



Social Services Institute 2026 Innovation Awards Nominees

ASHE COUNTY

Disaster Recovery Unit

Ashe County established the Disaster Recovery Unit to provide comprehensive disaster case management services for residents impacted by Hurricane Helene. Supported through a combination of county funding and grant allocations, the unit was created to help verified survivors navigate FEMA, state and federal aid programs, and local nonprofit resources during a complex recovery period. The initiative was grounded in a clear mission: helping families return home safely and with coordinated support.

DSS responded immediately by operating an emergency shelter, partnering with county leadership to establish a call line for residents seeking assistance or volunteer opportunities, and reassigning existing staff to meet urgent community needs. With support from local administrators, the department reallocated an existing staff member into a supervisory role, secured temporary grant funding for additional positions through a partner agency, repurposed an existing facility, and used available furnishings to create an accessible walk-in location. DSS also coordinated with churches and nonprofits to host large-scale community meetings at minimal expense, ensuring survivors could receive information and assistance in familiar community settings.

The Disaster Recovery Unit has had a profound and continuing impact on the community. More than 800 households have been contacted and served in some capacity; more than 99 donated campers or tiny homes have been provided to verified survivors; and more than 200 households have participated in formal Disaster Case Management. The department developed customized forms to track demographic information, recovery needs, and resources allocated to each household. Despite challenges related to staffing, grant continuity, and navigating complex recovery systems, weekly stakeholder meetings and

strong partnerships helped refine processes, avoid duplication, and ensure families received coordinated, meaningful support.

CABARRUS COUNTY

Customer Self Service

Cabarrus County developed the “Meet You Where You Are” Customer Self Service project to make document submission easier, faster, and more responsive to the realities of customers’ lives. Recognizing that many residents balance work, transportation, childcare, and other responsibilities, the agency created a secure digital intake form that allows customers to submit required documents without visiting the office. The project was designed to respect customers’ time while improving access to services through a convenient self-service option.

The form can be accessed by scanning a QR code with a mobile phone or by using a website from a computer or laptop. Customers can upload documents directly from their phones, including by taking a photo and submitting it through the mobile-friendly form. The agency built the tool using existing resources, including Laserfiche and its case management system, while IT staff added safeguards to scan files for viruses and protect customer data. Smart routing sends submitted documents directly to the appropriate team or caseworker, improving internal workflow without significant new costs.

The digital submission form has been a clear success by giving customers a secure, accessible way to manage their cases without unnecessary in-person visits. High use of the QR code and website demonstrates strong customer adoption, and the project has improved convenience for residents facing travel, childcare, or work-related barriers. Internally, the initiative has helped reduce lobby wait times, speed document processing, strengthen document routing through automated workflows, and reinforce a customer-centered approach to service delivery.

CABARRUS COUNTY

Community Health Fairs

Cabarrus County’s Community Health Fairs began in 2022 as an annual opportunity for Medicaid Managed Care health plans to connect directly with customers and share

information about available services. After holding the event annually in 2022 and 2023 and twice in 2024, the agency recognized an opportunity to expand the model beyond managed care education and create a broader, more accessible community resource hub.

In late 2024, the fairs were reimagined as quarterly events designed to bring residents, providers, and community partners together around timely health and human service needs. Beginning in 2025, each quarter was organized around a theme: Heart Health, Infants and Toddlers, Back to School, and Cold Weather Gear. Partner participation now spans medical, behavioral health, dental, physical health, governmental, food security, housing stability, and other basic-needs organizations. Services have included health screenings, flu shots, car seat checks, CPR demonstrations, hot car safety education, and other practical supports that residents can access in one location.

The reimagined Community Health Fairs have grown from approximately 20 participating agencies and partners to around 45, reflecting strong community value and partner confidence. The quarterly model has strengthened professional networking, expanded cross-sector partnerships, and created a consistent, accessible destination for residents to connect with timely resources throughout the year. The initiative has become a dynamic community institution and continues to demonstrate meaningful impact, even as growth approaches current space and capacity limits.

CARTERET COUNTY

Empowering Connection: The First 30

Carteret County developed “The First 30” as a practice model to strengthen outcomes for families at risk of foster care and those working toward reunification. Recognizing that early engagement shapes long-term outcomes, the initiative focuses on the first 30 days of ongoing services as the most critical window for building trust, transparency, and meaningful parental involvement. The model was designed to move practice from process-driven compliance to purpose-driven, family-centered engagement.

The initiative was developed through staff feedback, case reviews, and analysis of practice gaps that showed inconsistencies in early engagement, limited face-to-face connection, and overreliance on documentation rather than relationship building. Although the agency was meeting several performance standards, reunification outcomes remained a concern, with a 34% reunification rate before implementation. Without requiring additional funding, leadership and frontline staff used existing supervision structures, case transfer

processes, staff time, and internal expertise to create a structured framework for meaningful visits, standardized introductory and exploration contacts, team staffing, and case planning developed alongside families.

