Family Involvement is the Key to Improvement
By Del Hager

For those of us who have been around the block a time or two and have seen the social service pendulum swing back and forth, side to side, we can say with all honesty that in spite of the serious problems identified in a family assessment, it is still the responsibility of the family to recognize, address and resolve their own problems. In the rare occasions (approximately 5% of all CPS cases) the family fails in their responsibility, the county, state and the courts may assert their authority as the instrument of last resort.

Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) and Family Team Decision Making (FTDM) have been implemented in North Dakota to assist families and social service agencies in carrying out the mandate to reduce the number of children entering the foster care system by keeping those at-risk children connected to their families and culture. Grandmas and grandpas, uncles and aunts, cousins and friends, and anyone who is important in the life of a child could be a part of the Team helping to make critical, life changing decisions on behalf of the child. In years past the roles were nearly reversed. It was the child welfare professionals making most of the decisions while the people more closely connected to the child were seldom asked to be part of the process, much less have an impact upon the decisions.

As described in CHILD WELFARE (2000) Volume 18: “The term family group decision making was first coined by Drs. Gale Burford and Joan Pennell in the implementation of an FGDM project in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, as a way to describe a process that was similar to, but slightly different from, the family group conference as legislated in New Zealand. FGDM affirms the culture of the family group, recognizes a family’s spirituality, fully acknowledges the rights and abilities of the family group to make sound decisions for and with its young relatives and actively engages the community as a vital support for families.”

Here in North Dakota, a three-year federal grant funds the FTDM and FGDM programs, which are managed by a partnership between The Village Family Service Center, the Children and Family services division of the Department of Human Services, and the University of North Dakota, School of Social Work. FGDM focuses on offering Family Decision Making services to Native American families because they are overrepresented in the State’s foster care system. North Dakota Department of Human Services also funds a county-specific pilot program administered by The Village which brings FTDM services to all children at risk of immediate placement in Cass and Burleigh Counties. With proper funding, it would be possible to expand these types of services throughout the State to more families with children who are in (or at risk of) foster care placement.

Tara Muhlhauser, Director of the CFS Division of the NDDHS, provided testimony on Senate Bill 2012 (budget request) before the Senate Appropriations Committee on January 18, 2011, and the House Appropriations-Human Resources Division on March 4, 2011. A portion of her testimony addresses the role of
the state in providing Family Group Decision Making and Family Team Decision Making services. Here is what Director Muhlhauser had to say: “Services in this program area (Family Preservation) include Family Group Decision Making available to most county social services agencies, the Division of Juvenile Services and the tribes. This service brings family members to the table to develop a plan for children who are either in foster care, at risk of being placed in foster care, or children who are being cared for by their extended family. This also brings significant people in the life of the child(ren) together to discuss how to maintain and build family connections. In 2009-2010 there were 215 referrals with 136 conferences completed. A new pilot program, Family Team Decision Making (FTDM), recently began and will provide an early opportunity (either immediately prior to placement or immediately upon removal) to bring families and agency personnel to the table with a neutral facilitator to make plans that seek opportunities to maintain safety and reduce the need for removal. The pilot sites for this work are in Burleigh/Morton and Cass counties. This differs from Family Group Decision Making in that it is an expedited process that can happen more quickly to address emergent issues such as emergency removals. This is a promising practice nationally with positive outcomes targeted to reducing foster care placements and enhancing the engagement of parents in protecting and maintaining relationships with their children.”

As a partner in a pilot program funded by the Children’s Bureau that offers FGDM and FTDM services to approximately 100 children in North Dakota each year for three years, the role of the University of North Dakota School of Social Work is to conduct the program research as required by the federal government. This grant funding is provided to help identify outcomes associated with FGDM and FTDM processes, according to Dr. Melanie Sage, researcher with the UND Department of Social Work. She stated that the North Dakota model is one of only two in the nation currently funded by the Children’s Bureau that will study the outcomes of FGDM and FTDM with the Native American population.

