

ANNUAL REPORT

JULY 1, 2024 – JUNE 30, 2025

**Rutherford County
Department of Social Services**





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Message From The Director



As we reflect on the 2024–2025 fiscal year, we are reminded that true resilience is revealed in times of crisis. This year brought extraordinary challenges for Rutherford County and our agency. When Hurricane Helene devastated our region—bringing widespread destruction and displacing families—our community responded with unity, compassion, and determination.

The Department of Social Services played a critical role in facilitating the opening of the county’s emergency shelter immediately after the hurricane struck, as mandated. Through strong leadership and seamless coordination with Emergency Management, law enforcement, community partners, and volunteers, the shelter

was established efficiently and safely—providing essential support and stability to families in crisis during a time of immense uncertainty.

Our staff worked tirelessly to ensure that services continued without interruption, even as many faced personal losses of their own. From distributing emergency benefits through the Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (DSNAP) to connecting vulnerable families with shelter, food, and medical care, our employees met the moment with remarkable grace, professionalism, and resolve.

This year was also personally difficult for me, as I experienced the passing of my mother the day after Hurricane Helene struck. During that time, our agency’s leadership team, board members, community partners, and staff demonstrated the highest standard of professionalism and care. Their strength and teamwork ensured that essential services to families continued seamlessly. It was a profound reminder that leadership is not defined by one individual but by the collective will and compassion of many.

Despite the storm’s impact, our DSS team exemplified unwavering dedication. Maintaining every program under significant strain reflected an unshakable commitment to our mission of protecting and supporting the residents of Rutherford County. We extend our deepest gratitude to our Board of Social Services, county leadership, and community partners who stood beside us throughout every phase of disaster response and recovery. Collaboration with other counties across North Carolina was vital—providing personnel, technical support, and shared resources when our local capacity was stretched thin. Their partnership reinforced the strength and unity of our statewide human services network.

We close this fiscal year with deep gratitude—for the lessons learned, the lives touched, and the steadfast spirit of service that continues to define our agency. With the generous gift of The Lighthouse at Building D from Dogwood Health Trust, we celebrate a milestone achievement: this is the first year that no children had to sleep on our office floors while awaiting placement.

As Director, I remain committed to working closely with our Board and leadership team to ensure that our mission is achieved and that policy and best practices guide every decision we make. We will continue to strengthen the leadership capacity of our management team and supervisors through training, mentoring, and accountability—fostering a culture of excellence, ethical practice, and compassion. By investing in leadership development and reinforcing the principles that guide our work, we remain steadfast in our commitment to ensuring that every child, adult, and family we serve receives the highest standard of care and support.

Delores S. Hunt

Meet Our Board



Leon Godlock
Board Chair



Georgia Steele
Vice Chair



David Herndon
Member



Suzanne Porter
Member



Sydney Pellegrini
Member



Our Purpose

Who We Are and What We Stand For

OUR MISSION STATEMENT - To support, protect, and enhance the quality of life in Rutherford County by partnering with families and the community to provide needed services and meaningful opportunities for our citizens.

OUR VISION STATEMENT - Rutherford County DSS is an agency that partners with all county citizens to promote a safe, healthy, self-reliant, economically secure community where citizens are empowered to improve the quality of their lives.

CORE VALUES

SERVICE	FLEXIBILITY	ACCOUNTABILITY	INTEGRITY	DIVERSITY
To provide services in a prompt and respectful manner that are responsive, ethical, effective, fair, and consistent with governing laws, rules and policies while utilizing county resources in a most effective manner.	To always look forward and adapt service to the ever-changing needs of the community and provide consumers with the information to better serve those needs.	To accept responsibility for our actions and behaviors and be accountable to each other, consumers, and to the community for professional conduct and the responsible use of taxpayer dollars.	To always serve the community and employees with honesty, fairness, and respect.	To recognize and respect differences and values among all people without regard to race, gender, religion, age, sexual orientation or disability.

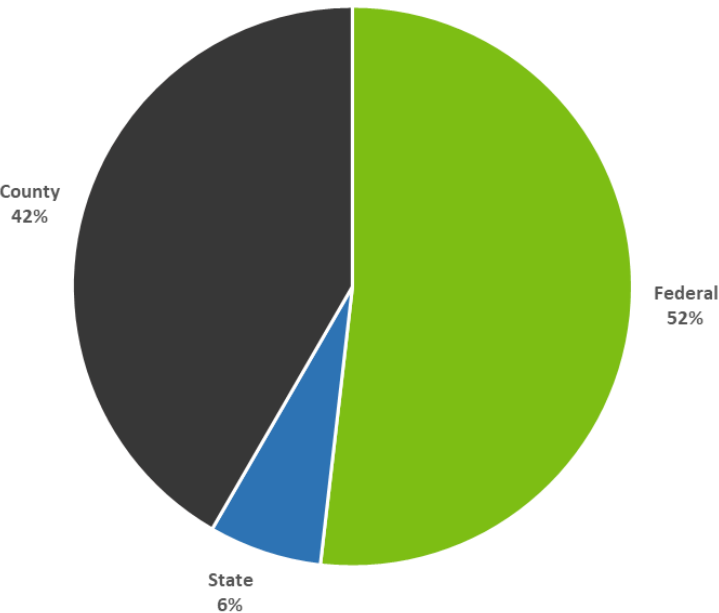
OUR GOALS

SERVICE	Ensure the highest quality of services to clients while developing and adhering to best practice standards.
PERFORMANCE	Use sound fiscal management, develop and implement a long-term strategic plan, and establish meaningful performance metrics to measure success.
VISIBILITY	Increase agency visibility through public speaking engagements, local events, and collaborative partnerships.
DEVELOPMENT	Foster a safe, secure, and welcoming workplace environment that supports agency staff and encourages professional development.
ACCESS	Champion social services with policymakers and other stakeholders, to promote increased access to services.
EXPANSION	Expand access to services and resources to underrepresented and underserved populations.
ADVOCATE	Advocate our mission and the rights and well-being of the client served by the agency.
COLLABORATION	Promote interagency collaboration to strengthen service delivery throughout the community.
TRANSPARENCY	Create an agency culture of accountability and transparency throughout all aspects of operations.
GOVERNANCE	Oversee the development and implementation of sound policies and procedures.