Implemented over one year through design, training, phased adoption, coaching, and CQI support, “The First 30” has created a more consistent and accountable standard for early family engagement. The model strengthened practice during the first month of involvement and contributed to measurable improvements in family outcomes. Reunification increased from 34% at implementation to 55% in 2025 and 64% so far this year, while foster care entries decreased by 50% from the implementation year to the following year.

Improvements were documented through case reviews, supervisory assessments, CQI and training partnerships, and tracking of early-stage contact depth and timeliness, and the framework has generated interest from other counties, DHHS partners, and statewide child welfare stakeholders.

CATAWBA COUNTY

Linking Inmates to Health Resources

Catawba County developed Linking Inmates to Health Resources as a no-cost interdepartmental collaboration to support individuals reentering the community after incarceration. The initiative focuses on people at high risk for overdose, untreated substance use disorder, homelessness, unemployment, and poor health outcomes, connecting them to critical health care and social supports before release. Through partnership among the Catawba County Detention Center, Public Health, Social Services, and the County Opioid SUD Program Coordinator, the program improves long-term stability while reducing the likelihood of future justice system involvement.

Community Health Workers meet with inmates scheduled for release within 60 days to assist with Medicaid applications, educate those already enrolled on how to use their benefits, and connect participants to substance use treatment, medical care, housing, food resources, transportation, employment services, and vocational rehabilitation. Social Services expedites Medicaid processing so coverage can be active at release, allowing individuals to immediately access treatment, medications, and preventive care. By addressing Social Drivers of Health through a peer-support model, the initiative removes barriers to successful reintegration and demonstrates how existing county resources can be aligned to improve public health and safety outcomes without additional financial burden.

Between April 2024 and April 2026, the initiative supported 248 inmates referred by the Detention Center. Of those, 123 received help navigating Medicaid and other services addressing Social Determinants of Health, and 54 received assistance with Medicaid applications, with 47 approved at release. The coverage is estimated to provide approximately \$6,000 per client in healthcare benefits, totaling \$264,000 in provider compensation. Case management was provided to 79 inmates, addressing needs such as healthcare navigation, employment, food, housing, and peer support. The program has earned local, statewide, and national recognition for its interdisciplinary approach to community reentry and healthcare access.

CATAWBA COUNTY

Statewide Expansion of Success Coach – A Post Permanency Model

Catawba County DSS, in partnership with The Duke Endowment, developed the Success Coach Service to address a critical gap in support for families after children exit foster care through reunification, adoption, guardianship, or custody. Success Coaches provide voluntary, in-home services that strengthen permanency and promote child well-being through support, education, and service coordination. The model is grounded in family-centered, strengths-based, trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, empowerment-driven, and well-being-focused practice.

After demonstrating strong local outcomes, the initiative expanded through non-traditional partnerships with NCDHHS, Boys and Girls Home of NC, Children's Home Society of NC, Child Trends, Casey Family Programs, The National Implementation Research Network, and The Duke Endowment. The service was designed to strengthen family protective factors, reduce risk factors, improve child well-being, prevent foster care re-entry, and create consistent post-permanency support statewide. In April 2025, NCDHHS selected Success Coach as the state model and expanded it across all 100 North Carolina counties through a \$16.5 million state and federal investment over three years, supported by statewide training, technical assistance, implementation coaching, fidelity monitoring, community partnerships, standardized tools, and ongoing evaluation.

The Success Coach Service has successfully grown from a single-county program into a statewide post-permanency support model serving families across North Carolina. The initiative strengthened collaboration among public child welfare agencies, private providers, philanthropy partners, researchers, and community organizations. Families

report feeling more supported, connected to resources, empowered in decision-making, and better equipped to navigate challenges after permanency. Success is measured through family feedback, assessment data, fidelity monitoring, implementation outcomes, service engagement, and ongoing evaluation, and the model has generated interest from organizations and agencies outside North Carolina seeking to replicate it.

CHATHAM COUNTY

Partnership for Employment and Independence for People with Disabilities

Chatham County DSS partnered with Employment and Independence for People with Disabilities (EIPD), formerly Vocational Rehabilitation, to offer the Windmills Disability Awareness Training Program. The project was designed to strengthen organization-wide understanding of disabilities, including both visible and non-visible disabilities, and to better support employees and clients who have disabilities. Windmills provides participants with practical knowledge, skills, and tools to create a more inclusive workplace where all employees have the opportunity to thrive, and the training was available at no cost to participants.

Over the past year and a half, DSS employees participated in sessions focused on emotional disabilities, communication, and reasonable accommodations. DSS also collaborated with Public Health and the County Manager's Office to participate in Windmills sessions, expanding the reach of the training across county departments and reinforcing the importance of inclusion as a shared organizational responsibility.

The partnership helped make DSS a more welcoming and responsive workplace for employees and clients. Participation in the training earned the department recognition as part of a national employer partnership campaign with EIPD and reinforced that small, thoughtful accommodations can make a significant difference in how people experience services and the workplace. The initiative strengthened disability awareness, promoted inclusive practices, and supported a culture that better recognizes and responds to individual needs.

