



Nebraska Children's Commission
1225 L Street, Suite 401
Lincoln, NE 68508

September 12, 2023

Re: Review of 2022-2023 Normalcy Plans and Reports by the Strengthening Families Act (SFA) Normalcy Subcommittee

The SFA Committee assigned the Normalcy Subcommittee the task of reviewing the Normalcy Plans and Reports submitted by child-caring institutions to the Department of Health and Human Services pursuant to NRS §43-4706. This is an opportunity for our subcommittee to read about the work agencies do to provide youth with a sense of normalcy while they are placed in a congregate care setting. We reviewed 16 child-caring institutions agency reports and offer the below suggestions as you begin your upcoming Normalcy Plan submissions.

Requirement 6 of the normalcy plan asks that agencies identify accommodations and support services so that children with disabilities and special needs can participate in age or developmentally appropriate activities to the same extent as their peers, and the report requires examples. The review of the 2022-2023 normalcy reports across Nebraska shows almost 70% of agencies are not providing adequate *examples* showing how they meet this requirement. The following examples have been reviewed and considered best practice for providing documentation:

“A youth with Cerebral Palsy was served at our agency during the previous reporting period. All activities and groups were planned in a way that allowed the youth to participate without concern. Staff acquired clothes, hygiene products and shoes that made it easier for them to complete activities of daily living like changing shoes and taking showers. The youth participated in all activities without any exclusions or limitations.”

“The agency previously admitted a Deaf youth and contracted with an interpreter to ensure quality service provision. Staff adapted to writing messages for the youth rather than speaking which allowed for them to have a more normalized programming experience. The agency is conscious of youth needs resulting in all youth literature, brochures, and training opportunities are presented at a fifth grade level. Staff will also work through information with youth to ensure a level of awareness and understanding related to the material being covered as a matter of policy and practice.”

Requirement 7 of the normalcy plan is ensuring individualized needs of all children in an agency are being met. Of the reports reviewed, 80% of agencies did not provide enough information explaining how individualized needs are met, rather than as a larger group. Consider the below examples when preparing your report:

“Aside from an individualized plan, our staff strive to support the interests and strengths of the youth. For example, youth have participated in music lessons, extra-curricular and intramural sports, church youth groups, volunteering, game tournaments, after school and community LGBTQ+ support groups, and have had specialized tutors and mentors.”

“Staff is continually working to ensure they are meeting the individualized needs of all youth in the system. This can be seen based on the agency’s service planning process. From the youth’s day of admission, throughout ongoing meetings and assessments, the individual needs of youth are addressed. The agency has a transitional learning program that meets weekly for children who will be graduating and teaches youth a variety of independent living skills such as how to balance a checkbook, meet transportation needs, budgeting skills, and help prepare for a first apartment. The agency meets the child where they are and help build skills they need for their futures. Each child in the program have access to services that can help them beyond their time in our programs. For

example, a youth explored their want to work as a nurse while at our agency, and the staff and team helped the youth explore that interest to get enrolled in a CNA program. The youth worked with their team on applying for an apartment on campus and enrolling in a transitional living program, so they can practice their skills learned while being surrounded by support systems.”

Requirement 8 of the normalcy plan asks agencies to review their efforts to reduce the disproportionate impact of the system and services on families and children of color and other populations. Many of the reviewed agencies discussed committees or groups of staff and youth that work to identify barriers or disparities, but few reported action steps or efforts to reduce them. The subcommittee recognizes agencies are not able to impact the type of referrals received and there is a disproportionate amount of BIPOC youth and youth from the LGBTQ+ community involved in the Child Welfare system; however, your agency’s role in reducing the impact of this disproportionality is critical in improving youth experience and normalcy. For future reports, consider providing examples of:

- *What has your agency done to reduce the impact of disproportionality on a specific youth or family?*
- *What hiring practices are in place to ensure that staff representation mirror that of the population that you serve in race, ethnicity, gender, lived experiences?*
- *What policies and practices does your agency have that are culturally responsive and includes access to external opportunities that strengthen cultural identity?*
- *Explain in what your agency has done to interrupt the negative cycle of mistrust of adults?*
- *What ways is your agency addressing (recidivism or reentry into care)?*

Youth are encouraged to engage in our Racial and Ethnic Disparities committee and discuss changes that the agency could make to improve their experience while at the program. These ideas are brought to leadership and implemented when possible. Our agency meets with the youth’s family and team to determine culturally appropriate interventions that will give the youth the best opportunity to successfully return home within a reasonable timeframe. In the last year, we had a youth that shared their preferred pronouns and our staff respected these pronouns throughout their stay. This allowed the youth to be able to focus on completing the program to return home and out of the system rather than consistently putting energy towards explaining their identity and values with each interaction in our program.

The subcommittee identified many improvements from previous year’s reviews and commend agencies for adjusting to create a stronger report of the positive impact your agencies make on children and families in Nebraska. Agencies increased examples of addressing normalcy barriers by 23% in the last year and improved youth board activity by 20%, showing active efforts in increasing normalcy for youth in care.

As you work on submitting the Plans/Reports due to your contract monitor this year, we encourage you to use this feedback to assist your agency in creating examples that showcase how your agency integrates normalcy for youth. For questions, please contact the Children’s Commission staff at amanda.adams@nebraska.gov or (402) 525-5611.

Sincerely,

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