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Monthly Directors Report

Department of Social Services
700 E Parker Rd.
Morganton, NC 28655

November 2, 2026
Board of Commissioners
110 N. Green St.
Morganton, NC 28655

Subject: Monthly Update for the Department of Social Services

Dear Board of Commissioners,

Please see below for an executive update on key policies and administrative metrics impacting the Burke County Department of Social Services. This report will be presented to you monthly and will track key performance indicators, policy progression, and identify potential emerging issues.

Thank you for your leadership and support. Please let us know if you have any questions or concerns.

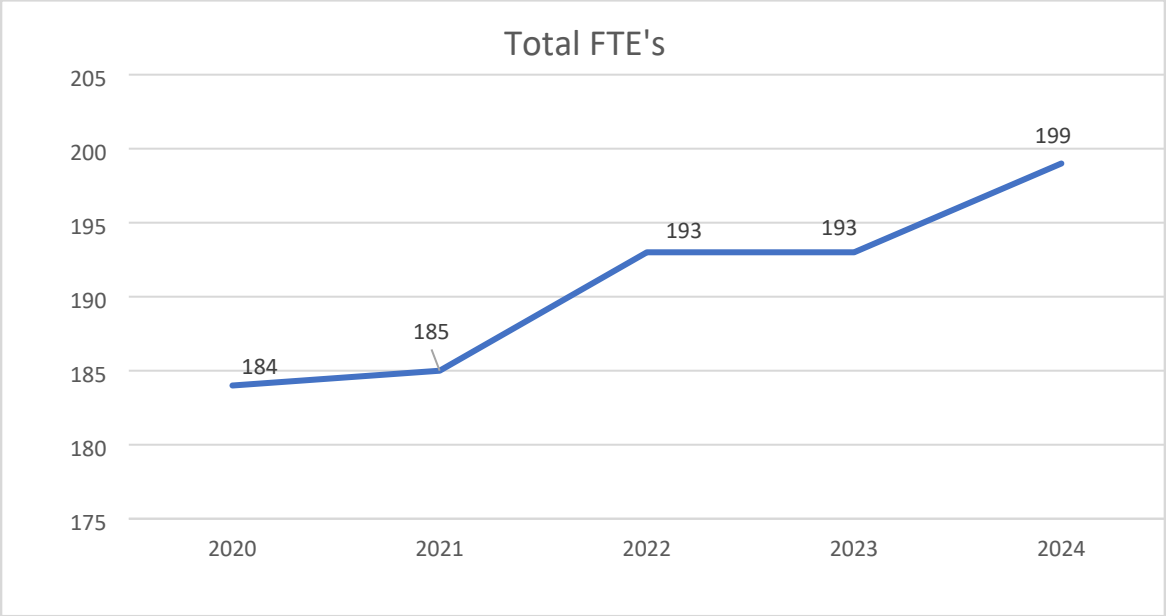
Regards,

Korey Fisher-Wellman
Director of Social Services, Burke County

CC: Brian Epley
County Manager

Personnel Analysis:

The Burke County Department of Social Services has an FTE allocation of 199 positions. This has grown over the past several years, specifically following a staffing analysis completed in 2019 that recommended 44 additional positions. The agency added 6 FTEs in December of 2023 following the passing of Medicaid Expansion. The county employs 22 part time employees, including 3 Income Maintenance Caseworker, 3 foster care workers who help with home studies and out of county visits, 2 CPS social worker who provides support with out-of-county requests, 1 part time finance staff member who helps support the finance team, 2 cps clerical staff, and 11 after hours placement support specialist who help to provide support when children are in the building overnight.



Of the 199 active FTEs in the department, currently, we have 12 full-time vacancies – which represents 6% vacancy rate. During the month of September DSS experienced 2 separations, and had a total of 2 new hires, 1 of which was for a full-time position.

Burke County DSS continues to strengthen its workforce through strategic recruitment, employee development, and retention initiatives designed to ensure high-quality services for the citizens of Burke County. The department remains focused on recruiting qualified employees while developing strategies to better support existing staff, particularly in areas experiencing persistent recruitment and retention challenges.