CUMBERLAND COUNTY

Professional Advisory Council and Multidisciplinary Team Collaboration

Cumberland County's Professional Advisory Council is a long-standing multidisciplinary partnership designed to improve outcomes for children and families involved in child abuse investigations. The council meets monthly and brings together representatives from the Child Advocacy Center, DSS, Public Health, law enforcement, the District Attorney's Office, Guardian ad Litem, schools, the local hospital, child medical exam providers, military installation school partners, and Family Advocacy Program staff. The council also supports a bi-weekly multidisciplinary team where the Child Advocacy Center, law enforcement, DSS, mental health agencies, and medical providers collaboratively review cases.

The initiative was created to strengthen coordination among agencies that often serve the same families during crises. By meeting regularly, partners can improve communication, streamline investigations and services, reduce trauma to child victims and families, and support more informed, family-centered case decisions. The council operates without a formal budget, relying instead on the professional expertise, staff time, and existing services of participating agencies to maximize support for children and families.

The Professional Advisory Council and multidisciplinary team meetings have improved coordination, communication, and service delivery in child abuse investigations. Regular collaboration allows partners to share investigative information, evidence, and service recommendations in real time, resulting in more informed decisions and stronger family-centered support. The initiative has reduced duplication, strengthened coordination between social workers and law enforcement, minimized repeated interviews for children, and improved interagency communication. Challenges related to staff turnover and PATH NC implementation have been addressed through transparent communication, supervisor participation, and advance preparation with partners.

CURRITUCK COUNTY

Operation Santa Claus

Currituck County DSS developed Operation Santa Claus as an annual community collaboration that provides holiday assistance outside the scope of mandated agency services. Through partnerships with local businesses, churches, civic organizations,

community service groups, individual citizens, and DSS staff, the program supports children living in poverty, children experiencing foster care, disabled or vulnerable adults, and adults experiencing guardianship with gifts, food baskets, and other holiday necessities.

Individuals and families in need are matched with community sponsors who purchase gifts and needed items. Monetary donations are also accepted so DSS staff can shop for children and adults who are not matched with sponsors, ensuring that every eligible participant receives support. Gifts are collected at the agency for inventory and distribution, and staff from administration, clerical, fiscal, social work, and economic services all contribute to administering the program.

Operation Santa Claus serves approximately 350 to 600 children and about 50 adults each year and generates an average of \$15,000 to \$20,000 in monetary donations annually. For a small county agency, the program represents a significant philanthropic effort and demonstrates the power of non-traditional partnerships and community generosity. It strengthens public trust, fosters collaboration and compassion across the county, and highlights the positive community-centered role of DSS by directly improving the lives of vulnerable children and adults during the holiday season.

FORSYTH COUNTY

Empowering Connection: Embedding Medicaid Access Within Substance Use Treatment Services

Forsyth County DSS launched an innovative partnership with Comprehensive Treatment Center (CTC) in response to Medicaid Expansion and the growing need to improve access to services for individuals experiencing substance use disorders. Through a structured internship partnership, a Medicaid Eligibility Specialist II pursuing a degree in substance abuse counseling was embedded onsite at CTC to provide direct Medicaid and Food and Nutrition Services support within the treatment setting.

The initiative was designed to reduce barriers to treatment, increase awareness of Medicaid eligibility, strengthen collaboration between DSS and community-based providers, and support recovery stability. Operating from January through May 2026, the project used existing staff resources without requiring additional funding. DSS leveraged county-issued equipment, community workspace support, and existing staffing capacity to

implement a cost-effective model that brought eligibility services directly to individuals who may have had difficulty accessing DSS during traditional business hours.

The partnership demonstrated measurable success by removing barriers to healthcare access and creating a more accessible, person-centered approach for individuals in treatment and recovery. Outcomes included increased onsite Medicaid application support, reduced treatment-related financial strain, improved treatment participation, stronger connections to Food and Nutrition Services and community resources, expanded referrals to supportive services, and improved collaboration between DSS and CTC. The model strengthened social services' presence within a non-traditional healthcare setting and created a replicable approach for embedding eligibility support in community-based treatment environments.

GASTON COUNTY

Don't Duck Out on Water Safety

Gaston County DSS launched “Don't Duck Out on Water Safety” after the community experienced two fatal child drownings and two near-fatalities in 2024. As the agency responsible for helping protect the safety and well-being of children and families, DSS identified community education and awareness as the most actionable strategy for preventing future drownings. The campaign was designed to reach families before peak swim season with practical, bilingual water safety information and to connect residents with resources that could help prevent future tragedies.

In January 2025, DSS convened Emergency Management Services, Emergency Medical Services, and Safe Kids to design a coordinated countywide prevention campaign. The team set clear objectives to reach families before pool season, engage local businesses as prevention partners, and ensure all messaging was accessible in English and Spanish. The first YouTube video was released on May 9, 2025, ahead of Memorial Day weekend, and the campaign continued through September. Key strategies included distributing 1,200 bilingual yellow rubber ducks through local businesses and directly to families, producing two YouTube videos on water safety and swimwear safety, sharing information through social media and the county website, and connecting families to the local YMCA's Safety Around Water program for grant-funded swimming lessons. The total materials budget was \$382.25, with video production and personnel provided through existing partner resources.

