



Creating Minnesota's Department of Children, Youth, and Families





Background

In 2023, following years of engagement with families and professionals who work with them, Gov. Tim Walz and Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan, through the Minnesota Children’s Cabinet, proposed establishing a new state agency focused on children and families. Based on engagement feedback, data from governance reports, cross-agency work, and learnings from other states, it was clear that Minnesota needed to create an agency in line with national trends in governance and the types of structures that exist in more than half of states: the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF). The Minnesota Children’s Cabinet led coordination work on behalf of the Administration with the Legislature, advocates, and agency partners to propose a permanent state agency with a cabinet-level commissioner focused on elevating children and families in policy and budget decisions. The vision of the proposal was a department that creates a clear front door for families, community members, and individuals in need of services.

[Establishing legislation](#) provided authority and resources to support creation, alignment, and launch of a two-year process of moving core child, youth, and family support programs to the new agency. The legislation was co-authored by Representative Dave Pinto and Senator Melissa Wiklund and it passed as part of the 2023 Health and Human Services Omnibus before being signed into law by Governor Walz.

The legislation named programs to transfer to DCYF from the departments of Human Services (DHS), Education (MDE), and Public Safety (DPS). An additional program from the Department of Health (MDH) was also identified to transfer to the new agency. The agencies involved in the creation of DCYF are referred to as the “originating agencies” in this summary.

An implementation office was created at Minnesota Management and Budget (MMB) under the leadership of the Children’s Cabinet with dedicated resources, staff capacity, and a two-year transition timeline to ensure a successful agency launch. Implementation office staff coordinated across the four originating agencies and Minnesota IT Services (MNIT) to achieve the vision of the new agency and the transfer of programs and employees. Following an initial planning year led by the implementation office, the agency officially launched with a commissioner appointed on July 1, 2024. That marked the beginning of a phased transition year for employees and programs, and the implementation office completed transition work with the agency fully established on June 30, 2025.



Vision

The Children's Cabinet worked with cross-agency partners following years of input from and engagement with families and county and Tribal partners. Together, they formed a shared vision to elevate and increase coordination among many programs serving children and families by bringing them together under a single, cabinet-level state agency. This vision was also informed by years of advocacy from the early childhood sector – providing an opportunity to consolidate early childhood programs from three different state agencies under one assistant commissioner, something that early care and education advocates had been working towards for over a decade.

The initial visioning for creating DCYF centered around a whole family approach, which is a framework for practice, program, and policy decision-making that simultaneously recognizes and addresses the needs of children and the adults in their lives. This approach appreciates that children do not come in pieces, and that family well-being is built when the whole family is centered instead of only focusing on the child or the parent. It's a strategy that has been used elsewhere in Minnesota state government for years, and creating DCYF provided an opportunity for further elevation and prioritization of families. The creation of DCYF moved Minnesota one step closer to Gov. Walz's vision of becoming the nation's best state for children.

Legislative process

The legislation and steps required to create, transfer, and fund the new agency was a multi-step process. The establishing legislation created a framework for the transition, including the authorities necessary to create the DCYF Implementation Office and Transition Account, the list of programs to transfer, and ultimately the ability to stand up the new agency. The authorizing legislation also directed the Revisor's Office to update Minnesota Statutes and Rules to support the transfer of responsibilities, the ability to fulfill them and the authority to build out the necessary operational functions. With the planning year underway and more detailed assessments of need, a budget and policy bill in the following legislative session was passed to fully and efficiently implement and adequately prioritize agency resources according to internal and external feedback.

Governance and decision-making

Reports, like the [Early Childhood Governance report](#), and similar consolidation and creation efforts centered on children, youth, and families in other states provided insight and guidance around implementation. These learnings emphasized the need for a thorough process and dedicated resources, staff capacity, and timeline to ensure a successful agency launch. The two-year timeline and dedicated structure of the transition effort was an important part of the establishing legislation.

Even before passage of the bill, the Children's Cabinet leadership worked within MMB to have initial infrastructure ready to support the implementation work, establishing support for the structure and plan from leadership at originating agencies. MMB was identified as the best place within state government to house an implementation office to provide the coordination and capacity for the budget, policy, and administrative planning needed to transfer programs from originating agencies to the new agency, with the Children's Cabinet assistant commissioner overseeing the transition activities and project management of agency implementation on behalf of the Governor and administration. A steering team led the governance and decision-making related to the new agency, with co-chairs reporting up to the Governor's Office.