The Training and Onboarding Supervisor and Quality Assurance Supervisor continue to play important roles in strengthening workforce development across the agency. Through structured onboarding, ongoing training, coaching, and practice oversight, these positions help improve employee readiness, promote consistency in service delivery, and provide supervisors with additional resources to support staff performance and professional development.

Burke County DSS continues to engage local colleges and universities as part of its long-term workforce pipeline strategy. Through student internships, career fairs, classroom presentations,

and other outreach activities, the department is working to increase awareness of careers in public service and social work while building relationships with potential future employees. These efforts remain an important component of the agency's strategy to recruit qualified professionals and address ongoing vacancies in hard-to-fill positions.

Recruitment within Child Welfare remains a priority, with continued recruitment efforts and sign-on incentives for experienced candidates filling Child Protective Services and Foster Care Social Worker positions. The department continues to emphasize employee development, structured onboarding, and supervisory support to promote workforce stability and continuity of services.

A significant focus during September has been the restructuring of the Income Maintenance Caseworker (IMC) training team within Economic Services. In response to ongoing challenges recruiting and retaining employees in IMC and other Economic Services positions, the department is evaluating how training resources and staff responsibilities can be better aligned with frontline operational needs. The goal is to strengthen the support available to new employees, improve the training experience, and provide existing staff with more consistent access to policy guidance, coaching, technical assistance, and ongoing professional development.

In addition to restructuring the IMC training team, the department is exploring other strategies to improve Economic Services recruitment and retention. These efforts include evaluating onboarding practices, identifying opportunities to improve the transition from training to independent casework, strengthening communication between trainers and supervisors, and identifying ways to provide more timely support when employees encounter complex eligibility or policy questions. The department is also examining how quality assurance activities can be used more proactively to identify training needs, reinforce policy application, and address practice concerns before they become larger operational challenges.

These initiatives are particularly important as Economic Services staff navigate increasingly complex Medicaid and Food and Nutrition Services requirements, including changes associated with HR 1. Expanded verification requirements, additional documentation standards, and evolving eligibility policies have increased the demands placed on frontline employees. Strengthening the training and quality assurance structure is intended to help staff manage these responsibilities more effectively while improving confidence, consistency, and overall job readiness.

Burke County DSS recognizes that addressing workforce challenges requires more than filling vacant positions; it also requires creating an environment in which employees receive the training, guidance, and support necessary to succeed. The department will continue evaluating recruitment, onboarding, training, and retention strategies to strengthen workforce capacity, support existing employees, and ensure Burke County residents receive timely, accurate, and responsive services.

Open Positions:

Position Title	Position #:	Status
IMC III Leadworker	51769	
IMC II	51375	
IMC III Leadworker	51367	
IMC II	51381	
IMC II	51380	
IMC II	51363	
IMC II	51767	
SOCIAL WORKER IA&T	51775	
SOCIAL WORKER IA&T	51905	
SOCIAL WORKER IA&T	51906	
SOCIAL WORKER III	51904	
SOCAL WORK SUPV III	51876	

Economic Services Updates

Federal Policy Update: Medicaid and SNAP (HR 1) Implementation

Burke County DSS continues to prepare for and implement significant federal changes to Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) enacted through the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (HR 1). As several key provisions take effect beginning October 1, 2026, and additional changes approach in January 2027, Economic Services staff are balancing implementation planning, policy updates, training, and increased communication with applicants and recipients. The department continues to work with the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) to prepare for these changes while maintaining timely and accurate service delivery.

Medicaid

Preparation continues for significant Medicaid changes that will increase eligibility administration and case management responsibilities. Key developments include:

- **October 1, 2026, eligibility changes:** New federal requirements will affect Medicaid eligibility for certain non-U.S. citizens. NCDHHS has issued guidance and public outreach materials to help counties and beneficiaries understand the changes.
- **January 1, 2027, work and community engagement requirements:** Certain adults ages 19–64 enrolled in Medicaid expansion will generally need to demonstrate qualifying work, education, community engagement, or other approved activities, unless an exemption applies.
- **More frequent eligibility renewals:** Most adults in the Medicaid expansion population will move from annual to six-month renewals beginning January 2027, increasing the frequency of eligibility reviews, client contacts, and case actions.
- **System and operational readiness:** Continued NC FAST updates, policy clarification, staff training, and preparation for increased verification and documentation requirements remain priorities.