The initiative successfully mobilized four partner agencies, engaged businesses across the

county, and delivered accessible drowning prevention messaging to families throughout the swim season. The campaign distributed 1,200 rubber ducks with water safety messaging, produced and shared two educational videos, and linked families to local swimming safety resources. Following the two fatal drownings and two near-fatalities reported to DSS in 2024, no drowning deaths or near-fatality drowning incidents were reported to DSS in 2025. The effort met its goals of broad seasonal reach, actionable family education, cross-sector partnership, and prevention-focused child safety.

GUILFORD COUNTY

Friends in Action: A Cross-Sector SNAP & Medicaid Readiness Initiative

Guilford County created the Friends in Action SNAP/Medicaid Initiative as a proactive response to major federal policy changes affecting SNAP and Medicaid eligibility requirements. Anticipating that vulnerable residents could lose access to food and healthcare benefits because of new work requirements and verification standards, DSS convened healthcare systems, nonprofit organizations, volunteer networks, and faith-based partners before implementation occurred. The initiative focused on educating community organizations, improving pathways for medical and work-related exemption verification, and strengthening support systems for impacted residents.

Launched in August 2025, the initiative used projected eligibility impact data, operational concerns about documentation barriers, and input from organizations serving food-insecure and medically vulnerable populations to shape its priorities. DSS program managers provided policy expertise, eligibility guidance, staff training, and coordination, while faith-based organizations expanded outreach through trusted community relationships. Healthcare providers improved exemption verification through electronic medical record access and standardized documentation, and nonprofit and volunteer partners connected residents to food assistance, transportation, housing resources, and employment supports. Between August 2025 and February 2026, the initiative engaged 137 participants representing 56 organizations and operated with a minimal investment of approximately \$1,364 by using existing partnerships, coalition meetings, and staff expertise.

The Friends in Action SNAP/Medicaid Initiative strengthened community preparedness and cross-sector coordination ahead of policy changes that could affect access to food and healthcare. It achieved its primary goals of educating partners, improving exemption verification processes, and expanding coordinated supports for vulnerable residents. The

partnership model produced outcomes DSS could not have achieved independently, including improved healthcare partner communication around medical exemptions, expanded faith-based outreach, stronger public trust, and coordinated transportation, employment, and food assistance resources. The initiative offers a highly replicable model for jurisdictions seeking cost-effective ways to improve administrative readiness and protect access to essential services during policy transitions.

GUILFORD COUNTY

Thriving Families Support Services Program

Guilford County developed the Thriving Families Support Services Program as a proactive initiative to strengthen families and prevent unnecessary involvement with the child welfare system. The program was created in response to increasing community needs related to housing instability, financial hardship, limited access to essential resources, and gaps in supportive services. Its purpose is to provide early, voluntary support before family challenges escalate while also serving as a flexible resource during active child welfare cases to help stabilize households and reduce the likelihood of re-entry.

The program accepts referrals from self-referrals, schools, medical providers, law enforcement, and community agencies, allowing families to connect with support through multiple trusted pathways. To ensure appropriate service delivery, referrals must reflect layered needs beyond housing alone, such as parenting support, resource navigation, budgeting assistance, transportation barriers, and overall family stabilization. Staff actively participate in school and community events, collaborate with local agencies, and provide tangible assistance through donated goods, meals, and resource coordination. The program continues to evolve through community partnerships, stakeholder feedback, and ongoing assessment of emerging family needs.

The Thriving Families Support Services Program has strengthened connections between DSS and the community while increasing accessibility and trust among families who may otherwise be hesitant to engage with social services. By meeting families where they are and addressing needs early, the program has helped reduce risk factors associated with child welfare involvement. Early indicators show increased voluntary engagement, improved access to basic resources, and more timely interventions that help stabilize households. The program has met its objectives of increasing community engagement, providing preventative support, and strengthening families through a proactive, relationship-centered approach.

HARNETT COUNTY

Halloween Bash

Harnett County's Halloween Bash is a long-standing annual event created to strengthen connection, support, and awareness among children in foster care, foster families, adoptive families, and agency staff. Over the past 10 years, what began as a small tradition has grown into a highly anticipated community celebration that helps foster and adoptive families build relationships with one another and with the agency. The event is traditionally held on the Friday before Halloween, allowing families and children to participate without the added pressure of school or work the next day.

The Halloween Bash is made possible through donations, county funds included in the agency's annual budget, and the time and creativity of staff across all departments. Employees volunteer to decorate offices, operate games and the haunted house, serve food, distribute candy, and support the overall event experience. Older foster youth also participate by serving as judges for office decorating contests, creating an opportunity for youth engagement and leadership. Over time, the event has expanded through increased staff involvement and growing support from community partners and other county agencies.

The Halloween Bash has successfully achieved and expanded its original goal of helping foster parents connect with and support one another. It now serves as a broader collaborative community event that strengthens relationships among foster parents, foster care programs, adoptive families, agency staff, and community partners. In 2025, the event expanded to include additional county agencies, and the addition of a trunk-or-treat component helped create a more inclusive and equitable experience for all children and families attending.

