

4th Annual NCACDSS Best Practices Awards Nomination Form

**Category: ISC#5 Tier 3
Innovations In Services to Customers**

Project Title: Permanency for Children

1. **Project/Program Summary:** *Briefly summarize the project's history, purpose, timeline and budget.*
Over half of the Work First caseload in Catawba County consists of Child-Only cases. In many of these cases, the family has made a long-term commitment to a child without benefit of legal counsel. Eventually, problems arise from these informal arrangements when the relative caretaker attempts to enroll the child in school, seek medical attention for the child, sign the child up for sports events, etc.

Catawba County Work First staff wanted to assist these caretaker families in getting the legal advice and assistance needed to legitimize the living arrangement of the child. More importantly, the staff wanted to give the child a stronger sense of belonging and permanence.

In January 1999, The Work First Unit contracted with the Morganton office of Legal Aid of North Carolina, to provide legal counsel, advice, education and services to Work First Caretaker families. The first 'consult' was scheduled for April 15, 1999. A \$15,000 capped allocation was budgeted for the first year of the program.

2. **Innovation:** *Why is the program unique? How does your project differ from similar projects?*
This project is unique in that once the Work First staff member identifies the legal needs of the child and family, all of the processes for linking the family with legal services are already in place. There is no Legal Aid Office in Catawba County. Under the terms of the contract, Legal Aid staff come to Catawba County Social Services on a regular basis to meet with the caretakers of our Work First children. Because the family is already familiar with DSS, this is a familiar and non-threatening environment. The caretaker is not required to come up with an expensive retainer fee. The costs are covered by the contract. In the early years of the contact, an hourly rate of \$50 was established. The contract has been in existence for seven years now and the hourly rate has increased to \$60 per hour which is still a bargain. The going rate for private attorneys in the area is \$125 per hour with a \$1500 retainer fee.

3. **Project Success and Impact:** *What were the objectives? How well were they met? How widespread is the impact of the project/program? What is the anticipated long-term impact? Did the project involve collaboration with other agencies, non-profits, businesses, etc.? Describe the outcome of the collaboration.*

The objective of the program is to enhance the well-being of Work First children living with Caretaker-relatives by assuring that no legal barrier creates a hardship for the child and to increase the child's feelings of belonging and permanence. The service is offered to all Caretaker relatives and in unique cases, to regular Work First families.

A contract with Legal Aid of North Carolina has proven to be highly successful. Since the inception of the program, 55 families have been assisted. Custody has been obtained through court action for 24 children (in seventeen families) and eight children have been adopted by their caretaker relatives. Significantly, in each case in which the caretaker family member chose to file an action in court for custody or adoption, the family member was successful.

Twelve other families needed only brief service to achieve their goals. For example, Legal Aid provided educational residency affidavits to secure school enrollment for children, authorizations to consent to health care for a minor, and in one case, registration of a foreign custody order in North Carolina.

4. **Project Effort and Difficulty:** *How well did the program use limited resources? What obstacles or challenges did you overcome? How was this done?*

The program has been highly cost effective. The caretaker relatives in 55 cases have obtained needed information and/or services to make the placement of the child in their home more secure, if not permanent.

Since the inception of the program in FY 2000, the program costs have been \$44,686.45. Without this contract, the caretaker relatives would not have been able to pursue legal custody or adoption of the child in their care due to the prohibitive cost of legal services.

5. **Ability to Replicate Project:** *Can this project be duplicated in other counties? What could counties do to minimize obstacles and problems?*

This program has the potential to be duplicated in any county with access to Legal Aid services.