

To: Richard Opper, Director Department of Public Health & Human Services

From: Governor Steve Bullock



Date: July 1, 2016

Re: Implementation of Protect Montana Kids Recommendations

One of our most important obligations is to protect child victims of abuse and neglect. Unfortunately, the legislature has consistently failed to provide adequate funding or pass recommended legislation. As a result, for decades our child and family services system has been overburdened and under-resourced, compromising the ability of frontline workers to effectively do their jobs. Our most vulnerable citizens deserve more and so I have demanded changes even where the legislature has failed to act. With your help, we have hired 33 additional frontline staff, improved staff trainings, and formalized processes for supervisory review of cases, but there is still more work to be done.

In May 2015, I created the Protect Montana Kids Commission (hereinafter "the Commission") and tasked them with advising me on an evidence-based, comprehensive set of recommendations to align the Montana child protection system with national standards and best practices.

The Commission made its recommendations to me on May 31, 2016. I am pleased with the thoughtful consideration they gave to the challenges facing Montana in the field of child welfare. As the Commission noted:

- the percentage of children in foster care has increased by 111% since 2008, and
- the number of abuse and neglect cases filed in state district courts have increased by 125% since 2010.

At the same time the system has experienced these significant increases, the Child and Family Services Division has faced increased difficulty recruiting and retaining frontline workers. Child and Family Services staff should be recognized for the difficult and extremely important jobs they do.

The Commission noted it was "greatly concerned by the status of the entire Montana child protection system and the lack of resources that have been allocated to address this crisis" and that the current system "must be stabilized and the lack of sufficient resources remedied as quickly as possible."

Many of the Commission's recommendations require the legislature to pass policy proposals and approve additional funding for Child and Family Services. I direct you to work closely with my staff to prepare a policy and budget proposal for presentation to the 2017 legislative session. It is clear from the Commission's report that the legislature must be a willing partner in addressing the pressing needs in areas like caseload standards, retention of staff, implementation of evidence-based best practices and modernizing the technology used by the Child and Family Services Division.

The challenges are such that we cannot wait for legislative action to begin to implement some of the Commission's recommendations. I direct you to begin immediate development and implementation of a short term stabilization plan that includes the following Commission recommendations:

- 1) Increase staffing through hiring open positions and aggressively recruit and hire a division administrator;
- 2) Prioritize implementation of the following strategic initiatives:
  - a) use of vacancy savings to fund modified positions,
  - b) advance filling child protection specialist positions in offices with the highest turnover rates,
  - c) expand the use of hiring assessments to assist supervisors in hiring individuals better suited for the work of a CPS,
  - d) establish a career ladder for CPS positions,
  - e) partner with the University of Montana School of Social Work to revise new worker online training,
  - f) implement Safety Science using a team-based model for analysis of critical incidents,
  - g) ensure that staff has access to appropriate employee assistance and counseling programs to help manage work-related stress, and
  - h) ensure that staff are trained in trauma informed systems;
- 3) Contract with the Council on Accreditation to conduct an assessment to determine what would be needed for CFSD to meet public child welfare agency accreditation standards;
- 4) Prioritize communication with stakeholders to build trust and confidence;
- 5) Review bylaws of the Child and Family Services State Advisory Council and make necessary changes to allow the Council to provide oversight of the implementation of the PMK recommendations;
- 6) Complete Phase I implementation of the new case management system for intake and investigations by January 2017; and
- 7) Continue to build strong relationships with the Tribal Nations in Montana, and work closely with each Tribal government to implement and train CFSD staff on the new Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) released in June 2016.

You have informed me that Child and Family Services is working to build an integrated management system that will assist and guide the direction and implementation of the long-term strategic plan recommended by the Commission. I am directing you to prioritize the following activities as you build the integrated system:

- 1) Enhance transparency and communication internally and externally to build trust among staff, the families we serve, and partners;
- 2) Conduct periodic short, web-based, anonymous workplace culture surveys and immediately follow-up with plans to address identified issues;
- 3) Utilize current data reporting tools to study workload indicators for staff and examine opportunities for improvement;
- 4) Work closely with Montana's University System to support Department efforts to recruit workers educated in social work;
- 5) Study and potentially expand on the "Resiliency Program" pilot done with staff in the Kalispell field office to determine if it is reducing secondary trauma in staff, and improving resiliency of workers;
- 6) Support training needs and foster a culture of collective responsibility and safety throughout the child welfare system by prioritizing training for all supervisors;
- 7) Implement evaluations for leadership and supervisors throughout the Division.
- 8) Update and review the Division's Policy and Procedure guide to provide users a more convenient, accessible, and transparent format.
- 9) Expand the Montana Foster Child Health Program to serve more children in foster care in Montana.

I want to thank you and your staff for your participation in this process and for moving these important recommendations forward. My administration will continue to make improvements to the child welfare system a policy and budget priority.