The federal government is looking for in-depth analysis of costs, time in care, what happens to children after the meeting, recidivism rates with respect to another report of neglect or abuse, what worked well in the meeting, and many other factors. Although the goal of family-centered meetings is to respect each family’s culture and heritage, the North Dakota study will help draw attention to specific needs of people from Native American cultures. For instance, Native American cultural traditions such as who opens a meeting and who speaks first may mean that standard FGDM practices should be adjusted to best engage and support families as they create plans to care for their children. The involvement of fathers is particularly important to the federal research, as is the issue of disproportionality with respect to the number of native children in foster care compared to non-native children. Basically, they are looking at what works and what does not work, with the hope of improving knowledge about how to engage families so that children can safely remain at home or be reunited with their families.

The target population for the federal research project includes Native American children ages 0-18 who are at-risk of placement into foster care or are already in foster care. The Counties currently being studied include: Cass, Burleigh, Morton, Mountrail, Ramsey, Rolette, and Ward. The four reservations of Fort Berthold, Fort Totten, Standing Rock and Turtle Mountain may have children included in the research; however, the children placed on the reservations through Tribal Social Services are not included in the project at this time due to limitations of federal funding. Participant recruitment began in February 2012, and will continue through 2014.

Dr. Sage and Sandi Zaleski, Program Director with the Village Family Services of ND, co-presented the research and program highlights at the 2012 Indian Child Welfare and Wellness Conference, held in Mandan, February 1-3, 2012. They will also present in June at the American Humane National Conference in Florida, and will be in Washington, DC in April, to announce their findings to the Children’s Bureau, Administration on Children and Families (ACF), a branch of the Department of Health and Human Services. The Village Family Services is the North Dakota agency responsible for the administration of the program.

What is FGDM?

FGDM is a process utilized by families in which a child is currently in out-of-home placement or is at risk of being placed out of their home. Beginning in 2007, the Village Family Services has been the contract agency in North Dakota offering these services through local, state, and federal grants when funding allows. The Village provides a trained facilitator for the meeting, who, by virtue of his or her employment with The
Village, is someone outside the traditional county social service agency and not a person employed by county or state government. The facilitator assures a strength-based decision making process is followed in the presence of family, friends, service providers, and community representatives all gathered at the table. Here are some of the program features as defined by The Village:

- **Purpose:** To make a decision that creates safety, permanency, and well-being for the child.
- **Goal of the Meeting:** Family, broadly defined, creates an initial plan to achieve the purpose of the conference.
- **Distinctive Element:** Comprehensive preparation and private family time. Both elements position the extended family network as primary decision makers.
- **Decision Responsibility:** The family makes and then presents their initial plan. At this time, the plan is reviewed to strengthen and clarify it. If a social worker is involved in the case, bottom lines will be discussed.
- **Scheduling Requirement:** The caregiver must agree to participate in or authorize a family group decision making conference. The caregiver or custodian must also consent for the extended family and others to participate.
- **Referral:** County social services, mental health providers, families, self, or a community member may refer the family to FGDM at any time.
- **Preparation:** A critically important part of the process in order to engage family in participating and leading the process. The FGDM facilitator typically spends 3-4 weeks preparing for the conference.
- **Team Members:** The family decides on participants during preparation with the facilitator. Typically, more family members are present than service providers.
- **Facilitator:** A trained facilitator, with no case specific responsibilities, prepares participants, guides the process, and does not have any decision making authority. The facilitator works for a private nonprofit organization.
- **Length of Meeting:** Usually three to five hours.
- **Confidentiality:** Participants sign a confidentiality statement before the conference begins.
- **After Meeting Responsibilities:** Participants may carry out and monitor their plan, in partnership with the referral worker. Follow-up FGDM conferences can be scheduled to adjust or change the original plan. If there is an assigned county social worker, that person maintains all county case responsibilities.