HERTFORD COUNTY

DSS and Emergency Management Partnership

Hertford County's DSS and Emergency Management Partnership demonstrated the important role social services can play during complex community crises that fall outside traditional agency responsibilities. On February 19, 2026, the DSS Director received a request from the Director of Emergency Management for assistance following an explosion

at Perdue Farms in Cofield, NC, where emergency personnel were attempting to recover an adult male who had died inside an unstable building. The victim's mother had been notified of his death but was refusing to leave the scene, creating urgent safety and emotional support needs.

Although the situation was not part of DSS's typical scope of work, the agency responded quickly to support Emergency Management and assist the grieving family. A team of social workers arrived onsite the following morning, received a briefing from emergency personnel, helped communicate with the family, offered condolences and counseling resource information, and maintained communication with the command center. Their presence helped support the family while also reinforcing safety concerns related to the unstable structure.

The response showed DSS's commitment to supporting residents during moments of crisis and highlighted the value of interagency collaboration when complex circumstances cannot be addressed by one department alone. By working alongside Emergency Management, DSS helped ensure the family received compassionate support and practical guidance during a traumatic event. The partnership strengthened trust between agencies and demonstrated how social services expertise can be mobilized effectively in emergency response situations.

MACON COUNTY

Together We Can Transition House

Macon County's Together We Can Transition House was created to address a critical gap for children entering foster care without an immediate placement. Before the initiative, children could remain at the local DSS office for extended periods while caseworkers searched for an appropriate home, adding stress and uncertainty during an already traumatic transition. The goal of the Transition House was to ensure that children had a safe, welcoming, trauma-informed space where they could shower, eat, receive clean clothing, play, rest, and feel secure while placement options were identified, including opportunities for sibling groups to remain together.

Together We Can worked closely with DSS leadership, foster families, and community partners to develop policies, procedures, safety protocols, and operational guidelines that would support both children and staff. The project moved through fundraising, renovation, furnishing, and program development, with resources maximized through donations,

discounted contractors, volunteer labor, and community support. The home was fully renovated and equipped through these partnerships, and its operational budget focused on renovations, furnishings, utilities, supplies, and maintenance. From the beginning, the Transition House was intentionally designed as more than temporary shelter; it was created as a trauma-responsive environment grounded in dignity, stability, and compassion.

The Transition House has become a meaningful solution for children entering care, DSS staff, and the broader foster care community. It provides an immediate alternative to an office setting, reduces trauma, preserves sibling connections, supports staff during placement shortages, and creates a more compassionate response during emergency removals. Impact has been measured through use of the home, staff feedback, reduced placement stress, and the ability to meet children's immediate care needs during transitions. The initiative also strengthened partnerships, increased awareness of the foster care placement crisis, and demonstrated how nonprofit and local agency collaboration can produce practical, child-centered solutions.

MECKLENBURG COUNTY

Mobile Market

Mecklenburg County's Mobile Market Program was created to address food insecurity among seniors, particularly those living in food deserts and those receiving Medicaid and Food and Nutrition Services. Since 2022, the Services for Adults division has provided free, healthy food directly to senior communities, recognizing that transportation barriers, affordability challenges, and limited access to fresh groceries can make it difficult for older adults to maintain nutrition and independence. The program is grounded in dignity, compassion, and the belief that seniors should be able to access healthy food in the communities where they live.

The County purchased and outfitted two Mobile Market vehicles and built external partnerships to make the model sustainable. Local farmers help supply monthly produce, and two local food banks provide produce, meats, and dairy at no cost. Food is offered through a market-style shopping experience that allows seniors to choose items for themselves, reinforcing respect, independence, and personal choice. By bringing groceries directly into neighborhoods, the program removes transportation barriers and expands access to fresh fruits, vegetables, and other nutritious foods that may otherwise be unaffordable or unavailable.

The Mobile Market Program has expanded from three low-income senior communities to 20 communities and now supports more than 800 enrolled seniors. Since its inception, the program has distributed 814,315 pounds and counting of fresh produce and groceries, demonstrating its continued growth and vital role in strengthening food security. Impact is measured through pounds of food delivered and the number of seniors reached. Budget constraints remain a challenge and have limited expansion to additional communities, but the program is positioned to serve at least 200 more seniors with additional funding and resources.

MECKLENBURG COUNTY

Countywide Pre-K

Mecklenburg County's Countywide Pre-K program was launched eight years ago to address a significant gap between available public pre-K seats and the number of four-year-old children in the county. While NC Pre-K has improved access across the state, Mecklenburg recognized that many families still needed additional support to access high-quality early education. The countywide program was designed to strengthen school readiness and holistic child development by offering universal public pre-K at no cost to all eligible families, with eligibility based only on county residency and the child being four years old by August 31.