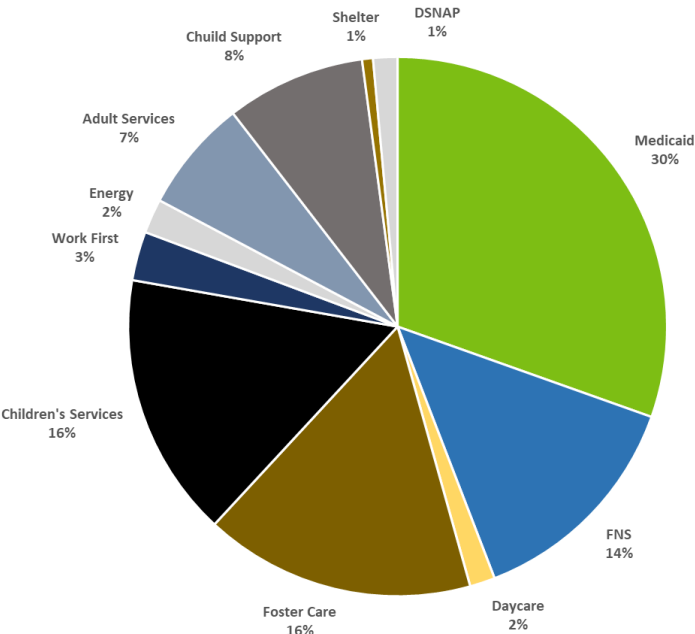
Fiscal Year 2024-2025

Financial Information

Total **ADMINISTRATIVE** Revenues



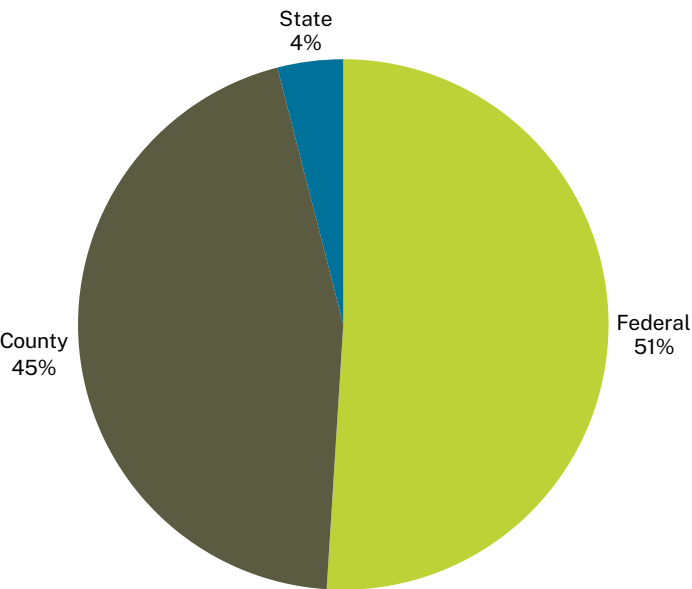
Total **ADMINISTRATIVE** Expenses



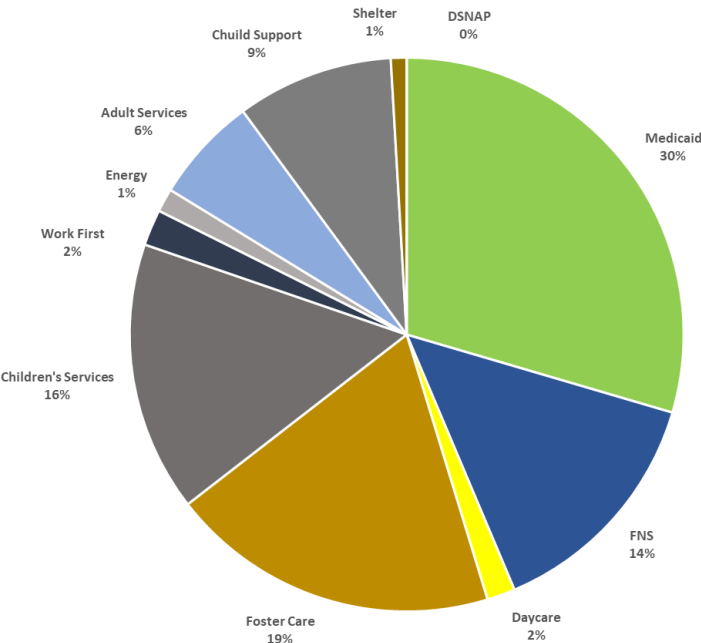
Fiscal Year 2023-2024

Financial Information

Total **ADMINISTRATIVE** Revenues



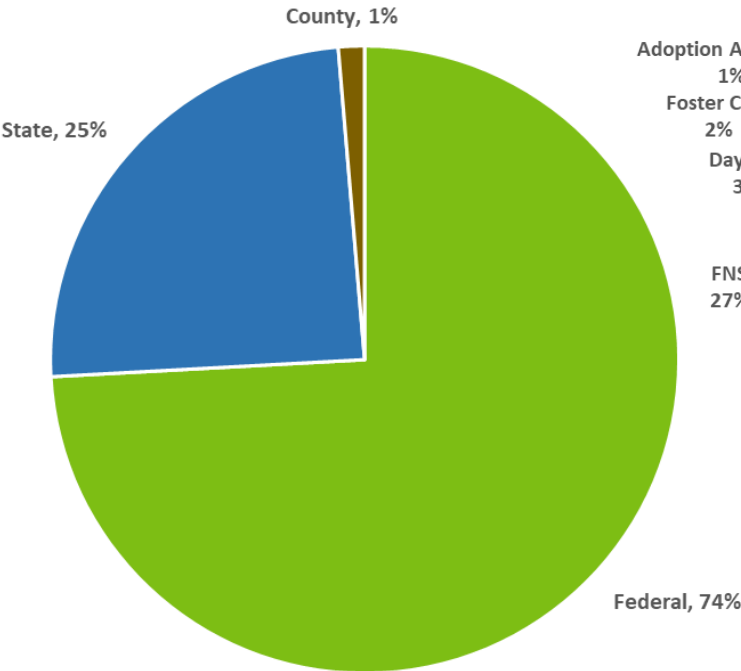
Total **ADMINISTRATIVE** Expenses



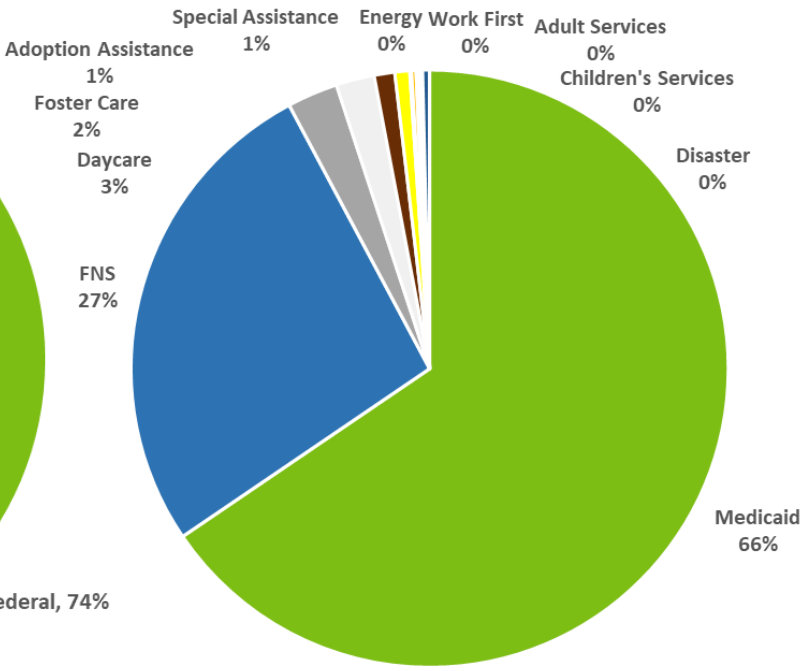
Fiscal Year 2024-2025

Financial Information

Total PROGRAM Revenues



