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Governor Bullock's Protect Montana Kids Initiative: *Improvements to Systems Serving Children & Families*

All children deserve a safe home where they can grow and thrive. Unfortunately, cases of abuse and neglect continue to rise in Montana, straining the entire child protection system, from courts, county attorneys and tribal governments, to child protection caseworkers and court appointed special advocates.

Over the last eight years, the number of children in foster care has grown by over 75%. Cases involving drugs and alcohol have been a major source of this increase. Since 2010, the number of children in care as a result of parental substance abuse has increased by over 65%.

When a family becomes a source of harm rather than protection for a child, we have a collective responsibility as neighbors, clergy, teachers, doctors, coaches and fellow Montanans to ensure that child's safety. Critical components of that system of care include the state's Child and Family Services Division and, in the most extreme cases, judges, county attorneys, the attorney general's office, and court appointed special advocates.

System Improvements Implemented Since 2013

Over the last two years, Governor Bullock has overseen important improvements to these historically underfunded and overburdened systems, including:

- Signed into law legislation creating the Independent Office of the Child and Family Ombudsman in the Department of Justice.
- Added 14 new child protective caseworkers in 2014.
- Implemented comprehensive training programs for new and existing caseworkers and supervisors, including the three-week Montana Child Abuse and Neglect (MCAN) training that imparts the basic knowledge and skills needed to provide investigation, assessment, safety, reunification, and permanency services in accordance with state and federal law and policy.

Although important advancements have been made, Governor Bullock will continue demanding improvements to keep vulnerable children in Montana safe. His Protect Montana Kids Initiative consists of two phases that will both demand immediate changes and provide a thorough review of the entire child protection system.

- **Phase One** will be implemented immediately and include changes to improve the delivery of services to children at risk of abuse and neglect.

- **Phase Two** will include the work of the governor's new Protect Montana Kids Commission and culminate in a plan presented to the 2017 Legislature to bring more transparency to Montana's system and align state laws governing child abuse and neglect with best practices across the country.

Phase I: Immediate System Improvements

Governor Bullock recognizes that one of the State's most important obligations is to protect child victims of abuse and neglect. Efforts to improve systems serving these kids must happen on a daily basis. Although the challenges and strains on the system have been created over decades, Montana's most vulnerable children cannot afford for us to take decades to address those challenges. With these children in mind, the governor announces these immediate changes:

Increasing Capacity and Skills of Frontline Workers

Frontline caseworkers will always be the most critical line of defense for vulnerable children and struggling families. Today the governor is announcing several changes that will improve the skills, tools and capacity that caseworkers have to perform their critically important jobs:

- **Additional Staff:** The hiring of 33 additional frontline staff to relieve pressure created from dramatically increasing caseloads, thus allowing overburdened staff to better meet the needs of children and families.

- **Staff Training:** Continuous evaluations and improvements to the groundbreaking Montana Child Abuse and Neglect trainings implemented in 2013. For example, next month, a "simulation lab" is being added to the core training to give workers hands-on experience within a mock investigation.

- **Better Case Management:** The building of a new electronic case management system for frontline workers, replacing an obsolete and inefficient system that has failed to provide the up-to-date information, data, and reports necessary for ensuring child safety. The new system will ensure timely access to statewide information, improve efficiency, and allow caseworkers to spend more time working in the field with vulnerable children and families.

Bolstering Supervision and Oversight of Frontline Workers

- **Increased Supervisor Capacity:** The hiring of additional frontline staff will have the secondary benefit of reducing caseload responsibilities that supervisors have had to assume because of worker shortages. This will allow supervisors to prioritize oversight responsibilities.

- **Uniform Case Review:** Review and improvement of continuous quality improvement (CQI) checklists to be used in mandatory supervisory case reviews. The CQI checklist provides supervisors with a formalized process for monitoring compliance with statutory and regulatory timelines.

Using Evidence-Based Practices to Improve Outcomes

- **Safety Assessment and Management:** Full implementation of the evidence-based Safety Assessment and Management System (SAMS), providing statewide consistency in investigations, assessments, and family involvement and support. The SAMS model includes mandatory home visits and interviews with every member of a home where abuse is alleged.

- **Safe Care Augmented Home Visiting:** Statewide expansion of an evidence-based home visitation model used in numerous states and 22 countries that has been shown to decrease child maltreatment in high risk families.

- **Critical Incident Review Policy Team:** An incident review team within CFSD will review incidents of serious injury or death and, based on findings, make policy recommendations for immediate improvement of the child protection system.

- **Substance Abuse Funding:** Availability of more flexible funding to support services for families struggling with substance abuse, such as evidence-based sober family housing programs.

- **Increased Use of Evidenced-Based Therapies:**
  - *Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy:* A model that helps children who have experienced trauma reduce adverse consequences on their development by addressing and resolving the issues caused by that trauma.
  - *Parent-Child Interactional Therapy:* A model of therapy that includes the parent and child working together with a therapist to build healthy attachments that promote optimal development.

Increasing Stakeholder Involvement

- **Safety Permanency and Well-Being Roundtables:** Statewide expansion of roundtables that include staff and stakeholders coming together to create an action plan to reduce barriers to a child finding a safe and permanent home.

- **Public Health Nurse Partnership:** The Missoula County Public Health Department has a "Foster Child Health Program" that assigns public health nurses to children in foster care in Missoula and Mineral counties. The program works to ensure that children in foster care have a complete health assessment and a plan to address any identified health needs. The public health nurse does regular home visits to track the progress and outcomes for each child and to ensure that foster parents have support and information related to the health needs of the child. CFSD is working with other public health departments in the state interested in implementing this program to improve the health and well-being of children in foster care.

Phase II: System Review and Statutory Recommendations

Creation of the Protect Montana Kids Commission

Montana's future depends on our collective ability to support families in crisis and protect children from harm. The system designed to intervene in these cases involves a complex patchwork of independent sources of oversight and protection, from county attorneys, judges, child protective caseworkers, law enforcement, CASAs and guardians ad litem, the Department of Justice, and independent evaluators.

Governor Bullock is creating the Protect Montana Kids Commission to examine the entire child protection system and recommend policies, practices, and services that encourage collaboration and further improve protections of children from abuse and neglect. The Commission is charged with aligning Montana's outdated statutes to reflect best practices and with recommending legislative changes to bring more transparency to the legal processes that govern child protection responsibilities. As outlined in the executive order, the Protect Montana Kids Commission will report its legislative recommendations to the governor by March 31, 2016.

Independent Expert Review

Governor Bullock has asked Casey Family Programs to assist the Protect Montana Kids Commission by conducting a thorough and independent review of Montana's child protection system and making recommendations for improving outcomes in child abuse and neglect cases. Casey Family Programs is a nationally recognized leader in consulting, research, and evaluation services to improve child welfare systems.

Additional Monitoring of Caseloads and Timelines

Finally, the Governor has directed DPHHS to provide quarterly updates on case load statistics and compliance with statutory timelines. Ongoing work will continue to identify ways that the department can better protect kids and implement improvements as they are identified.