The County partners with local Smart Start for program administration while supporting enrollment, programming, financial planning, and coordination with child care providers and the school system. The program operates through overlapping annual cycles, with enrollment review and resource allocation beginning in November, applications and placement starting in January, transition to kindergarten occurring in May and June, and summer months focused on enrollment and preparation for the next instructional year. This fiscal year, the program received a budget of \$26.2 million, following \$23.7 million the year prior. Nearly 80% of funding supports child care provider partnerships through per-child reimbursement, teacher salary supplements, retirement, and operating costs; 15% supports provider registration, teacher coaching, and child and family support; and the remainder funds materials needed for daily program operations.

The countywide pre-K program has produced strong results in enrollment, access, and school readiness. Applications reached record highs for the 2025–2026 school year, with record enrollment and more than 99.5% of seats filled. The program operated 115 pre-K

classrooms across 53 providers, expanding free, high-quality pre-K access for more than 2,000 children. Demand and enrollment have increased each year outside of the COVID-impacted school year, and data show the program has become increasingly economically integrated and demographically diverse. Kindergarten data also showed that program graduates scored higher than peers on early literacy assessments.

NORTHAMPTON COUNTY

HOPE – Wonderful Wednesday

Northampton County's H.O.P.E. Association, Helping Other People Every Day, was created to continue supporting residents after the disbanding of NCSSA, when county staff recognized that many citizens still faced challenges meeting basic daily needs. Built on compassion, teamwork, and service, the organization provides nonperishable food and hygiene items to individuals and families experiencing hardship, crisis, or unexpected need. The program is designed to respond quickly when unmet needs are identified while maintaining accountability and fairness in how assistance is distributed.

When county workers identify a potential need during regular interviews or interactions with citizens, they discuss the situation with a supervisor and contact a member of the H.O.P.E. Association for assistance. Every distribution is logged, and each food box contains enough supplies to help feed a family for approximately one week, while hygiene items support dignity and daily wellness. To ensure resources reach as many households as possible, each household may receive one food and hygiene box every six months. One of the Association's most successful efforts is "Wonderful Wednesday," when staff may wear jeans by donating either \$5 or five approved nonperishable food or hygiene items, creating a morale-building activity that directly supports the program's mission.

The County H.O.P.E. Association has become a meaningful and successful way to meet unmet needs throughout the community. Since its creation, the organization has provided direct support to individuals and families facing difficult circumstances by offering food and hygiene products during times of crisis or hardship. The program has strengthened relationships within the community, allowed county staff to respond quickly and compassionately when needs arise, and surpassed its initial goals through continued generosity, teamwork, and participation from county employees.

NORTHAMPTON COUNTY

Holiday Cheer Throughout the Year

Northampton County's Holiday Cheer Throughout the Year program was created to help DSS go the extra mile for residents with unmet needs during the holiday season and beyond. The initiative includes Thanksgiving baskets, the Children's Christmas Program, Adult Services needs, and other emergent needs identified by staff. Beginning in September and continuing through December, the program brings together DSS staff, local organizations, businesses, churches, schools, community members, and individual sponsors to provide food, clothing, shoes, blankets, personal care items, gift cards, and toys to vulnerable adults, guardianship clients, foster children, Adult Protective Services clients, CPS-involved families, victims of house fires, and other residents experiencing hardship.

The program is supported through donations, sponsorships, and staff-led fundraising. Adult Services coordinated a silent auction that raised \$716, with items donated by local organizations and DSS staff, and three additional fundraisers raised \$826. Donation and sponsorship letters are sent in October, and DSS reaches out across the community to ensure families and individuals can be matched with support. The fundraising efforts also strengthen morale within the agency by creating opportunities for staff to have fun together while directly helping residents in need. Any remaining funds are used to continue assisting citizens until the resources are exhausted.

Holiday Cheer Throughout the Year has provided meaningful direct assistance to residents facing poverty, crisis, and vulnerability. Social workers distributed \$20 gift cards, clothing, shoes, blankets, and personal care items to clients in need. In 2025, the Children's Christmas Program had 11 sponsors supporting 64 children, received 22 monetary donations totaling \$6,995.81, and enabled DSS to shop for 154 additional children. Altogether, the program brought holiday support to 218 children in 74 families and also provided hams and turkeys to county residents for Thanksgiving until supplies were exhausted.

ONslow COUNTY

One Church, One Family

Onslow County's One Church, One Family initiative began with one social worker's vision to connect local churches with children, adults, and families served by DSS. Recognizing that churches wanted to help but lacked a coordinated pathway for engagement, the agency worked to build relationships, educate congregations about DSS services, and identify meaningful ways volunteers could support vulnerable residents. What began as a simple idea has grown into an organized community partnership focused on connection, stability, and ongoing support.

Over the past two years, DSS staff have reached out to area churches, shared information about the needs of children, adults, and families served by the agency, and learned how congregations wanted to become involved. Nine churches have been trained on agency programs and expectations, and background checks have been completed for volunteers interested in mentoring youth and vulnerable adults. Communication with additional churches continues, with another congregation currently scheduling training to join the initiative.

The One Church, One Family initiative has created a sustainable support network for families and individuals involved with social services. Participating churches have donated essential items, sponsored families with Christmas meals and gifts, provided gifts for youth, assembled Easter baskets, and donated rolling suitcases filled with toiletries for children entering foster care. One foster family was licensed through the partnership, and one adult and nine child welfare families have been matched with church mentors who continue offering encouragement, guidance, and support beyond agency involvement.