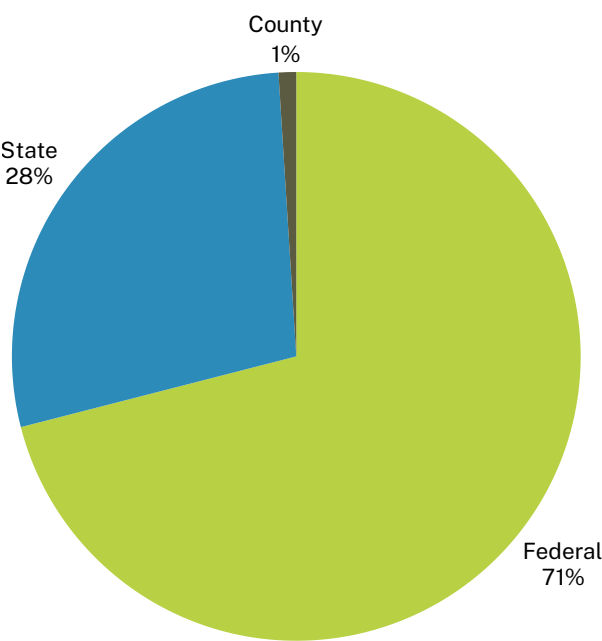
Total PROGRAM Expenses



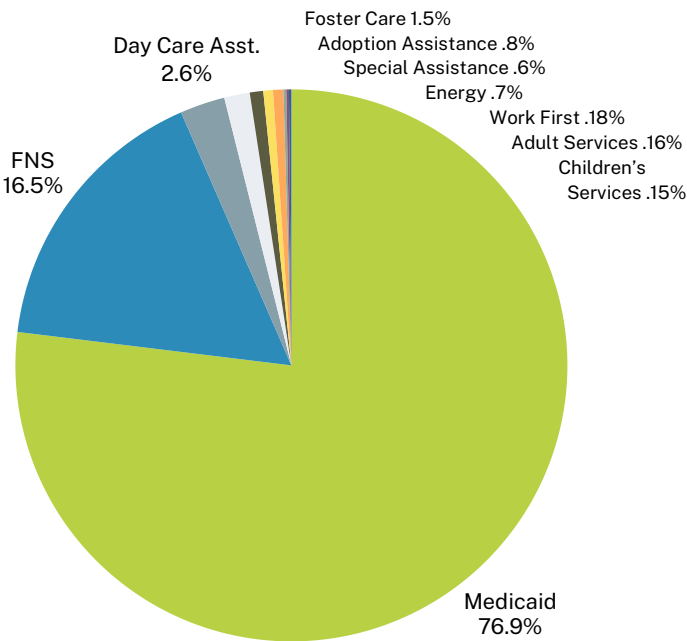
Fiscal Year 2023-2024

Financial Information

Total PROGRAM Revenues



Total PROGRAM Expenses



Program Costs

Fiscal Year

2024 - 2025 vs 2023-2024

Revenues

	FY 24-25 VALUE	FY 24-25 %	FY 23-24 VALUE	FY 23-24 %
FEDERAL	\$ 84,641,948	74.13%	\$ 108,020,115	71.38%
STATE	\$ 27,995,403	24.52%	\$ 41,680,379	27.54%
COUNTY	\$ 1,537,518	1.35%	\$ 1,625,252	1.08%
TOTAL REVENUES	\$ 114,174,869	100%	\$ 151,325,746	100%



