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MID-WESTERN
HEALTH BOARD

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To: **CHAIRMAN AND EACH MEMBER , MID WESTERN HEALTH BOARD**

Report No: 84/02
Item No 9 on Agenda

**REPORT FOR THE MEETING OF THE BOARD TO BE HELD ON FRIDAY 8TH NOVEMBER
2002**

ANNUAL REVIEW OF CHILD CARE AND FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

Dear Member,

The Annual Review of Child Care and Family Support Services is circulated with the agenda for your information and consideration. Section 8 of the Child Care Act, 1991 places the responsibility on health boards to review annually the adequacy of child care and family support services in their area of responsibility.

Within this context, a review process was established involving the collation of information from a number of sources. This included

- feedback from service user, provider agencies and through regular internal service reviews,
- the systematic collection and analysis of data on monthly service activities,

Key Developments and Activities in 2001

The Review identifies the broad range of services that were delivered to children and families in the region within a clear strategic framework. It outlines specific services designed to protect and meet the needs of children who are identified under the Child Care Act, 1991 as not receiving adequate care and protection.

Of particular significance during 2001 was the following:

- The Community Development sector saw the expansion of family support services with the objective that by helping families to develop their own strengths and protective factors, they will be less likely to need more interventionist measures at a later stage.
- The final Springboard evaluation report, *Promoting Family Well-being through Family Support Services* was launched nationally which showed that parents and children experienced considerable improvements in well-being while attending Springboard projects. In the Mid-West region, 46 families were referred to the Springboard projects in Southill and Thurles and a further 16 families were referred to a similar Family Support Project in Moyross.
- The implementation of *Children First – the National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* was progressed throughout the Region. This was evidenced by clearer operational definitions of child abuse and threshold criteria for notifications to the Child Protection Notification System.
- In addition to the implementation of the *Children First Guidelines*, Child Protection Services were also enhanced during the year by the continued collaboration between the Gardaí and the Board and by the joint training in inter-agency operational procedures.
- In terms of Alternative Care Services, the numbers of children in care was consistent with previous years and the trend to place children in more family type environments, i.e. foster care, predominated.

There were 391 children in care at the end of 2001 with 91% in foster care; this compares with 87% in foster care at the end of the previous year. Furthermore, the Relative Carer's project expanded with 89 children placed with relative foster carers compared with 75 at the end of 2000. Revised allowances for foster care were also implemented.

- In line with statutory obligations and consistent with the National Standards for Children's Residential Centres, the Board carried out inspections of all the residential child care units managed by the voluntary sector. Protocols and procedures were also developed for the operation of the Special Care Unit and the programme for the development of four High Support Units was completed. A newly refurbished facility for youth homeless was opened and a Youth Homeless Strategy was drafted.

Adequacy of Services

While many initiatives were undertaken in 2001, the report also outlines some of the key inadequacies identified by service providers and highlights areas where further attention and improvements are required. The more critical inadequacies identified in such services have related particularly to the need to

- further enhance community work services and to provide additional early intervention/preventative and support programme for families;
- extend the Family Welfare Conference system;
- strengthen the capacity to track and audit child protection cases more effectively;
- enhance the Board's capacity to meet the requirements of the Children Act, 2001;
- continue basic and advanced training in relation to the *Children First Guidelines*;
- provide independent chairing of Child Protection Case Conferences in all Catchment Areas;
- ensure that the Special Care Unit becomes fully operational and that an integrated model of care is in place within all residential units;
 - Implement the "Report of the Working Group on Foster Care";

- enhance the youth homeless and aftercare services by developing programmes and an advocacy service for young people who have left care.

The access to accurate information is vitally important. The Board recognises that in spite of the rapid technological advances that have taken place in recent years, continued investment will be required to ensure effective data collection, record keeping and retrieval by frontline, research and management staff.

CONCLUSION

A growing awareness of child abuse amongst society at large in recent years has influenced the rapid development of services aimed at safeguarding at risk children. This has given the impression that services have been developed with the narrow focus of protection to the exclusion of all other services. However, as this Review shows, the growth of family support services reflects the importance given to early prevention and intervention initiatives as well as specialised treatment services.

The undertaking of reviews offers an opportunity to reflect on the appropriateness and adequacy of services to meet the needs of the people that they serve. This Review facilitates this reflection.

The need to develop new responses in services is acknowledged by the Review and a sustained programme of investment is required to respond to newly emerging needs and to meet existing obligations. In addition, responsibilities arising from new legislation together with changes in society raise very considerable challenges for the Board.

Yours sincerely,

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REGIONAL MANAGER
CHILDCARE & DISABILITIES