

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Human Services Aiming To Ease Adoption, Foster Care Process In Territory Through Federal Grant

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ST. THOMAS -- The Department of Human Services, Division of Children and Family has embarked on an undertaking to enhance the department's goal to service the needs of families and children, a release D.H.S. issued Monday has made known.

In its recent application/state plan, which currently awaits final approval by the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, the Virgin Islands seeks federal funding to cover costs associated with foster care, adoption subsidies (children adopted out of foster care), and kinship guardianship.

"While this initiative was developed prior to my tenure as commissioner designee, it is one that I wholesomely embrace and support," said D.H.S. Commissioner-Designee Anita Roberts. "In principle, this application is not only timely, but it is significant to the department's mission to adequately care for the needs of children in foster care and the many families that are involved in their welfare."

The Title-IV-E program is authorized by the Social Security Act, as amended, and is an annually appropriated program with specific eligibility requirements and fixed allowable uses of funds. Unlike the Consolidated Block Grant that the department receives, Title-IV-E is an entitlement grant based on the family income standard used for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in 1996. Assistant Commissioner Janet Turnbull-Krigger, who took the lead role in constructing the application and its accompanying documentations, gave reassurance about the program's impact on any federal funding the department currently receives.

"It must be noted that when the department becomes a title IV-E agency, this funding stream will not impact, in any way, any of the federal funds that the territory is receiving," Ms. Turnbull-Krigger said. "Title IV-E is listed at the top of all Social Security entitlement programs. In fact, under federal law, participation in Title IV-E is a requirement for a state to receive funds under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. As such, becoming a Title IV-E agency will not only enable the D.H.S. to access new federal funds, but will ensure continued participation in federal programs that we currently utilize."

The implementation of the Title-IV-E program locally will have other spin-offs and collateral benefit, according to the D.H.S. release. Since foster care, adoption, and kinship guardianship often become legal matters, the court's involvement is inevitable.

Efforts are already underway to ensure that the Virgin Islands Superior Court is engaged from the onset of the implementation, D.H.S. says. Specifically, the Virgin Islands Superior Court, Family Court Division, and the respective judges, have been participating in a quarterly call with other judges from Region II in order to familiarize themselves with the benefits of inclusion in the title IV-E Federal Court Improvement Program (FCIP). The Virgin Islands Superior Court may apply under FCIP for a grant. This grant must be utilized within the Family Division to assist with court-related improvements as well as staff training, according to D.H.S.

"We believe that the implementation of the Title IV-E program will reorder our priorities and streamline services to foster children and their families. We are equally encouraged by the prospects of added value regarding the Medical Assistance Program. Through Medicaid, Title IV-E eligible children are automatically deemed eligible. This will significantly reduce the proportion of local funds required to support residential and group home programs," Ms. Roberts said.

Similar savings can be realized when Medicaid is claimed for therapeutic foster care and wrap-around services provided for children known to welfare and living at home, D.H.S. says.

A comprehensive review of the anticipated savings to be realized by D.H.S.'s implementation of the title IV-E program revealed them to be plentiful.

"The department is currently spending 25 percent of its local annual budget or approximately \$17 million on residential care which includes on and off-island residential facilities," Ms Krigger said.

"It is estimated that the department will have a cost savings of seven to eight million dollars annually when title IV-E is implemented," added Ms. Roberts. "As we join our partners in the fifty states and the District of Columbia, and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, we are affording our children the same opportunities as other children across the country."

Feature Image: Danna and Brian Hopkins, who live in Bozeman, Mont., adopted two teenage boys and two girls from Ethiopia and in 2013 were in the process of adopting four sisters from Congo. (Credit: New York Times)