Expenses

PROGRAMS	FY 24-25 VALUE	FY 24-25 %	FY 23-24 Value	FY 23-24 %
MEDICAID	\$ 74,786,774	65.50%	\$ 116,422,946	76.94%
FNS	\$ 30,489,782	26.70%	\$ 24,998,454	16.52%
DAY CARE ASST.	\$ 3,130,550	2.74%	\$ 3,981,106	2.63%
FOSTER CARE	\$ 2,358,915	2.07%	\$ 2,267,101	1.50%
ADOPTION ASSISTANCE	\$ 1,276,806	1.12%	\$ 1,189,027	0.79%
SPECIAL ASSISTANCE	\$ 914,788	0.80%	\$ 855,897	0.57%
ENERGY	\$ 108,957	0.10%	\$ 911,431	0.60%
WORK FIRST	\$ 286,380	0.25%	\$ 258,071	0.17%
ADULT SVCS.	\$ 189,563	0.17%	\$ 227,522	0.15%
CHILDREN'S SVCS.	\$ 199,352	0.17%	\$ 214,191	0.14%
DISASTER	\$ 433,002	0.38%	0	0
TOTAL EXPENSES	\$ 114,174,869	100%	\$ 151,325,746	100%

Administrative Costs

Fiscal Year

2024/2025 vs 2023/2024

Revenues

	FY 24-25	FY 24-25 %	FY 23-24	FY 23-24%
FEDERAL	\$ 7,333,927	51.83%	\$ 7,293,885	50.54%
STATE	\$ 922,704	6.52%	\$ 627,788	4.35%
COUNTY	\$ 5,892,734	41.65%	\$ 6,510,232	45.11%
TOTAL REVENUES	\$ 14,149,365	100%	\$ 14,431,905	100%



Expenses

PROGRAMS	FY 2024-2025 VALUE	FY 24-25 %	FY 2023-2024 VALUE	FY 2023-2024 %
MEDICAID	\$ 4,306,129	30.43%	\$ 4,264,307	29.55%
FNS	\$ 1,939,845	13.71%	\$ 2,033,255	14.09%
DAY CARE ASST.	\$ 214,170	1.51%	\$ 237,759	1.65%
FOSTER CARE & ADOP.	\$ 2,297,516	16.24%	\$ 2,774,158	19.22%
CHILDREN'S SVCS.	\$ 2,245,112	15.87%	\$ 2,275,135	15.76%
WORK FIRST	\$ 415,708	2.94%	\$ 304,443	2.11%
ENERGY	\$ 290,805	2.06%	\$ 196,957	1.36%
ADULT SVCS.	\$ 958,932	6.78%	\$ 893,238	6.19%
CHILD SUPPORT	\$ 1,182,286	8.36%	\$ 1,319,975	9.15%
SHELTER	\$ 92,156	0.65%	\$ 132,678	0.92%
DSNAP	\$ 206,706	1.45%	\$ 0	0
Total Expenses	\$ 14,149,365	100%	\$ 14,431,905	100%

Child Welfare Services

Child Protective Services

Child Protective Services (CPS) responds to reports of abuse, neglect and/or dependency to ensure the safety of children in Rutherford County. CPS aims to protect children from further maltreatment and to support and improve parental/caregiver abilities to assure a safe and nurturing home for each child.

To report abuse, neglect, or exploitation of a child:

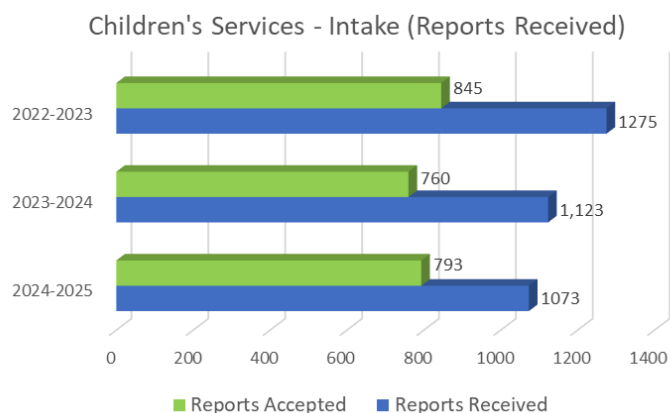
During business hours of 8:30am-5:00pm please call 828-287-6165 to speak with an intake worker. After 5:00pm and on weekends, please call 828-229-7205 and ask for the emergency duty social worker.



Intake

Child Protective Services (CPS) Intake is the initial stage in the child welfare process where reports of suspected child abuse, neglect, or dependency are received, assessed, and documented. During this phase, social workers gather critical information from reporters—who can be anyone from concerned citizens to mandated reporters like teachers or doctors—about the child's situation.

The intake process involves determining the credibility and urgency of the report, assessing the potential risk to the child, and deciding whether the allegations warrant a formal assessment or investigation.



The goal of CPS Intake is to accurately assess potential dangers to ensure that children who are at risk receive immediate protection and support, while also ensuring that families receive appropriate services and interventions if needed. Intake workers are also knowledgeable about community resources for cases that warrant referrals only.

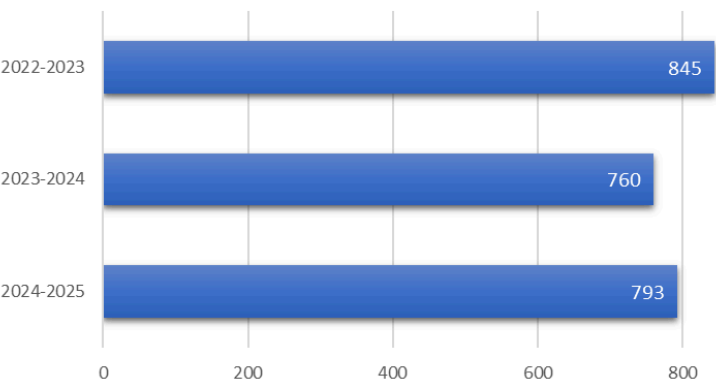
CPS ASSESSMENTS/INVESTIGATIONS

Child Protective Services (CPS) Assessments/Investigations are a crucial step in ensuring the safety and well-being of children who may be at risk of abuse or neglect. Once a report is deemed credible during the CPS Intake process, a formal investigation is launched to thoroughly assess the child's living conditions, the family's circumstances, and any potential harm or danger to the child. This investigation typically involves interviewing the child, parents, and other relevant individuals, as well as conducting home visits and reviewing records.