**How does it start?**

FGDM may be used in a variety of situations. A majority of the meetings are initiated when Child Protective Services are involved with the family and the possibility of out-of-home placement exists or, the child is already out of the home. In these situations, the county social worker would discuss the possibility of FGDM with the family and complete the referral form before faxing it to The Village. The facilitator would then begin the process of contacting the family and others who could be a part of the meeting. The family group would meet at the Village office within 4-6 weeks after the referral is made. Zaleski explained that if the child is already in out-of-home placement, the reasons for having a meeting could be centered around reunification; or, for preserving the placement so the child doesn’t need to be moved; or, perhaps for issues that might lead to adoption. Additionally, FGDM may be utilized as early intervention. For example, a Head Start worker could initiate a referral for a family at risk before child protective services becomes involved. Since July of 2011, FGDM has been available to all counties in North Dakota.

**What is FTDM?**

There are differences between Family Group and Family Team Decision Making practices. Here are some of the features of The Village’s FTDM program:

- **Purpose:** To make immediate decisions regarding the child’s placement.
- **Goal of Meeting:** Team, including family, seeks consensus on a decision regarding a child’s safety and permanency.
- Distinctive Element: Held when there is an immediate risk of removal or after emergency removal has taken place.
- Decision Responsibility: Social services maintain responsibility if consensus regarding the placement issue is not achieved.
- Scheduling Requirement: Meetings typically held within 24 to 48, but no later than 72 business hours after an emergency removal.
- Referral: Assigned social worker is required to schedule when the decision must be made. The Village facilitator will provide time slot for these meetings.
- Preparation: Often limited due to the crisis nature of the placement decision. The assigned social worker completes referral paperwork. The facilitator makes contact with those on the invite list.
- Team Members: All who attend must have the family’s permission to participate. The team includes family members and service providers.
- Facilitator: A trained facilitator, with no case specific responsibilities, guides the process and does not have any decision making authority. The facilitator works with a private nonprofit organization. Ideally, we would like to use the same facilitator throughout the family’s involvement in the system.
- Length of Meetings: Usually one to two hours.
- Confidentiality: Focus is on privacy. The family is told that the information may be used for case planning or in court.
- After Meeting Responsibilities: Assigned county social worker is primarily responsible to implement decision from meeting; other participants play supporting roles. Outcome data collected and used for self-evaluation and planning.

**Other points to consider**

The Village has a total of seven facilitator positions. The county worker making the referral will begin with a list of invitees to the meeting. The facilitator will “widen the circle” Zaleski said, and “begin all the prep work for the meeting, which will be held at The Village.” Considerations for the family would include: whether or not the child should be at the meeting; are there any safety issues regarding participants such as restraining orders for domestic violence; and if domestic violence is an issue, a separate meeting may take place. In the situations where the family has private time, they come back to the whole group and present what they want to see happen. Occasionally the facilitator is asked by the family to participate in the private time in order to help with the plan. The group will then come to an agreement on the final plan.

**What are we finding?**

Since Family Group and Family Team Decision Making has occurred in North Dakota, there have been positive outcomes for families and, almost just as importantly, positive outcomes from a systemic viewpoint, according to Zaleski. “The biggest impact has been in getting families and relatives involved earlier than we did in years past. This has led to an increase in family and kinship placements,” she said. “The team makes it more helpful at engaging the family and allows them to voice their concerns. And, it brings others in to help the family.” She also believes that with this model, “the image of CPS is a positive one rather than the old time stereotypes of child welfare workers.” On the flip side of that, from a social services perspective, she believes that it is “changing attitudes about families.” Shorter and more stable placements with less movement within the system are occurring when the family is engaged.

With Native American children and the requirements under ICWA, Zaleski said, “the tribes are asking, ‘are you going to send kids back to grandma on the reservation?’” The tribes are concerned with their own shortage of resources to support some of their families if it becomes routine to return children to their respective reservations. This is a serious concern for Decision Making – one that must always be considered. The approach taken by the team is one that understands the facts for each individual case but recognizes that a lack of resources “shouldn’t mean the child doesn’t have family connections on the reservation,” Zaleski explained. Perhaps placement on the reservation with family is not possible but making connections might still be appropriate, if the family agrees. Every case is different.