PERSON COUNTY

Huddle Up with Human Services

Person County created Huddle Up with Human Services as a quarterly community engagement effort to educate residents and service providers about DSS programs and other human services available throughout the county. Each meeting is open to anyone interested in learning more about featured services, with presentations led by subject matter experts and time set aside for questions and discussion. Topics have included DSS

programs, Child Welfare, Adult Protective Services, Medicaid, and services offered by other human service partners.

The initiative was developed in response to a CCR-led assessment completed as part of the county's decision to form a consolidated human services department. The assessment identified communication and community engagement as opportunities for improvement, leading the county to create a consistent forum for public education, partnership building, and trust-building. Meetings began in 2025 and are held in varied community locations, including the library, recycling center, senior center, and a local restaurant, to reach different audiences. Surveys are used to evaluate presentations and identify future topics, and the project has not required additional county expenses.

Huddle Up with Human Services has helped create a more informed and engaged community while improving public perception of DSS and other human service agencies. Attendance has ranged from approximately 15 participants to more than 45, with positive feedback from county commissioners, partners, and residents. The varied topics and locations have helped reach diverse audiences, and survey responses indicate that participants find the meetings insightful, helpful, and effective in addressing misinformation about services. The effort has increased awareness of available programs and strengthened relationships with law enforcement, school social workers, the local managed care organization, and other county departments.

UNION COUNTY

Union County's Campaign to Recruit More Foster Parents

Union County launched the "Foster the Future" campaign to address a critical shortage of licensed foster homes. At the start of the campaign, the county had only 40 licensed foster homes for more than 160 children in foster care, resulting in many children, especially teenagers, being placed outside the county and away from schools, families, and support systems. The campaign was designed to increase public awareness, correct misconceptions about foster care, and encourage more families to explore becoming foster parents.

Union County Public Communications and Social Services collaborated on a targeted outreach strategy that included digital storytelling videos, social media promotion, a redesigned foster care webpage, community presentations, branded yard signs, and other outreach materials. Goals included increasing website engagement by 25%, improving

attendance at foster parent informational sessions, achieving a combined digital reach of 25,000, and distributing 100 branded yard signs. The project was completed primarily in-house, with 96% of the work produced by existing county staff and resources, and the total cost was approximately \$1,800 for printed materials and limited digital advertising. Campaign strategies were adjusted throughout the year based on analytics, community engagement, and participation trends.

The “Foster the Future” campaign produced measurable success across digital outreach, community engagement, and foster parent recruitment. Website engagement increased by 30% year over year, generating 2,947 page views and 2,174 unique users. Storytelling videos reached thousands of residents, including the “Boots on the Ground” video, which received more than 18,600 Facebook views and 704 YouTube views. A targeted Facebook ad generated 7,225 post engagements and more than 500 landing page visits for less than \$70. The campaign also distributed more than 150 branded yard signs, exceeded its original goal, and increased attendance at foster parent informational sessions from two to three interested families to an anticipated 25–30 individuals.

WAKE COUNTY

Father Engagement Services

Wake County developed Father Engagement Services to strengthen positive father engagement within child welfare and improve outcomes for children and families. Survey results from fathers involved with the Child Welfare Division identified significant barriers to engagement, including lack of trust, lack of empowerment, discomfort with the agency, concerns about fair treatment of fathers, and potential racial and gender-related bias. The data showed that 67% of surveyed fathers had multiple children, 83% reported feeling uncomfortable with the Child Welfare Division, 67% felt there was a need for improved and fair treatment of fathers, and 50% felt the quality of services may be linked to gender identity and bias. These findings helped the agency recognize the need for intentional partnership with fathers to reduce assumptions, address barriers, and improve child well-being outcomes.

The program created a father-centered child welfare engagement model offering 1:1 coaching, parent education classes, support groups, a referral hotline, and community education and training. The initiative is supported by existing staff, including one supervisor, two full-time coaches, two part-time coaches, one part-time group facilitator, and one part-time intake specialist, with a total staff cost of \$345,129.47. Key

implementation lessons included the importance of engaging fathers at the onset of a case, ensuring staff reflect the population served, involving community partners, offering virtual options, and addressing historical and systemic racial disparities that can prevent fathers of color from engaging with the agency.

Father Engagement Services has contributed to measurable improvements in father involvement and reunification outcomes. In Fiscal Year 2021, 22% of youth who reunified were reunified with their father only; that figure decreased to 17.4% in Fiscal Year 2022, increased to 31% in Fiscal Year 2023, and was 16% in Fiscal Year 2024. Fiscal Year 2025 data showed a substantial increase, with 10 out of 16 reunifications, or 63%, resulting in father-only placements. The program also contributed to the creation of a Racial Equity Change Initiative, which includes monthly transformational talks, racial equity learning sessions, and change teams focused on developing solutions to existing disparities.