The primary objective of the CPS investigation is to determine whether the allegations of abuse or neglect are substantiated and, if so, to decide what protective actions are necessary.

This could range from offering support services to the family, to removing the child from the home if they are in immediate danger. Throughout the investigation, DSS works to balance the child's safety with the goal of keeping families together whenever possible, always prioritizing the best interests of the child.

CPS Reports Accepted



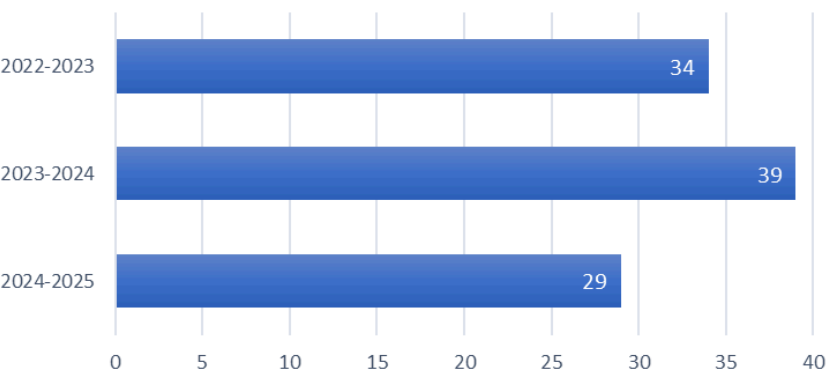
In Home Services

Child Protective Services (CPS) In-Home Services is mandated and designed to support families where concerns of abuse or neglect have been identified but where the child can remain safely in the home with the appropriate interventions. These services are initiated following a CPS investigation that determines the child is not in immediate danger but that the family requires assistance to address underlying issues and prevent future harm.

CPS In-Home Services include a range of supports, such as counseling, parenting education, substance use/misuse treatment, and assistance with accessing community resources.

The goal of these services is to strengthen the family's ability to provide a safe, stable, and nurturing environment for their children while reducing the risk of future CPS involvement. DSS social workers work closely with the family, regularly monitoring progress and adjusting services as needed to ensure the child's well-being remains the top priority.

In Home Services -
Number of Families Served

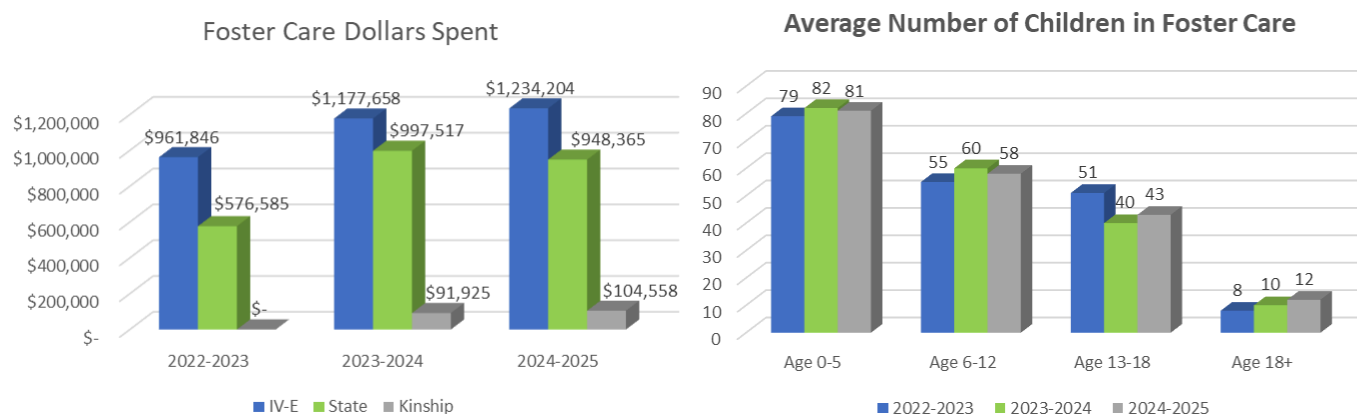


Foster Care

Foster Care is a temporary arrangement where children who cannot live with their birth families due to issues like abuse, neglect, or other safety concerns are placed in the care of trained and licensed foster families. The primary goal of foster care is to provide a safe, stable, and nurturing environment for these children while efforts are made to resolve the issues in their birth families that led to their removal.

DSS is responsible for overseeing the placement process, ensuring that foster families meet the necessary requirements, and providing ongoing support to both the children and the foster parents. While Foster Care is meant to be a temporary solution, it can sometimes lead to other permanent options including adoption, if reunification with the birth family is not possible.

IV-E is a federal program, while state dollars are state funded and kinship refers to funding for programs that support relative caregivers.



- Kinship Care began in Fiscal Year 2023-2024. Zero dollars spent in Fiscal Year 2022-2023.

