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Contact: Anne Singer
(202) 728-0418, asinger@excelgov.org

MASSACHUSETTS CHILD WELFARE INITIATIVE WINS ANNIE E. CASEY INNOVATIONS AWARD

STATE EFFORT ONE OF SEVEN OUTSTANDING GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS TO WIN \$100K PRIZE

WASHINGTON, DC— For its commitment to supporting child welfare professionals and improving the lives of client families, a pilot program called ‘Teaming’ in the Massachusetts Department of Social Services has won the special Annie E. Casey Innovations Award in Children and Family System Reform. The award – which comes with a \$100,000 prize – is a joint effort of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government. The award is administered in partnership with the Council for Excellence in Government.

In 2002, Massachusetts’ Social Services Department Commissioner, Harry Spence, began asking questions about trauma in the lives of child welfare social workers, trauma in the lives of the families they served, and ways to reduce it. The answer emerged that trauma (the stress borne by social workers, the crises in families when the state intervenes) was largely the product of a system that isolated social workers in their daily work and decision making. So Spence began looking for programs he could learn from, programs that solved the problem of isolation by building teams of social workers and supervisors, and that built collaboration into the relationship between social workers and their clients. When it turned out that no such program existed yet, Spence and his colleagues realized they would have to invent one, and in 2003, ‘Teaming’ was initiated as a pilot program in the Massachusetts Department of Social Services.

“Our initiative is modeled on similar innovations in emergency medical care, for example, which is another kind of trauma work,” said Spence, who describes the judgments made by child welfare workers, decisions that set the course for an entire life as “imponderable.” “These are decisions that should not be made alone, and should not be made in a split second,” said the Commissioner. Harvard’s Ash Institute Director, Gowher Rizvi, said, “We credit Massachusetts for being the first state to institute the lessons learned in similarly stressful and traumatic work environments to child welfare, which is some of the most challenging work in society today.”

Based on proposals submitted by staffers throughout the Department of Social Services, child welfare workers are organized into five-member teams with a single supervisor. According to Kim Wadsworth, a supervisor and unit leader, the collaborative spirit benefits everyone. “There is less burden on me because the teams are so energized to talk through and troubleshoot together,” she said “and best of all, our clients benefit, too.”

Stephen Goldsmith, Director of the Innovations in American Government Awards at the Ash Institute, said “Sometimes innovation operates by changing the workplace rules and conditions which often prevent public servants from performing more effectively. The Teaming experience solves these very problems and in so doing dramatically improves the professionalism of child welfare workers, resulting in better outcomes for children.”

Quantitative measures of success for programs serving children take several years to generate. However, qualitative evaluations of the Teaming program show enormous success. Surveys and focus groups among client families and department staff show positive consequences: stress levels among social workers have plummeted; the quality of decision making has soared; improvisational judgments are being replaced with department-wide policies; diverse teams result in much welcomed cultural competence; and resources are now more flexible as teams can make concentrated efforts when needed to pre-empt or diffuse a crisis.

"We are very pleased with the selection of the Massachusetts Teaming program as the first winner of the Annie E. Casey Innovations Award in Children and Family System Reform," said Douglas W. Nelson, president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. "The Team approach to working with families facing tough problems makes good common sense. The Massachusetts Department of Social Services deserves this recognition for pilot testing this idea, and showing the rest of the country how to make it work."

Teaming is one of seven programs receiving this year's Innovations in American Government Awards. Each winner takes a unique approach to meeting community needs and achieving real results. Because each of these programs is a model for government's capacity to do good, and do it well, the \$100,000 prize specifically supports dissemination to other jurisdictions.

The Innovations in American Government Awards honor city, county, state, tribal and federal government initiatives that are truly creative, measurably effective, meet a significant need, and have the potential to be transferred to other jurisdictions. The 2006 award winners, selected from an initial pool of 1,000 applicants, include two federal, two state, one county, and two municipal programs. The efforts improve conservation, healthcare, housing, education, social services, and law enforcement. The winners will be formally announced this evening at dinner event in Washington, DC.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation (<http://www.aecf.org/>) works to build better futures for disadvantaged children and their families in the United States. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families.

The Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation (<http://www.ashinstitute.harvard.edu/Ash/>) at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government fosters excellence in government around the world in order to generate and strengthen democracy. Through its awards program, research, publications, curriculum support, and global network, the Institute champions critical milestones in creative and effective governance and democratic practice.

The Council for Excellence in Government (<http://www.excelgov.org/>) is a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization whose mission is to improve government performance by strengthening results-oriented management and creative leadership in the public sector, and to build understanding by focusing public discussion on government's role and responsibilities.

The Teaming program's May 25, 2006 presentation to the panel at Harvard's Kennedy School can be seen at the Ash Institute's website: <http://www.ashinstitute.harvard.edu/Ash/news.htm>. For more information on the Innovations in American Government program and this year's winners, visit www.ashinstitute.harvard.edu or www.excelgov.org.

