

Safe at Home Implemented One Year Ago

Karen L. Bowling, Cabinet Secretary of the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources



October marks one year since phase one of Safe at Home West Virginia was implemented in 11 counties. Since then, the program has expanded to 24 additional counties, providing hundreds of youth with an improved opportunity to lead safe, healthy and successful lives in their home communities.

The journey started in 2013 when DHHR applied for a federal IV-E waiver in order to give our Department greater flexibility delivering services to children and their families. In 2014, because of the hard work of the staff at the Bureau for Children and Families, the waiver was granted, and we spent the next year vigorously planning before our 2015 launch.

All along, our focus has been on the 12-17 year old population, the largest age group to be placed in congregate care settings and the most frequently identified with a behavioral health diagnosis. With a trauma-informed approach, our staff works to prevent re-traumatization. We are honored to collaborate with local coordinating agencies and other partners who also understand the need to focus on trauma, especially for our Safe at Home youth, the majority of whom have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience.

A unique part of Safe at Home is that it focuses on the whole household. For many families, this program offers a new hope. With wraparound services, we are not only providing support to the child, but we're also helping parents and caregivers learn how to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

To date, 343 children have been referred to Safe at Home. Of those, 25 have returned to the state; 61 have moved from in-state residential placements back to their home communities; 130 have been prevented from entering residential placement; and 2 have returned from a shelter placement back to their home communities.

The future of West Virginia's children is bright, and that is thanks in part to all of the people who have bought into this revolutionary program. As we move forward to expand this initiative statewide in 2017, remember these words of Mahatma Gandhi: "In a gentle way, you can shake the world." Safe at Home West Virginia is doing just that, and you can be a part of the movement.

Helping Children Succeed with Safe at Home

DHHR Office of Communications

"Words cannot express how truly proud I am of him," reflected Tammy Gilbert, a Safe at Home Facilitator for Burlington United Methodist Family Services. Tammy is referring to one extraordinary young man who, prior to Safe at Home, struggled with truancy and family involvement.

His problem with school attendance stemmed from diagnoses of sensory issues, anxieties, and mood disorder, as well as reports of bullying. He was placed with DHHR, where he was referred to Safe at Home.

Through Safe at Home, the teenager was placed on an improvement period, and therapy was started in the home and at school. After observing the young man's tired behavior during a meeting, Tammy suggested blood work, which led to the discovery that he was critically low on vitamin D and borderline low on vitamin B12.

With this new understanding and the right vitamins, the young man's demeanor began to change. He became more engaged with his family and became more attentive and involved in class.

"School was not a major issue as before," said Tammy. "He actually began to set his own bed time; he got up two hours early to be sure he was not late for school."

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Helping Children, *continued*

The next step was to help the young man overcome his issue with riding the bus to school. He initially agreed to ride the bus home from school at least one day during the week as the father needed to return to work.

“I explained that if his dad was to go back to work then he would have to ride the bus to and from school,” said Tammy. “When his father did go back to work, the young man knew the bus schedule and was able to get to school on time.”

Despite these improvements, the young man still faced high anxiety. Tammy knew that he enjoyed coloring dragons, so it was worked out with one teacher to allow him to pull out his coloring book when his anxiety level was going up in order to help him refocus on his class work. A meeting was held to get the other teachers on board, which resulted in a new IEP that allowed the young man to channel his anxiety through creativity and have peer tutors to assist him in communication with his teachers.

In addition to the behavioral progress, the teen improved his grades in classes, including Career class, which went from 19% to 87%, Health, which went from 12% to 100%, Science, which went from 50% to 82%, and Math, which went from a 30% to 74%.

“This young man has worked very hard to overcome the obstacles that he faced on a daily basis. Not only has he made significant strides in his academics, but he learned to stop the bullying by simply ignoring the comments,” Tammy explained.

This teenager didn’t stop there. He wanted to put his gift of creativity and interest in computers to use. With preparation and a stellar interview, he was selected to participate in his school’s robotics class.

Tammy cried tears of joy when she thought back on his hard work and dedication to overcome so many struggles in such a short time with the wraparound services provided by Safe at Home: “You can see the pride in his face when you talk about all that he has been able to do with support from his family and his workers. He is now able to participate in family activities and conversations, help with his baby sister, ride bikes with his brother, and so much more than what he has been able to do in the past.”

How Safe at Home Changed Everything for DHHR’s Bureau for Children and Families

Lorie Bragg, Child Welfare Consultant for DHHR’s Bureau for Children and Families

As we prepare to expand Safe at Home statewide in the next year, it is incredible to see so many people working together with a shared vision. However, it took a lot of hard work to get to where we are today.

Before the development of this program, staff in DHHR’s Bureau for Children and Families often struggled to plan with families because of lack of resources. In effect, youth were frequently placed out of the home to receive services. We all were met with the same question: “how do we give our families and our youth what they need while keeping kids safe?” In 2013, we started learning about our answer: Safe at Home West Virginia.

In the beginning, we all wondered how it would work and where we would find the resources. Our team was hopeful yet skeptical as it all sounded too easy. Tenured DHHR staff started talking about wraparound services, which brought many successes in the 1990s. They knew this could work, so they started spreading the word.

Bit by bit, Safe at Home West Virginia came to fruition. Information was dispersed through email blasts, newsletters, management meetings, unit meetings, even individual conferences. Questions were asked; answers were received. We heard about successes and how this could help the children on our workload. Our questions about how it would work quickly turned to us excitedly asking how soon it would be in our district.

It has been a learning process for all of us in DHHR’s Bureau for Children and Families. There has been a shift in thinking. With Safe at Home, we really can safely serve these kids in their communities, in their homes. This program has had a bigger impact than we could have ever imagined – and we’re finding resources for families that were not there before. We’ve formed alliances, and whole communities are coming together to “wrap” themselves around our children. Steadily, hope is spreading, and I am confident we’ll continue to see positive changes for West Virginia’s children.

