



Office of the County Manager

500 S Grand Central Pky 6th Fl • Box 551111 • Las Vegas NV 89155-1111
(702) 455-3530 • Fax (702) 455-3558

Virginia Valentine, P.E., County Manager
Darryl Martin, Assistant County Manager • Elizabeth Macias Quillin, Assistant County Manager
Phil Rosenquist, Assistant County Manager

October 19, 2007

The Honorable Jim Gibbons
Office of the Governor
101 N. Carson Street
Carson City, NV 89701

Dear Governor Gibbons:

As you know, the issues and needs of Nevada's child welfare system have been well documented and publicized. Recent reports from the National Center for Child Death Review and the resulting Blue Ribbon Panel appointed by Mike Willden, Director of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) document many of those shortcomings. In addition, the Administration for Children and Families of the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services noted the distressed condition of child welfare in Nevada when it required that Nevada renegotiate its Program Improvement Plan (PIP) subsequent to its Federal Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSR). Uniformly, all examinations of Nevada's child welfare system have cited high caseloads as a preeminent threat to the safety, permanency, and well-being of abused and neglected children in Nevada.

In October of 2006, the Clark County Board of Commissioners began the Safe Futures plan by creating 119 new positions to address needs in child protective services and in-home family services. During the 2007 Session, the Nevada Legislature passed several important pieces of legislation protecting children, and created 85 new positions to address needs in foster care and adoptions. During the legislative session, I was particularly heartened by your testimony before the March 12, 2007 Assembly on Health and Human Services Committee, in which you stated, "Certainly, one of the most essential services of government is to safeguard children who cannot adequately protect themselves from harm. As political leaders, it is our duty to provide the best care possible for children who, through no fault of their own, come under the care of the child welfare system." Your support of those positions during the legislative session demonstrated the importance your administration placed on improving the foster care and adoption system, as well as ensuring the quality of life for our youngest and most at-risk citizens.

In response to your recent call for proposed budget cuts, the Nevada Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has requested that the Clark County Department of Family Services (DFS) recommend budget cuts totaling over \$3.5 million over the current biennium. As you may know, 52 percent of the Clark County Integration Budget is reserved for payments to foster and adoptive parents. Because this amount cannot be reduced, the proposed budget cut must be imposed on the remaining 48 percent of the budget, making the net effect a 9.4 percent reduction in child welfare services. Given that the portion of the budget not related to foster and adoptive parent placement is heavily leveraged by Title IV-e Federal Financial Participation, the actual impact on the operations budget is even higher.

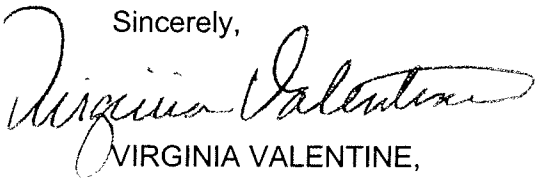
Unfortunately, the only realistic option for proposed budget cuts is a reduction in staff, resulting in an increase in caseload ratios. Currently foster care caseloads are at a dangerously high level of 39 children per case manager, while national standards accept only 12 to 15 children per case manager. As part of child welfare integration memorialized in AB 1 of the 17th Special Session in 2001, the State of Nevada committed to funding case management positions at a level of 22 children per case manager. The 2007 legislature, with your approval, authorized 36 case manager positions in fulfillment of this commitment. If these positions are eliminated, not only will the state not have fulfilled its commitment to the children of Southern Nevada, but high caseload ratios will also continue to place them at an unacceptable level of risk.

The consequences of not filling these positions not only impact the safety of children, but will also have huge financial implications. Nevada was found non-compliant on all CFSR outcomes indicators during its last review. Without these positions, compliance becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible. Non-compliance will mean imposition of penalties on the State of Nevada by the US Department of Health and Human Services that could total millions of dollars more than any current savings resulting from the proposed budget cut. In addition, both the State of Nevada and Clark County have been enjoined in litigation by the National Center for Youth Law. Without caseworker positions, the success of the plaintiff's cause of action will be further ensured at a cost of millions of dollars in taxpayer money.

Ultimately, however, the cost is human. The cost of budget cuts to child welfare is increased risk of harm to vulnerable children and the potential permanent loss of a child's family. Each permanent loss of a family means both trauma to a child and exponentially expanded costs to the state in the form of foster care and adoption expenses.

The State of Nevada cannot claim it is committed to improving the safety, permanency and well being of abused and neglected children if it simultaneously cuts the funding vital to supporting these goals. Please exempt the child welfare system from budget cuts as you have exempted the public safety system. Exempting public safety from budget cuts without also exempting child protection suggests that the protection of children is not a public safety concern.

Sincerely,


VIRGINIA VALENTINE,
County Manager


THOMAS MORTON
Director, Family Services

cc: Mike Willden, Department of Health and Human Services
Joan Ohl, Administration for Children and Families
Senator William Raggio
Speaker Barbara Buckley