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Minnesota Department of **Human Services**

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January 14, 2000

John C. Hottinger, Chair  
Health and Family Security Committee  
120 Capitol  
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Senator Hottinger:

I am writing to report on the pilot project for alternative risk assessment in child protection services. Laws of Minnesota 1998, chapter 406, article 4, section 8, subdivision 1, provides direction for both the pilot testing process and this progress report.

[RISK ASSESSMENT ALTERNATIVES.] Notwithstanding any rule to the contrary, the commissioner of human services may authorize local welfare agencies to research and conduct pilot projects for alternative methods of child protection risk assessment. The commissioner shall give priority to the establishment of at least one pilot project that includes a study of domestic abuse and violence in the home as a risk factor for children. The commissioner shall report to the appropriate committees in the House of Representatives and the Senate on the outcomes of research and risk assessment pilot projects by January 15, 2000.

I'm also providing information on the current status of the risk assessment pilot project, which outlines the support provided by the Department of Human Services, and Structured Decision Making, which is a comprehensive approach to decision making in child protection that includes an actuarial-based risk assessment tool.

### **Background**

The Minnesota risk assessment tool was derived from a tool which was originally developed in Illinois. Child welfare experts agreed on factors which were thought to be associated with child maltreatment. Therefore, the Minnesota tool is commonly referred to as a consensus-based instrument and was incorporated into administrative rule in 1988.

— 1998 Minn. Laws Chap. 406 —  
Art. 4 Sec. 8 Subd. 1

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The 1998 program evaluation report of child protection services conducted by the Office of the Legislative Auditor was critical of the Minnesota risk assessment tool and process due to the great variation on application between counties. Further, the report encouraged the consideration of other approaches to child protection risk assessment.

Following the legislation, the Department hosted a statewide training for counties on child protection risk assessment and invited counties to indicate the risk assessment alternative they wanted to pilot. Although the Department initially received a limited response, all of the applications indicated a desire to pilot the risk assessment component of the Structured Decision Making model developed by the Children's Research Center, which is a subsidiary of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency.

The risk assessment component of the Structured Decision Making model was developed through extensive research which correlates maltreatment with the recurrence of maltreatment in a statistical data base. Risk assessment instruments developed with this methodology are commonly referred to as actuarial-based and are considered to be more accurate and reliable in classifying families according to risk of child maltreatment. The items on the Structured Decision Making risk assessment are weighted according to the relative strength of their correlation with the recurrence of child maltreatment. Further, the Structured Decision Making model provides a separate scale for abuse and neglect because different family dynamics are present in different types of maltreatment.

Simultaneously, the seven Twin Cities metropolitan counties extensively investigated the Structured Decision Making model and decided to adopt the model for their county child protection systems. Building on this initiative, the Department offered other counties the opportunity to pilot the risk assessment portion of the Structured Decision Making model. Although there was overwhelming interest (41 non-Twin Cities counties) in piloting the Structured Decision Making model, the duplication with existing case management systems made participation impractical for many counties.

### **Structured Decision Making**

Structured Decision Making is a model of decision making in child protection that provides structure for each critical decision point along the continuum of the child protection system including:

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- Intake screening and response priority.
- Assessment of child safety.
- Family risk assessment.
- Family needs and strengths assessment.
- Provision of service.
- Reassessment of risk.
- Reunification assessment.

Because the risk assessment component is actuarially based, it is more effective in classifying families into categories of risk. These categories of risk are used to determine the level of response that is required by the child protection system in working with the family.

Although this pilot project is focused on one tool of the model, family risk assessment counties are very interested in the complete Structured Decision Making model.

### **Current Status**

As stated earlier, Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott, and Washington counties have adopted the Structured Decision Making approach to child protection services. Each county has been approved by the Department of Human Services to begin pilot testing this approach during 2000. One component of their work is to improve the consistency of risk assessment and accurately sort families into categories of risk.

To date, five other counties have expressed an interest in pilot testing this risk assessment tool. An additional sixteen are willing to serve on a Department-sponsored committee that will review the experience of the pilot counties, evaluate the impact of the actuarial-based risk assessment tool, and advise the Department on the feasibility of this approach for the future.

### **Department Support**

During the past year, the Department of Human Services has participated with seven Twin Cities metropolitan counties in defining the parameters and use of the Structured Decision Making approach. The Department also provided assistance for these counties through Children's Research Center. Similar assistance will be provided to the other counties that will pilot the risk assessment tool. Department staff are working with county representatives to evaluate Minnesota's experience and formulate recommendations for statewide implementation.

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During calendar year 2000, the Department will conduct an evaluation of Structured Decision Making and its actuarial-based risk assessment tool. We will address the following questions:

- How does Structured Decision Making risk assessment impact key child protection decisions compared to those in previous years in which pilot counties used the traditional risk assessment model?
- What is the difference in key child protection decisions in pilot counties using Structured Decision Making risk assessment vs. non-pilot counties using the traditional risk assessment model?
- How consistent are pilot counties in determining the need for child protection services for differing classifications of risk?
- What is the impact of Structured Decision Making risk assessment on determining the need for child protection services in communities of color?

If you have any questions, I encourage you to contact Steve Vonderharr, Family and Children's Services Division, at (651) 296-5324.

Sincerely,



Michael O'Keefe  
Commissioner