Permanency Planning

Permanency Planning services consists of children that have been placed in the Department's custody through a court order. When a child comes into the Department's custody, the primary goal is reunification. Within the Permanency Planning section of the Department, there is one unit specifically designed to license foster parents. To become a licensed foster parent, you must attend a 30-hour course as well as go through interviews, records checks, and home inspections. Our need for foster parents is critical

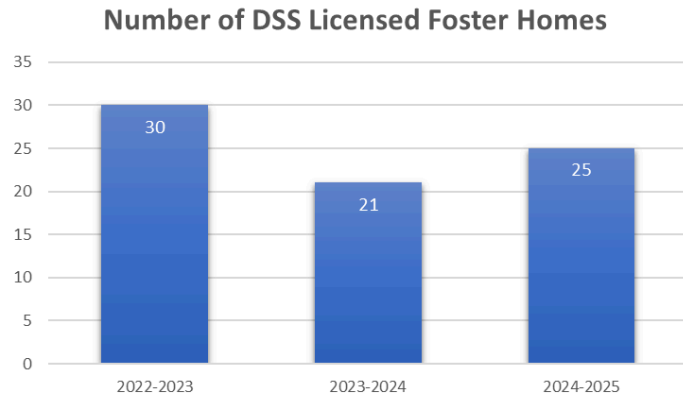
	2024-2025	2023-2024	2022-2023
AVERAGE CHILDREN IN CUSTODY	182	176	149
AVERAGE LICENSED FOSTER HOMES	25	21	30
AVERAGE NEW FOSTER HOMES LICENSED	5	7	7

Licensing

Foster Care Licensing is the process by which individuals or families are evaluated, trained, and approved to become foster caregivers. This licensing process is essential to ensure that foster parents are capable of providing a safe, nurturing, and stable environment for children who need temporary care due to circumstances like abuse or neglect in their birth families.

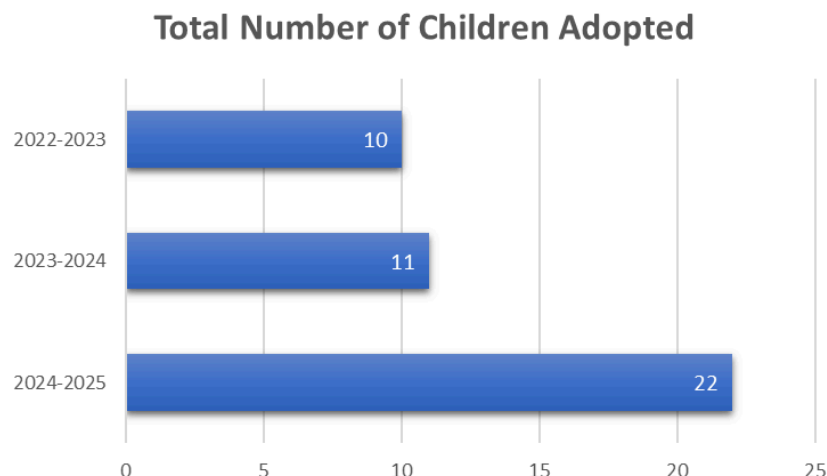
DSS conducts thorough background checks, home inspections, and interviews as part of the licensing process, along with providing mandatory training to prepare prospective foster parents for the unique challenges of caring for foster children. Once licensed, foster parents are supervised and supported by DSS to ensure they continue to meet the standards required to provide quality care.

This rigorous process is designed to protect the well-being of children and ensure they are placed in suitable homes that can address their physical, emotional, and developmental needs.



Adoption

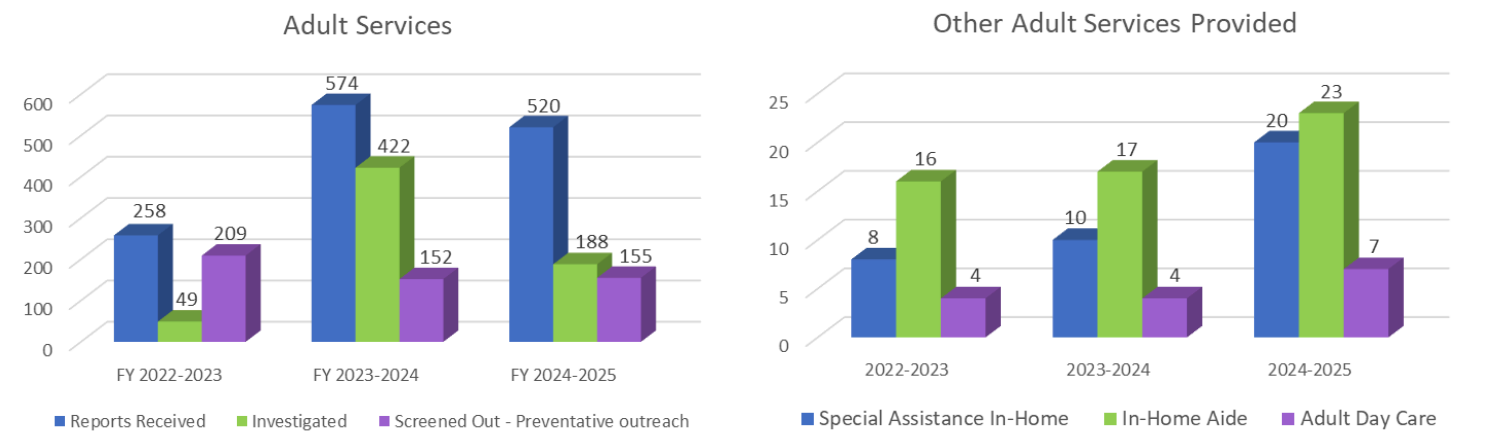
Adoption refers to the legal process by which a child's parental rights are permanently transferred from their biological parents to adoptive parents. This process is often facilitated to find stable, loving homes for children who cannot remain with their birth families due to circumstances such as abuse, neglect, or the inability of the biological parents to provide proper care. DSS plays a crucial role in evaluating potential adoptive families, ensuring they meet the necessary criteria, and supporting both the child and the adoptive parents through the transition. Adoption is designed to prioritize the child's best interests, providing them with a safe, forever home environment where they can thrive.



Adult Services

Adult Services offers a range of mandated and voluntary supportive services which intervenes and advocates on behalf of disabled adults who are at risk of mistreatment. Adult Protective Services (APS) assists adults with disabilities who may be abused or neglected by a caretaker, may be neglecting themselves, or may be exploited.