These changes are expected to increase the volume and complexity of eligibility work. The department is focused on preparing staff to apply new requirements consistently, identify applicable exemptions, and communicate effectively with individuals who may be affected.

SNAP / Food and Nutrition Services

Economic Services continues to implement changes to the Food and Nutrition Services (FNS/SNAP) program resulting from HR 1. Expanded work requirements and revised non-citizen eligibility rules are already affecting program administration, requiring staff to evaluate eligibility, screen for applicable exemptions, and provide guidance to applicants and recipients.

Beginning October 1, 2026, the federal share of SNAP administrative costs decreases from 50% to 25%, increasing the financial responsibility for program administration at the state and county levels. Additional state cost-sharing for SNAP benefits is scheduled to begin in federal fiscal year 2028, with the amount tied to payment error rates.

These changes reinforce the importance of accurate eligibility determinations, effective quality assurance, and meeting federal timeliness requirements. They also create additional operational and budgetary considerations as the department works to maintain program performance with available staffing and resources.

Local Operational Impact

The cumulative impact of HR 1 continues to place significant demands on Economic Services staff. Employees are managing evolving eligibility requirements, increased verification and documentation, system changes, training needs, and client communication while continuing to meet federally mandated timeliness and accuracy standards.

In response, Burke County DSS is evaluating and restructuring its Economic Services training and quality assurance functions, including the Income Maintenance Caseworker (IMC) training team. These efforts are intended to provide stronger support for new employees, improve the transition from training to independent casework, and give existing staff more timely access to policy guidance, coaching, technical assistance, and quality feedback. The department is also exploring additional strategies to improve recruitment and retention in hard-to-fill Economic Services positions.

Strengthening these functions is particularly important as employees navigate increasingly complex program requirements. Improved training, more consistent policy guidance, and proactive identification of learning needs are expected to help staff build confidence and competency, improve consistency in eligibility decisions, and support employee retention.

Agency leadership continues to collaborate with NCDHHS, the North Carolina Association of County Directors of Social Services, and county partners to monitor implementation guidance, assess operational and fiscal impacts, and identify opportunities to improve efficiency. Burke County DSS will continue adjusting its training, quality assurance, and operational strategies as additional guidance becomes available, with the goal of supporting staff and maintaining timely, accurate, and customer-focused services for Burke County residents.

MEDICAID

MOU MEASURE												90	90		95		
	AGED OR DISABLED ADULT ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS Does not include MXP or FP cases	ADULT ACTIVE CASES *Does not include MXP or FP cases	FAMILY AND CHILDREN ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS	FAMILY AND CHILDREN ACTIVE CASES	TOTAL MEDICAID APPLICATIONS TAKEN	TOTAL MEDICAID REVIEWS	TOTAL MEDICAID REVIEWS WITHOUT WAIVERS	CAP REFERRALS	LTC REFERRALS	TOTAL MEDICAID RECIPIENTS	TOTAL NEMT TRIPS	REPORT CARD MAD	REPORT CARD OTHER	RECERT COMPLETION TIMELINESS RATE	Straight Through Processing	Total
SEP	5289	7,744	23471	15,459	378	1586		2	16	28,740	756	100%	94%		100%	94%	
OCT	5311	7,747	23422	16,290	398	1606		1	16	28,733	638	100%	98%		100%	98%	
NOV	5342	7,755	23,381	15,465	472	1825		2	12	28,723	624	100%	96%		100%	97%	
DEC	5313	7,761	23,324	15,542	560	1890		3	15	28,637	832	100%	95%		100%	96%	
JAN	5319	7,748	23194	15,527	531	503		2	19	28,513	606	100%	93%		100%	93%	
FEB	5318	7,781	23123	15,439	405	1893		2	10	28,441	809	100%	87%		100%	88%	wa
MAR	*	7,826	*	15,420	504	1767		3	11	28,446	933	90%	94%	*	100%	94%	
APR	5368	7,836	22876	15,301	413	1651		5	20	28,246	849	92%	95%	*	100%	94%	
MAY	5369	7,791	22750	15,224	456	1423		2	15	28,121	910	100%	94%	*	100%	94%	
JUN	5389	7,770	22532	15,170	461	1337		2	10	27,925	986	100%	95%	*	100%	95%	
JUL	5387	7,798	22,596	15,136	467	1239		0	20	27,923	975	100%	95%	*	100%	95%	
AUG	5387	7,793	22,596	15,146	442	1217		1	15	27,984	877	87%	96%	*	100%	96%	
SEP	5387	7,837	22,596	15,174	424	1305		1	20	28,304	871	90%	93%		100%	93%	

	FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICES							
			MOU MEASURE	95%	95%	95%		
	ACTIVE RECIPIENTS	ACTIVE CASES	APPLICATIONS TAKEN	APP TIMELINESS RATE-REGULAR	APP TIMELINESS RATE-EXPEDITE	RECERT TIMELINESS RATE	RECERTS COMPLETED	FNS EBT BENEFITS
SEP	10,794	5605	580	99.13%	97.98%	99.41%	509	1,752,253.00
OCT	10,695	5568	512	99..07%	99.02%	98.65%	445	1,797,705.00
NOV	10,418	5445	417	99.15%	98.81%	99.70%	336	1,759,731.00
DEC	10,269	5389	479	100.00%	100%	99.36%	336	1,721,688.20
JAN	10,112	5307	505	96%	99.09%	97.51%	482	1,662,857.00
FEB	9,992	5228	542	100.00%	98.15%	98.15%	432	1,645,153.00
MAR	9,889	5197	543	98.45%	99.28%	99.21%	505	1,647,954.00
APR	9,805	5142	500	99.45%	97.98%	99.49%	587	1,618,144.00
MAY	9,754	5091	540	100.00%	100.00%	99.00%	564	1,645,145.00
JUN	9,735	5,082	572	98.59%	98.98%	98.01%	569	1,635,049.00
JUL	9,792	5,131	524	99.14%	99.07%	99.36%	467	1,651,828.00
AUG	9,719	5103	530	98.75%	97.39%	99.36%	468	1,654,188.00
SEP	9,691	5076	551	98.34%	100.00%	98.21%	504	1,620,102.00

Social Work Updates

Child Welfare

147 active cases in CPS
221 Children experiencing foster care

- 2 entries into foster care during July
- 3 exits

25 young adults in our 18 to 21 program

Child Welfare Update

September was an active month for Child Welfare, with continued emphasis on workforce stability, placement capacity, implementation of PATH NC, and strengthening community partnerships to improve outcomes for children and families.

Workforce Recruitment and Retention

Burke County DSS continues to prioritize recruitment and retention of qualified Child Welfare staff. The agency is pursuing multiple strategies to strengthen the workforce, including recruitment partnerships with colleges and universities, participation in job fairs and school presentations, and targeted sign-on incentives for experienced CPS and Foster Care social workers. These incentives are intended to attract applicants with at least one year of directly related DSS experience who can contribute to the workforce without completing the standard pre-service training process.

The agency continues to focus on strengthening onboarding, staff development, and quality assurance to support employee success, improve consistency in practice, and prepare staff to meet evolving program requirements.

Child Protective Services

Child Protective Services continues to manage complex cases while maintaining a focus on child safety, permanency, and well-being. Staff have worked diligently to respond to reports of suspected abuse, neglect, and dependency while balancing increasing demands and the challenges associated with identifying appropriate services and resources for children and families.

The agency continues to monitor caseloads, provide support to frontline staff, and coordinate with community partners to address emerging needs and ensure children receive appropriate interventions.

Foster Care Placement Capacity

The ongoing shortage of appropriate foster homes and residential placements remains a significant challenge for Child Welfare. Identifying safe, appropriate placements for children with complex behavioral, developmental, and emotional needs continues to require substantial staff time and coordination with providers and community partners.