Finally, she stated, “North Dakota is truly a Wraparound Model. We’re moving with the same beliefs and values. It makes sense that our state has done very well with the Federal Reviews.”
From the State Office
By Dean Sturn, Foster Care Administrator

Protecting the Credit of Foster Youth

Federal legislation continues to be enacted to ensure the smooth transition of foster youth into adulthood. The Child and Family Services Improvement and Innovation Act (P.L. 112-34) was signed into law on September 30th, 2011. One of the things this law requires is that custodial agencies must assist foster youth, age 16 and older, in completing an annual credit check and acquiring a credit report. The youth will be assisted in interpreting the results of the report and in resolving any inconsistencies noted in the report. A copy of the credit report will be placed in the youth’s foster care file annually beginning at age 16, and continue until they are discharged from foster care.

The need for this legislation was recognized on a national level when statistics showed that youth transitioning to adulthood from the foster care system were more likely to have issues with their credit than transitioning youth who were not a part of the foster care system. Higher rates of credit issues/difficulties for youth transitioning to adulthood from the foster care system were attributed to a number of reasons. Two of the main reasons were: (1) the youth securing credit on their own and improperly using that credit, which hurt their scores and (2) others fraudulently securing credit by using the youth’s personal information and willfully defaulting on that credit. Hopefully, the first issue can be reduced through efforts of responsible adults involved in the foster youth’s life. It is felt that poor and inaccurate credit scores created through the willful fraud of others will be repaired and reduced by checking and making needed adjustments to the foster youth’s credit report on an annual basis.

It was noted that many youth under the age of 18 may not even have a credit history and will, therefore, receive a “blank” credit report. This, in and of itself, will be proof that there is not a problem with the youth’s credit score. Foster youth encounter enough obstacles during their transition into adulthood without having to face the difficulties created by poor credit scores by themselves, especially if the poor scores were created through fraudulent acts of others.

Once again, I would like to say thank you to everyone involved in the foster care system in North Dakota. Your dedicated efforts to help children and families are greatly appreciated, and deserve the utmost respect. This was summed up very well by the former president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, when he said, "There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children."

Until next time, Think Spring!

President’s Corner
By Jon Mielke, President, ND Foster Adopt Parent Association

Mark your calendar for October 5-6, 2012. Those are the dates for the annual Foster and Adoptive Parent Conference. This year’s conference will be held at the Doublewood Inn in Fargo. Planning is already well underway and the conference promises to provide attendees, both licensees and social workers, with excellent educational and networking opportunities.

Many foster parents may be unaware of the fact that the costs associated with attending the annual conference (registration, lodging, mileage, etc.) are largely reimbursable. This fact, plus the quality of the program and related continuing education credits, makes the annual conference something that you should definitely plan to attend.

Anyone who attends the association’s annual conference automatically becomes a member of the association. Given the cancellation of the 2011 conference due to flooding in Minot, the association’s board of directors decided to extend 2011-12 membership to anyone who attended the 2010 conference in Grand Forks. Anyone else who would like to become a member should send $10 to the association’s treasurer, Jim Hooge, at 8928 88th St. NE, Munich, ND 58352.
The Foster and Adoptive Parent Association has a fund established to provide educational scholarships for current and former foster children. There are also funds available to give small grants for items or services that might not be eligible for funding from traditional state or county sources.

At the association’s November board of directors meeting, it was decided to give $500 grants to foster families that were directly and significantly impacted by flooding during the past year. With help from the North Dakota Department of Human Services, the association identified six foster families that met related criteria. These families were located in or near Bismarck, Minot, and Devils Lake. They were notified of the grants just prior to Christmas and have since expressed their sincere appreciation for the association’s help and thoughtfulness.

Please think about nominees for future scholarship awards. The association gave out two scholarships in 2011, each for $500. Recipients were also informed that they could apply for up to two more scholarship extensions, so they could potentially receive $1,500 to support their educational endeavors. The association is happy that it can assist these former foster children with their educational pursuits. Anyone who is a member of the association may submit nominations.