Guardianship involves the provision of services to adults deemed incompetent. It includes legal proceedings when an adult is declared incompetent by the Court and when no other adults or family members are willing or able to take responsibility for duties relative to the adult’s personal affairs and/or property; the Department assumes responsibility. The nature and scope of a guardian’s responsibility are determined by the Court, based on applicable provisions of the law and the circumstances of the individual case.



To report abuse, neglect, or exploitation of a vulnerable adult:

During business hours of 8:30am-5:00pm please call 828-287-6165 to speak with an intake worker. After 5:00pm and on weekends, please call 828-229-7205 and ask for the emergency duty social worker.



Economic Services

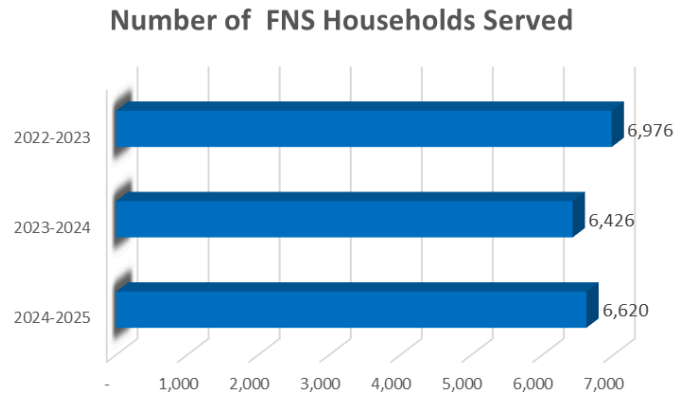
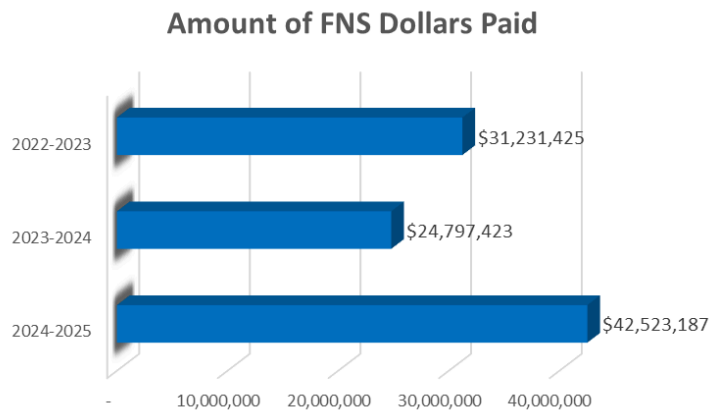
The Economic Services Division of Rutherford County Department of Social Services provides income-based economic services including Food and Nutrition, Medicaid, Subsidized Daycare, Work First Family Assistance, and Energy Programs.



Economic Service workers taking part in planting Pinwheels for Prevention .

FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICES

The Food and Nutrition Services Program (FNS) strives to end hunger, improve nutrition and health, and assist low-income households to buy the food they need. Benefits are issued through Electronic Benefit Transfer cards (EBT cards). FNS benefits are 100% federally funded; however, positions to support the eligibility and maintenance of cases are funded by local, state, and federal dollars.



DISASTER SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (DSNAP)

During Fiscal Year 2024–2025, North Carolina faced an unprecedented natural disaster as the worst hurricane in recorded history tore through its mountainous regions. The storm caused widespread devastation, triggering an urgent need to activate the Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (DSNAP) to support affected communities.

Despite experiencing many of the same hardships as the residents they serve, our dedicated staff rose to the occasion. Demonstrating exceptional commitment and resilience, they worked extended hours under extremely challenging conditions. In total, **4,517 DSNAP applications** were processed during this emergency response effort.

The total **expenditures** associated with this operation amounted to approximately **\$4,000,000**, reflecting the scale and urgency of the support provided to individuals and families in crisis.



Even under the urgent timeline of processing thousands of applications, our team shared smiles and positivity with our community.

Hurricane Helene - Emergency Shelter Response Summary

Storm Impact:

- Landfall: Thursday, September 26, 2024
- Effects: Heavy rain, high winds, widespread flooding, and near-total power outages across the county.

Emergency Shelter Timeline:

Friday, September 27

- 4:00 AM: Rutherford County Emergency Management notified DSS of the need to open an emergency shelter at Town Hall in Lake Lure.
- Morning: Due to impassable roads to Lake Lure, a shelter opened at Rutherfordton Presbyterian Church around 10:00 AM.
- Afternoon: Due to lack of power and no generator at the church, a more suitable shelter was opened at RS-Central High School at approximately 3:00 PM.
 - DSS staff stayed at the church temporarily to redirect individuals to RS-Central.
 - Clients were transported from the church to RS-Central High School that afternoon.

Sunday, September 29

- A second shelter opened at Chase Middle School, specifically for oxygen-dependent individuals.

Tuesday, October 1

- The American Red Cross arrived and officially took over operations at RS-Central High School at 8:00 PM.

Sunday, October 6

- Both the RS-Central High School and Chase Middle School shelters relocated to Rutherfordton Presbyterian Church.
 - DSS assisted with the relocation process.

DSS Involvement:

- Two DSS staff members were onsite daily from at least 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM.
- Last day of DSS onsite support: Friday, October 11, 2024

