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NM's High Use of Short-Term Foster Care Might Contribute to Trauma

New Mexico is among the biggest users of "short-term" placements in foster care, an approach that can be traumatic for children, an LFC evaluation finds.

The report, *Program Evaluation: Short-Term Foster Care*, finds New Mexico's use of short stays in almost 41 percent of cases in which a child is removed from the home is five times the national average of 8.7 percent and cost the state up to \$13.7 million a year.

"Some removals are necessary," the report says. However, it notes, "Children removed from the home often have worse outcomes than those not removed ... likely related to the trauma associated with parental separation and the child's feelings of fear, uncertainty and abandonment."

Over 80 percent of children in short-term placements, eight days or less, are placed with a relative – a recognized best practice. Further, over 90 percent of short-term placements last two days or less, an indication a removal could have been avoided if effective in-home services were available, the evaluation says.

Among the factors contributing to the high use of short stays, the report finds, is state law authorizing law enforcement officers to remove a child from a home, even without input from child protective services, a practice in only four states. Overly large caseloads at the Children, Youth and Families Department also likely contribute to the high use of short stays.

The evaluation recommends greater use of evidence-based in-home services and other family preservation efforts; amending state law to provide for greater collaboration with CYFD and formal case review; expanding the use of cross-agency training, data sharing, and multidisciplinary teams; and increasing efforts to retain child protective staff.