

Child Welfare Leadership Fellows make strides and create change

On Thursday, June 8, five teams of Child Welfare Leadership Fellows gathered at the Children's Museum to present the final phase of their project work focused on the challenge of serving babies and their families. The 2017 class marked the third, and most experientially diverse, group of Fellows.

Recognizing the tremendous, long-term effects of early life experiences, the Fellows spent this year exploring opportunities to improve supports and services for babies and their families. The Fellows divided the topic into five areas – prenatal, daycare, fathers, hospitals and home visitation – and examined how each area could be strengthened. Some suggestions offered by the group included stationing an Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF) caseworker at hospitals to offer guidance to families; increasing engagement with fathers; and updating the DHS website to simplify the process of finding and securing childcare.

“The Child Welfare Leadership Fellows program is a shining example of how the dedication of a small group of people can create change,” said Brian Bell, analytical unit manager in the Office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation (DARE), who oversees the Fellows program. “Fellows aren't recommending expensive or complicated policy changes – the program is designed to encourage changes in knowledge and perspective – but their ideas, however ‘simple,’ are making a visible difference in the families we serve.”

While the Fellows program has only been in existence for three short years, previous participants have been the catalyst for many changes in the child welfare system. Suggestions from the first class of Fellows have led to the establishment of Behavioral Health Specialist positions in each of the five CYF offices to provide consultation to caseworkers on behavioral health questions, recommend evidence-based programs and supports, and assist with the negotiation of complex insurance issues. Research conducted by a second group of 2014-2015 Fellows led to the establishment of a Private Petition Diversion Initiative that refers a very specific population of youth (12-17 years old without a safety concern) to services they need to address a crisis without CYF involvement. Finally, Fellows from the 2016 graduating class created the idea of Kinship Navigators to assist caseworkers in identifying kin, obtaining clearances and expediting the kinship foster home certification process. The Kinship Navigators were hired and began working in the regional offices at the beginning of 2017.

Since inception, more than 75 DHS staff members from across DHS program areas have participated as Child Welfare Leadership Fellows. The program will break for a short time, and plans to resume with a new cohort of fellows in 2018.