Implementation Office

The implementation office structure included:

An operations team, including communications, legal, and human resources functions, to lead the detailed logistics planning around the transfer and launch of programs from originating agencies and to direct and manage the workstreams.

An equity and engagement team to solicit input and feedback from internal and external partners which informed the design, structure, and leadership of the new department.

Work areas

All aspects of the operational implementation planning were divided into six work groups to address the operational details, policies, leadership, and infrastructure necessary to establish DCYF and transfer programs (budget and finance, IT and data, legal and compliance, organizational planning, staffing and labor relations, and vision for policy and equity). Each group adopted a charter and workplan and consisted of representative members from across each of the originating agencies and MNIT. Groups ranged in size from 10 to 40 members and met on a regular basis throughout the two-year implementation process. The work groups were designed to incorporate perspectives, experience, and input from each originating agency, transfer programs and, staff and tee up decisions for the steering team.

Project management

The implementation office utilized a two-year workplan with quarterly milestones across the six work areas. The plan included designated leads, deliverables and dates with a system to indicate whether the deliverable was on track. Implementation office staff reviewed and presented on the workplans continually to create a shared understanding of the tight timeline and milestones that were built upon the previous quarters' progress.

Before the launch of the agency in July 2024 and prior to each of the seven employee transfer dates, the implementation office utilized a readiness checklist co-developed with originating agencies, listing readiness activities and deliverables that would ensure continuity of service and leveraged daily stand-up and go/no-go meetings with leadership leading up to transfer days.





Building and implementation

Creating a new agency and transferring employees and programs from multiple originating agencies is a technically complicated endeavor that requires coordination across agency HR, IT, and finance teams, among other competencies. Establishing legislation created a two-year planning timeline, allowing for programs to transfer over the course of one year once the agency was officially established with the appointment of a commissioner on July 1, 2024. The initial planning year was essential to allow for detailed preparation around transferring operational structures, financial systems, IT, and data systems, and human resource requirements. This structured timeline established in statute also allowed for programs to be transferred in phases over the course of the second year of the transition, which was an essential part of the success of the implementation effort.

The phased timeline included:

- Transferring identified programs from MDE Early Learning Services and DHS Children and Family Services in July 2024
- Transferring the Help Me Connect program from MDH in January 2025
- Transferring identified programs from DPS and DHS Office of Inspector General in June 2025

Planning for a phased transition allowed the implementation office and originating agency staff to prioritize decision-making around those programs transferring first, as well as create a longer runway for programs with more complexities impacting their transfer. Planning continued through the second transition year, with significant focus on IT and financial systems to create, test, and implement in the newly launched agency.

Organizational chart and executive team hiring

The creation of an organizational chart for DCYF required balancing originating organizational structures and employee contracts with innovation and aspirational change goals, employee and community partner engagement and input. The recommended high-level structure included four policy administrations (early childhood, family well-being, child safety and permanency, economic opportunity and youth services), along with an Office of Inspector General and central operations.

Though most positions at DCYF were existing state government roles that transferred to the agency, the establishing legislation provided funding to create executive team positions. These positions were determined based on executive team staffing at agencies of similar size and scope as well as the needs of the new agency. The implementation office led an engagement effort to gather input from internal and external partners on the qualities and skills they wanted in the DCYF leadership team, then worked with enterprise HR to hire the executive team through a multi-step process that included qualified hiring panels representing diverse perspectives.



Communications and engagement

Successful change management requires continuous and multi-layered communication with employees, providing opportunities to provide input throughout the process. The implementation office, in partnership with impacted agencies, created different communication tools and platforms to help inform and prepare employees, including biweekly employee updates, monthly implementation office hours with leadership, supervisor toolkits and trainings, and welcome sessions for employees' first day at DCYF.

The implementation office also executed a comprehensive engagement strategy to obtain community, partner, and staff input to inform the design, organizational structure, leadership, and culture for the new department. IO engagement staff convened more than 200 sessions with partners, focusing on engagement with families with young children and youth as well as intentional partnership with advisory boards and councils; Tribes and Tribal programs; county governments; practitioners; schools and education partners; labor partners; community-based organizations; advocates; and state leaders and employees. Additionally, a group of organizations and leaders that helped to build the DCYF momentum and visioning over many years, decades worked closely with Children's Cabinet leadership to support and partners on the implementation mechanics. This work is documented in detail in the [implementation office transition report](#) submitted to the Legislature in March 2024 and the detailed [engagement report](#) published in October 2024.