

Statement of Dr. George Davis

As a child psychiatrist who has spent an entire thirty-year career in New Mexico working almost exclusively with victims of childhood trauma and loss, I have never not worked with the child protective system. For ten of those years I served as the Director of Psychiatry for the NM Department of Children, Youth and Families. In the company of social workers, pediatricians, attorneys, therapists and advocates, we have all eventually learned to witness the lack of protection and therapeutic services for child maltreatment without indulging either despair or rage, but also without much hope. This agreement is the first attempt ever to systematically improve the agency charged with protecting New Mexico children from abuse.

The New Mexico child welfare system, located within the New Mexico Department of Children, Youth and Families, has suffered from its inception from inattention and underfunding. But in addition to the sheer lack of resources, the children under its care and protection have also endured a perpetually disorganized and unprofessional approach to intervention and treatment. The policies of the previous administration did not in itself cause, but clearly did exacerbate, the poor performance of the department. The recently agreed upon effort to reorganize and professionalize the child welfare system is the first ever attempt in New Mexico to systematically apply the science of child development and the current understanding of the developmental effects of trauma to children under the state's care. The new agreement represents a voluntary partnership between the state and the plaintiffs that proposes to incorporate both current science and best practices.

Children are susceptible to trauma and loss in a way that can permanently change the course of their development. Throughout childhood, but especially in the first five years, critical brain development takes place that will potentially determine for a lifetime the child's ability to form attachments, learn skills and eventually become a productive member of society. The loss of a positive parenting relationship is the greatest of all potential traumas. Therefore, children for whom the state has become the guardian represent society's most vulnerable population. Child welfare duties can be carried out in such a way that either minimizes and contains the impact of this trauma and loss, or else intensifies the damage. Much like the protocols of a medical emergency room, intervention to prevent child maltreatment must be conducted professionally and in keeping with current developmental understanding. The recently signed agreement will promote the agency's employment of systematic intervention procedures, reliable screening and referral to accessible treatments and programs. By its participation in this partnership, the state can benefit children not only during their present tragedy, but also for the entire course of their development.