Burke County DSS remains committed to identifying additional placement resources and strengthening partnerships to support children in agency custody. Expanding local capacity and ensuring access to appropriate services remain important priorities.

Every Child Matters Initiative

Burke County DSS continues to advance the Every Child Matter**s** initiative in partnership with Black Mountain Children's Home and Anuvia Prevention and Recovery Center. This collaborative effort is designed to strengthen the local continuum of care for children and families by expanding foster parent recruitment and support, providing parenting education, connecting families with behavioral health and substance use services, and developing additional community-based resources.

During September, the initiative continued to make progress in several key areas:

- **Foster parent recruitment and support:** The first MAPP (Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting) class was completed, with two Burke County families participating. Recruitment efforts included outreach at 12 local churches and engagement with all Burke County school principals to increase community awareness and identify potential foster families.
- **Parenting education:** Five parents are currently participating in parenting classes, and 13 additional parents have been referred for the November cohort.

- **Child and Family Assessments:** The team has completed numerous Child and Family Assessments (CCAs) to help identify appropriate placements, services, and supports for children with complex needs.
- **Hiring of in-house resources:** Black Mountain and Anuvia are actively working to recruit and hire staff for in-house positions associated with the initiative.

The Every Child Matters initiative represents an important investment in building community capacity, supporting families, improving placement options, and helping children achieve safety and permanency. Continued collaboration among DSS, provider agencies, schools, faith communities, and other local partners will be essential to the initiative's long-term success.

PATH NC Implementation

Burke County DSS went live with PATH NC for Child Welfare on September 8, 2026. The transition required staff preparation, training, and coordination to support implementation while maintaining ongoing service delivery.

Following go-live, the agency has continued working through system and workflow issues in coordination with NCDHHS. Staff are adapting to the new system while managing daily responsibilities and ensuring that child safety, permanency, and well-being remain the primary focus.

Implementation of PATH NC remains an ongoing process, and the agency will continue to communicate concerns, seek guidance, and support staff as system functionality and workflows are refined.

Priorities Moving Forward

Moving forward, Burke County DSS will continue to focus on workforce recruitment and retention, strengthening placement capacity, advancing the Every Child Matters initiative, and supporting staff through the PATH NC transition. The agency remains committed to building effective community partnerships and developing sustainable resources that improve outcomes for children and families throughout Burke County.

Adult Services Update

The Adult Services Division continues to respond to a high volume of complex and sensitive cases that safeguard the safety, dignity, and well-being of older and disabled adults in our community.

Guardianship

We are currently serving 86 adult wards through public guardianship services. An additional 17 are managed by contracted providers, allowing us to extend our capacity and ensure proper oversight for individuals who have been deemed legally incompetent and require court-appointed

protection. In September, we received 6 new guardianship referrals, reflecting sustained demand in this area.

Special Assistance In-Home (SAIH)
We are serving 79 clients through the SAIH program, significantly exceeding the state-recommended caseload of 25 to 30 per social worker. This caseload is currently being managed by one SAIH social worker, highlighting the program's high demand and the strain on available staffing resources. SAIH remains essential in helping individuals with limited income remain safely in their homes and avoid institutionalization.

Community Alternatives Program for Disabled Adults (CAP/DA)
As of the end of September 121 individuals are actively enrolled in CAP/DA services, with capacity to serve up to 188 or more, depending on the speed of state-level referral processing. CAP/DA plays a vital role in supporting individuals who might otherwise require nursing home placement, enabling them to remain safe in their homes while receiving necessary care and support.

Adult Protective Services (APS)
In September we received 39 new APS reports, of which 20 were screened in for formal investigation. In addition to investigations, APS staff also conducted 6 outreach assessments, made 17 service referrals, and handled 6 guardianship referrals connected to adult protection concerns. These figures highlight both the vulnerability of adults in our county and the essential work our team does daily to assess risk, coordinate services, and intervene when necessary.

Conclusion
This month's data underscores the growing demand and complexity across all areas of adult services. Continued pressure on programs like SAIH, guardianship, and APS reinforces the importance of sustained investment in staffing, training, and infrastructure to ensure that we can effectively protect and support some of the most vulnerable members of our community.