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CATAWBA COUNTY SOCIAL SERVICES WINS BEST PRACTICES AWARD

HICKORY -- Catawba County Social Services recently received a Best Practices Award for developing a policy about how to respond to youth in foster care who also become involved in the juvenile justice system. The award from the North Carolina Association of County Directors of Social Services was presented at the Social Services Institute.

This project began because Social Services staff noticed a large number of young people in their custody who were being held in jail due to involvement with the criminal justice system. Although social workers often knew about these situations, there was no clear policy on when or whether to bond the youth out. As a result, most young people waited in jail until their court hearings, which might be weeks away.



A multi-disciplinary team from Catawba County Social Services recently won a Best Practices Award from the NC Association of County Directors of Social Services. Pictured are (left to right): Janine Szymanski, Family NET clinical director; award presenter Wayne Black, NC Social Services Division director; Amy Herman, foster care program manager; and William Mack Jr., Family NET clinical program manager.

In many cases, these youth were being held for minor reasons for long periods of time. Research has linked child maltreatment with juvenile delinquency. "It seemed, to us, that these youth were, in essence, being punished twice!" the nomination read. As a result, the agency created a community-wide, multi-disciplinary team to establish a clear policy/protocol that would guide decision-making in these cases.

"Currently, North Carolina has no formal policy or protocol to guide decision-making for youth in DSS custody who also end up in the justice system. In addition, child welfare and juvenile justice systems have historically operated separately," the nomination form read.

In a few meetings, this group developed policies and guidelines covering:

- When law enforcement should be contacted and/or criminal charges pressed in response to situations at the group homes operated by Catawba County Social Services.
- When and if youth in Social Services custody should remain incarcerated.
- Drug testing of residents at the group homes.

Developing this protocol and policy has helped Social Services meet the needs of local youth in foster care. Developing the policy took only a short time and did not cost anything.

Members of the winning team were Lauren Vaughn, attorney; Mark Ownby from Barium Springs Home for Children; Jason Hughes, child protective services program manager; Amy Herman, foster care program manager; Karen Harrington, assistant director of Catawba County Social Services; Lori Julian, formerly with Catawba County Social Services and now with Alexander County Social Services; Stephanie Grabusky, group home manager; Janine Szymanski, clinical director of Family NET; Lorraine Saporito, therapist; Brad Gibson, group home manager; Valeree Adams, attorney; David Abernethy, attorney; William Mack Jr., Family NET program manager; and Sydney Smith, administrator of the Catawba County Guardian ad Litem Office.

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