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Serving Children & Families
through:
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Early Start,
Child Care,
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WBUP-TV5, WLUC-TV6, WMTU, WNMU
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

New program seeks to preserve families at risk of separation

Project seeks to develop permanency, stability for families with infants and toddlers

HOUGHTON – Families who have had an infant or toddler removed from the home or are at risk of having their child placed into foster care may have another chance, thanks to a unique family-preservation program set to begin early in 2003.

The \$200,000 project, called Rebuilding Family Homes, ultimately seeks to achieve permanency and stability for families with infants and toddlers at risk of placement in the Child Welfare System. The project, recently awarded by the Department of Health and Human Services, will be operated by B-H-K Child Development Board and the Houghton-Keweenaw Family Independence Agency in close cooperation with local courts.

“This project will have a substantial impact on the most vulnerable children in the area,” said Rod Liimatainen, B-H-K executive director. “What’s unique about this program, however, is that it will serve the entire family and not just the child. Instead of separating family members – as most approaches take – this project will work with the family as a unit.”

Rebuilding Family Homes will place the entire family – including the infant or toddler at risk of removal, his or her parents, and up to three siblings – into a three-bedroom home, which

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2-2-2

they'll share for three months with a Model Parent Mentor couple. Located along M-26 in Houghton, the home is part of the former Portage Motel complex, which was purchased earlier this year by B-H-K.

The mentor couple, which will occupy a basement apartment in the home, will be on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week to mentor and support the family by demonstrating positive parenting, effective discipline, life skills, and more. Mentor couples also will link families with other resources such as substance-abuse counseling. A mentor relief worker will assist the mentor couple as needed.

After successful completion of the three-month live-in component, families will receive weekly home visits that emphasize child development, parenting skills and ongoing support to help maintain family stability.

Jim Aebli, longtime director of the Houghton-Keweenaw Family Independence Agency, said a program for the entire family is something seldom attempted but very logical. He added that maintaining stability in biological families is key for young children.

"There's an incredible trauma associated with separation from one's family," Aebli said. "Children tend to blame themselves for being removed from the home. Each and every child does this. This program will help to eliminate that."

B-H-K and the FIA will work closely with local probate courts across the three-county area to identify and select families for this program. It's anticipated that up to four families may take part in the program each year.

A second component of the program, called Foster First, will provide respite care for up to 10 foster families each year who are caring for children already removed from the home. In addition to allowing foster parents with some personal time or a chance to take care of errands, this component will provide home visits that provide information on child development, parenting and other topics.

The Rebuilding Family Homes project is thought to be the first "whole-family" foster care program in the state of Michigan. It is modeled after the Shared Family Care program, which operates on a small-scale basis in California; Milwaukee, Wisc.; and a few other states.

The project is funded through a special Child Welfare grant through the Department of Health and Human Services' Early Head Start program. For more information, call Liimatainen at 482-3663.