WAKE COUNTY

Child Welfare Court Liaison Program

Wake County developed the Child Welfare Court Liaison Program in response to an increase in justice-involved youth entering DSS custody, limited placement options, and gaps in coordination across systems. The program was designed as a proactive, court-connected intervention model to support judicial decision-making, reduce reliance on DSS custody, and stabilize youth in family or community-based settings whenever safely possible. By engaging earlier in the juvenile court process, the initiative helps identify alternatives before custody decisions are made.

The program embeds child welfare expertise within the juvenile court process through close collaboration with District Court judges, the Department of Juvenile Justice, managed care organizations, and community providers. Staff work with youth and families to identify strengths, explore relative placement options, and connect families to services that can stabilize the home environment. The initiative was implemented through strategic reallocation of existing resources and did not require new funding beyond personnel already supported through a county budget expansion. Of five new Child Welfare positions created to support Family Support Services prevention work, two were designated for this court-connected effort, with an annual personnel cost of approximately \$151,134 and a 1.5-year cost of approximately \$226,701.

Since implementation in October 2024, the Child Welfare Court Liaison Program has

demonstrated strong early success in preventing court-ordered entry into foster care. During the review period from October 2024 through March 2026, none of the 64 youth referred to the program entered DSS custody, reflecting a 100% prevention rate during that timeframe. Two youth entered custody after the review window, representing a small percentage of total referrals. The program has diverted youth from foster care, increased family- and community-based alternatives, reduced reliance on DSS custody during placement shortages, strengthened coordination among child welfare, juvenile justice, managed care, and the courts, and contributed to fewer youth waiting in county offices for placement.

WILSON COUNTY

Eviction Diversion Collaborative: A Cross-Sector Housing Stability Network

Wilson County's Eviction Diversion Collaborative is a cross-sector housing stability network designed to prevent avoidable evictions, promote housing stability, and reduce the long-term human and financial costs associated with homelessness. The initiative emerged from 2019 discussions among public and private partners responding to rising eviction filings, housing insecurity, and increasing rent burden. Partners recognized the need for a coordinated eviction prevention system that could intervene earlier and reduce fragmented service delivery.

Planning began through collaboration among housing, legal, healthcare, education, and human service partners, who formalized shared roles in 2023 through a Memorandum of Understanding. Led by DSS, the initiative brings together more than 15 non-traditional partners, including a housing authority, legal aid, United Way, public schools, re-entry services, healthcare providers, municipal agencies, nonprofits, and landlords. Services include housing counseling, social work support, mental health services, emergency rental assistance, landlord mediation, stabilization services, and coordinated referrals. The effort is implemented through braided existing resources with no new dedicated funding, with a DSS social worker providing case management and a DSS Communications Manager consolidating partner data into a shared reporting document for evaluation and accountability.

The Eviction Diversion Collaborative has demonstrated strong success in preventing housing displacement and strengthening cross-sector coordination. Since

implementation, the initiative has assisted 57 households and stabilized housing for more than 164 residents, including 103 children. Of the households served, 53 retained their housing, preventing eviction and reducing strain on emergency systems. Success is measured through housing retention outcomes, avoided evictions, coordinated service plans, landlord engagement, and successful referrals to supportive services. The initiative has created a unified partnership network and a scalable model for addressing housing instability through collaboration, braided funding, shared accountability, and data-informed decision-making.

YANCEY COUNTY

Senior Resource Fair

Yancey County's Senior Resource Fair was developed after DSS revived the county Adult Multidisciplinary Team in 2023 as the public health emergency wound down. Through MDT meetings, local agencies and community partners recognized that many seniors, vulnerable adults, and caregivers were unaware of available resources related to abuse prevention, neglect, exploitation, health services, long-term care, and community supports. To address this gap, the MDT created a Senior Resource Fair beginning in 2024, intentionally scheduled in June to coincide with Elder Abuse Prevention Awareness Month.

The fair is held in a centrally located downtown event space and brings together a broad range of partners offering services such as health screenings, provider enrollment, in-home aide services, advance directive information, scams and identity theft protection, long-term care resources, palliative and hospice care, dementia caregiver support, veterans' services, DSS economic services eligibility information, county agency services, and disaster relief information for residents impacted by Hurricane Helene. Attendees receive purple shopping bags in recognition of Elder Abuse Prevention Awareness, and vendors provide snacks, drinks, door prizes, and giveaways. State and regional partners, including the Regional Director and Regional Adult CQI Specialist, have participated in the events, strengthening collaboration among state, county, local vendors, and other agencies.

The Senior Resource Fair has become an important annual community service project for a small county agency. The 2024 and 2025 events each drew more than 100 attendees, not including vendors, and the success of the first two fairs led to planning for a third annual event. The local Council on Aging sponsored the event space and provided World Elder Abuse Prevention Awareness purple T-shirts for staff, while agency staff contributed

months of planning and onsite support. The financial impact on DSS was minimal, with less than \$500 spent on purple shopping bags, advertising signs, and incidentals, while the community impact was significant. Attendees left with information to help them not only live, but thrive, and follow-up MDT discussions confirmed that an annual Senior Resource Fair is an invaluable resource for the community.

