

New York State Office of Children and Family Services

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**GOVERNOR SPITZER ANNOUNCES FIRST PROGRAM IN NATION TO
PROVIDE SUPPORTIVE SERVICES EXCLUSIVELY TO CHILDREN IN
FOSTER CARE WITH SERIOUS DISABILITIES**

Bridges to Health Program Will Help Children Avoid Costly Institutional Care

Governor Eliot Spitzer today announced a new program to expand support services to thousands of children in foster care with serious disabilities. The Bridges to Health program is the first of its kind in the nation enrolling children in foster care exclusively.

Bridges to Health targets foster children who have developmental disabilities, mental health diagnoses, and medical problems that are so severe they would otherwise likely be in restrictive and high-cost institutions. By making services available to these children, the state will help them function in family and community settings instead. The program will be launched in early 2008 and will serve more than 3,300 foster children when it is fully implemented.

"This is a program designed to help the neediest of needy children," said Governor Spitzer. "By making important health related services available, we give children in foster care the chance to stabilize their time with foster families, return home, or be adopted. Home environments provide the best opportunity for children to receive the fundamental stability and support that families provide and that every child deserves."

Services provided to children through the Bridges to Health program will include skill building, habilitation, pre-vocational training and supported employment, specialized adaptive and assistive equipment among others. The children and their families are also eligible to receive support services to help provide the best environment possible for the children. These services include specially designed crisis and respite services and advocacy for the children's participation in school and other community activities.

The program will be financed by Medicaid and implemented through collaboration between the Department of Health and the Office of Children and Family Services, which oversees the care of the almost 27,000 children in foster care throughout New York State. The Office of Mental Health and the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities assisted in the design of the program. An integral part of the program is assessing the progress the children are making as a result of the program's services to enable continual evaluation.

Office of Children and Family Services Commissioner Gladys Carrion said: "We are very excited about the Bridges to Health program, which permits New York State to use Medicaid funding to provide services not otherwise available. The first of its kind in the nation, this program will provide non-traditional services to help foster care children and their adult caregivers overcome great challenges. We'll be drawing on the expertise of not-for-profit agencies with proven track records to help manage these programs. Bridges to Health will help provide the services and permanency these children so deserve and need for a fair chance in life."

Department of Health Commissioner Richard F. Daines, M.D., said: "We are proud to partner with the Office of Children and Family Services and other state agencies in this unique and groundbreaking program. It has been a true collaboration. The Department of Health looks forward to continuing this collaboration to ensure the success of Bridges to Health. We are committed to providing technical assistance, and payment

and reporting systems support and oversight to meet federal Medicaid guidelines."

To implement the program, the OCFS will enter into contracts with not-for-profit providers and work with local Departments of Social Services to provide appropriate services.

This announcement is part of the Governor's Children's Agenda which includes expanding health insurance coverage to all children without insurance, expanding children's access to high quality pre-kindergarten and early learning programs, and naming a pre-school special education task force to improve special education opportunities for children with special needs.

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