



Office of the Governor

MICHELLE LUJAN GRISHAM

NEWS RELEASE

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March 14, 2024

Governor signs executive order strengthening Fostering Connections program at CYFD

SANTA FE – Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham on Thursday signed an executive order strengthening the Fostering Connections program to expand services for youth who did not previously qualify.

Neera Tanden, President Joe Biden’s domestic policy advisor, joined the governor for the announcement at the New Mexico State Capitol.

“New Mexico has the nation’s premier Fostering Connections program, with one of the highest rates of participation in the country,” said **Gov. Lujan Grisham**. “By providing critical resources during a time of great transition for these youth, we see lifelong positive outcomes: they’re more likely to earn an education and less likely to experience homelessness or become incarcerated.”

The voluntary Fostering Connections program provides resources to young people who have “aged out” of the child welfare system. The Executive Order signed by Gov. Lujan Grisham today expands CYFD’s extended foster care support to all qualifying youth, regardless of their adjudication status.

Currently, state statute requires a court to adjudicate that a child is abused or neglected before they can receive benefits. Sometimes, children who are not abused or neglected (i.e. are voluntarily surrendered by their parents), or those who were not able to be adjudicated ahead of turning 18, may miss out on the program’s benefits.

The governor’s executive order also directs CYFD to form a working group of individuals involved in the program to prepare legislation to close this gap ahead of the 60-day session.

New Mexico's Fostering Connections program has one of the highest rates of participation in the country, with 86% of eligible youth participating (compared with 46% nationally). Since the program started in 2019, 300 New Mexicans have enrolled.

The Biden Administration has continuously invested in children and families, including [a \\$9 billion expansion](#) to provide housing vouchers to all 20,000 youth exiting foster care annually across the United States.

"The governor's expansion of the Fostering Connections support today is an important step toward securing bright futures for vulnerable young people in New Mexico," **Tanden said.** "This vital support for youth as they move from state care to independence is the kind of leadership that we would like to see across the nation."

"The Fostering Connections program provides a helpful path into adulthood for children that have been fostered in New Mexico," said New Mexico **Senate Majority Whip Michael Padilla**, who sponsored the 2019 Fostering Connections Act. "The program provides vital support at just the right time that many of us take for granted."

"We have seen so many success stories through this program, including young people obtaining medical and post-graduate degrees, young people who have escaped human trafficking and are now thriving, and young people who now have established and positive relationships with other adults," said **Teresa Casados, Cabinet Secretary for the Children, Youth and Families Department.** "CYFD is committed to providing support for children and youth at every stage of their involvement with the Department."

In 2019, Gov. Lujan Grisham signed the Fostering Connections Act, which established the state's extended foster care program and made funding available through the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. Fostering Connections programs include accessing housing, community-based behavioral health services, job assistance, and food access. New Mexico is one of 23 states with a Fostering Connections program.

**A copy of the executive order is attached to this email.*

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State of New Mexico

Michelle Lujan Grisham
Governor

EXECUTIVE ORDER 2024-006

EXPANDING ELIGIBILITY FOR THE FOSTERING CONNECTIONS PROGRAM

WHEREAS, the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 authorizes states to claim additional federal funds for certain child welfare purposes;

WHEREAS, the Biden Administration recently announced its intent to seek a \$9 billion expansion in federal funding to provide housing vouchers to all youth exiting foster care annually across the United States;

WHEREAS, the Children, Youth and Families Department's Fostering Connections program extends the age for support and services available to young adults involved with the Department from the age of 18 to 21;

WHEREAS, some of the extended support available to young adults eligible for extended foster care under the Fostering Connections program include active efforts accessing housing, community based behavioral health services, job assistance, and food access;

WHEREAS, the Fostering Connections program embodies the State's commitment to the well-being and successful transition of foster youth into self-sufficient adulthood;

WHEREAS, NMSA 1978, Section 32A-26-3 (2020), currently requires youth in the custody of the Department to be adjudicated pursuant to the Children's Code or tribal law prior to being eligible for the Fostering Connections program;

WHEREAS, the unintended consequence of requiring adjudication under the Children's Code or tribal law before eligibility negatively affects those who enter the Department's custody shortly before turning 18, or through a voluntary placement agreement as they may not be finally adjudicated until after they turn of age;

WHEREAS, this creates a gap in support during a critical phase of these young adult's development;

WHEREAS, each year there are several youth who fall within the gap created by Section 32A-26-3's requirements;

WHEREAS, it is vital to immediately address this eligibility gap to uphold the principles of fairness and inclusivity for all youth in the foster care system, align the Fostering Connections program with the overarching goal of providing a safety net for youth in the custody of the Department regardless of the age or manner at which they become involved with the child welfare system, and satisfy federal and state constitutional guarantees of equal protection; and

WHEREAS, the Department is able to cover the additional costs of extending the eligibility for the Fostering Connections program to cover all youth in the custody of the Department with existing federal and state funding streams.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, Michelle Lujan Grisham, Governor of the State of New Mexico, by the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the State of New Mexico do hereby **ORDER** and **DIRECT** as follows:

1. In addition to eligibility provisions set forth in Section 32A-26-3, the Children, Youth and Families Department shall make the Fostering Connections extended foster care program available, on a voluntary basis, to an eligible person who has attained at least eighteen years of age while:

A. In the legal custody of the Children, Youth and Families Department as a result of abuse and neglect proceedings, families in need of court-ordered services proceedings, or a voluntary placement agreement pursuant to the Children's Code or its equivalent under tribal law;

B. Subject to a court order or voluntary placement agreement that placement and care be the responsibility of the Department or the Indian tribe that entered into an agreement with the Department; and

C. Subject to out-of-home placement.

2. The Department shall form a working group to study, draft, and submit legislation to ensure that the Fostering Connections program remains available to all children in need. Members shall include those persons who qualify for the extended foster care program pursuant to Section 1 of this Order. Membership in the working group shall be voluntary. Members shall not be entitled to any compensation as a result of their work relating to the working group.

I FURTHER ORDER and DIRECT as follows:

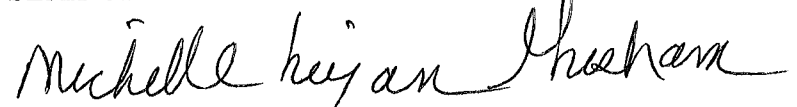
1. This Order shall take effect immediately and shall remain in effect until renewed, modified, or rescinded.

ATTEST:

MAGGIE TOULOUSE OLIVER
SECRETARY OF STATE

DONE AT THE EXECUTIVE OFFICE
THIS 14TH DAY OF MARCH 2024

WITNESS MY HAND AND THE GREAT
SEAL OF THE STATE OF NEW MEXICO



MICHELLE LUJAN GRISHAM
GOVERNOR