The association’s bylaws call for the election of a president and vice president in even-numbered years. Those elections will be held at the annual conference in Fargo. Anyone interested in serving on the board or nominating someone else should contact any member of the current board. Here is a list of current board members and related contact information:

- **President**: Jon Mielke (Bismarck - 2012)  
  Email: jcmielke3@bis.midco.net
- **Vice President**: Keatha McLeod (Horace - 2012)  
  Email: cloudynd@Q.com
- **Treasurer**: Jim Hooge (Munich - 2013)  
  Email: jim43hooge@gmail.com
- **Past President**: Jim Schnabel (Venturia)  
  Email: jmpmfarm@drtel.net
- **Human Services Rep.**: Tara Muhlhauser  
  Email: ND Dept. of Human Services

I would again like to invite association members to become involved with work of the association. If you would like to be a member of one of the following committees, please contact me and I will put you in touch with the appropriate committee chairman:

- Scholarships & Awards
- Financial Review
- Website
- Education/Convention Planning
- Legislation

The association is also in need of a volunteer to serve as secretary. If you are interested, please contact any of the board members listed above.

In closing, I want to thank all the social work professionals who work with foster children, their biological families, and foster parents, on a day-to-day basis. From personal experience, we all know that they put their hearts and souls into their work and are routinely torn apart by the situations that they have to deal with. Being a foster parent can be tough but I think being a social service professional would be even harder. Thanks for all you do for the kids that we care for!

**May is National Foster Care Month...You Can Change a Lifetime!**

Each May, National Foster Care Month provides an opportunity to shine a light on the experiences of the more than 400,000 children and youth in the foster care system. The campaign raises awareness about the urgent needs of these young people and encourages citizens from every walk of life to get involved – as foster or adoptive parents, volunteers, mentors, employers or in other ways.

With the help of dedicated people, many formerly abused or neglected children and teens will either reunite safely with their parents, be cared for by relatives or be adopted by loving families. Many children would not have to enter foster care at all if more states provided support and services to help families cope with crises early on.
Thanks to the many advocates, child welfare professionals, elected officials and support groups around the country, the total number of children in foster care has decreased over recent years. But more help is needed.

Every year, approximately 30,000 young people leave the foster care system without lifelong families – most at age 18. On their own, these young adults must navigate a weakened economy offering fewer jobs and less support for vital services such as housing. They need – and deserve – caring adults who love and support them.

We call on all Americans to join us in helping to change a lifetime of a child or youth in foster care. No matter who you are or how much time you have to give, you can help create permanent, lifelong connections for these children and youth.

All children — including the 424,000 American children and youth in foster care — deserve a safe, happy life. Young people in foster care especially need nurturing adults on their side because their own families are in crisis and unable to care for them.

Visit www.fostercaremonth.org to find out more about the many ways you can get involved and make a lasting difference for America’s children. No matter who you are and how much time you have to give, you have the power to do something positive that will CHANGE A LIFETIME for a young person in foster care. You can help create permanent, lifelong connections for these children.

**Stay up-to-date about Internet and phone safety**

Most children are teaching us about the Internet, cell phones, and social networking! But the reality is, young people with histories of sexual abuse are at higher risk of online sexual exploitation than are other children (Brown, et al., 2009). Sending personal information or talking online to strangers about sex puts children at the greatest risk, since these actions make them most likely to receive solicitations (Grayson, 2010). Here are some websites to help you keep kids safe.

*a) Federal Bureau of Investigation*: A Parent’s Guide to Internet Safety (www.fbi.gov/). Scroll down to “What Are Signs Your Child Might Be At Risk Online?” for ways to recognize possible child abuse, particularly sexual abuse, on the Internet and what to do to prevent and resolve it.

*b) Internet Safety Tips for Caregivers* (www.wifostercareandadoption.org/library/392/internetsafety.pdf). This tip sheet from Adoption Resources of Wisconsin provides clear and helpful information for keeping children safe online.

*c) NetSmartz* (www.netsmartz.org). Provides resources for parents and guardians, educators, law enforcement, teens and kids. There is also a Spanish online resource.


**NDFAPA Executive Board**

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