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NEWS

Praise for adult services, foster care

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COLUMBIA COUNTY — Representatives from the state Office of Children and Family Services traveled to Hudson on Friday to recognize the county Department of Social Services for developing a program that helps fill in the gap between childhood and adulthood.

A unique approach from DSS' Foster Care and Adult and Children Services divisions gives foster children who age out of care another resource to use when working toward independence. The units are "teamed" together to make the transition out of foster care more manageable for children who age out of the system.

The "team" combines staff from the two units who identify children in foster care age 17 to 21 with a goal of independent living or, in the case of those with developmental disabilities, adult residential care.

Children "age out" at 21, but many who have been in foster care for much of their lives need additional help, especially those with developmental disabilities or who wouldn't be able to live independently.

Caseworkers work with children, and their families, to develop a plan for the future instead of an individual being discharged directly into the community with no prior knowledge of how to find medical care or other programs and services.

An advisory board of psychologists, law guardians, DSS supervisors, mental health agencies and other community agencies was assembled to assist the team with the troubleshooting related to the new program.

This year, the state OCFS honored programs that "successfully promote the protection of vulnerable adults," said Alan Lawitz, director of the Bureau of Adult Services for OCFS, who came to Hudson with Paula Vielkind, OCFS Adult Services Specialist.

"Because the transitional team members have broad knowledge of the youth involved, Columbia County expects that the improved discharge plans will prevent homelessness, domestic violence, substance abuse and involvement with law enforcement," Vielkind said. "The transitional team makes sure that each youth has the life skills necessary for self-sufficiency as an adult."

Vielkind said the new program "has changed the way Columbia County DSS deals with youth aging out of foster care ... integration between the foster care and adult and family services units is a step in the right direction."

Lawitz called the team "innovative."

"Amidst all the gloomy budget news we hear, we need to try to remember there's a lot of good news to



The teamwork of members of the county Foster Care and Adult and Children Services departments was recently praised by the state. Sitting left to right are Adult Services Specialist for New York State Paula Vielkind, Director of the Bureau of Adult Services of the New York State OCFS Alan Lavitz, DSS Commissioner Paul Mossman. Standing left to right are Supervisor of Adult and Family Services Sue Karicher, Director of Family Services Deborah Amerling, Foster Care Caseworker Georgia Lanier, Foster Care Senior Caseworker Karen McSweeney, Foster Care Supervisor Cindy Jennings, Senior Caseworker Millie Sweatt, Foster Care Caseworker Dana Shutts and Foster Care and Independent Living Caseworker Elaine Scull. Missing from the picture is Community Care Specialist Cindy Pilch. (David Lee/Hudson-Catskill Newspapers)

share and a lot to be proud of," he said.

Mossman gave the credit to his staff, who "put together such a wonderful program and implemented it."

The "teaming" model for social service agencies is part of a pilot program from OCFS; teaming is being used in several New York counties but the foster care teaming initiative is unique to Columbia County.

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