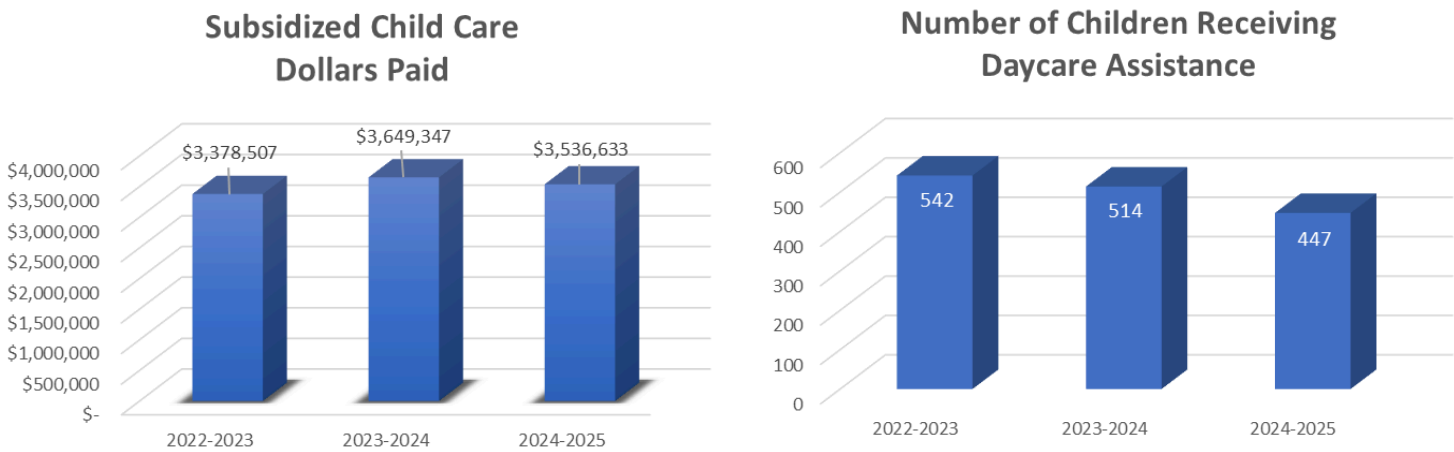
Shelter Utilization:

- Approx. 160 individuals utilized the emergency shelters during the response period.



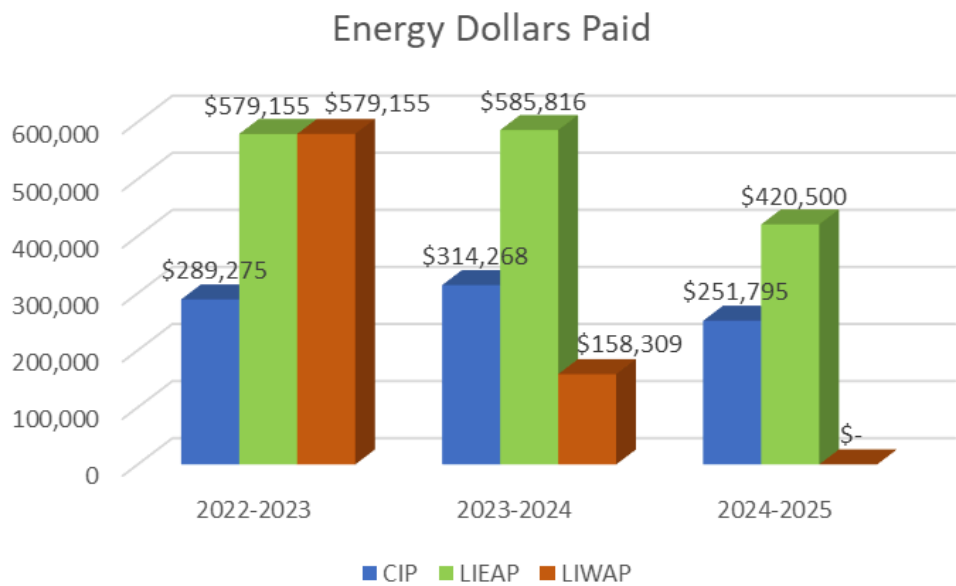
SUBSIDIZED CHILD CARE

The Subsidized Child Care Program uses state and federal funds to provide financial assistance to eligible families. For information on eligibility please call 828-287-6165 and ask for the Subsidized Child Care worker.



ENERGY PROGRAMS

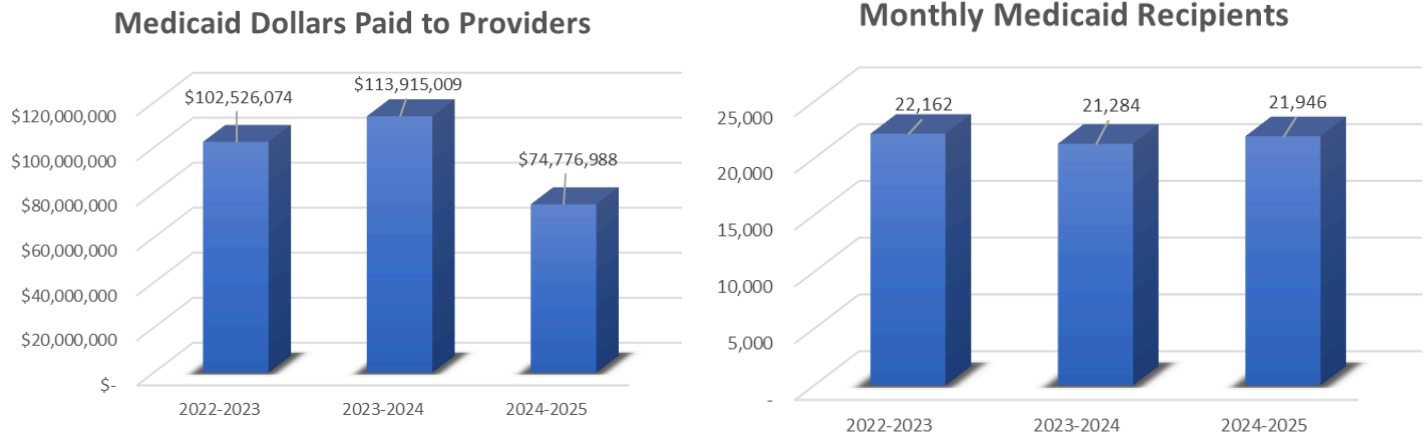
The Rutherford County Department of Social Services administers federally funded emergency financial assistance programs to assist families with heating or cooling crises. The Crisis Intervention Program (CIP), Low Income Energy Assistant Program (LIEAP), and Low Income Water Assistance Program (LIWAP) programs pay directly to local utility companies.



- The LIWAP program ended during the 2023-2024 Fiscal Year.

MEDICAID

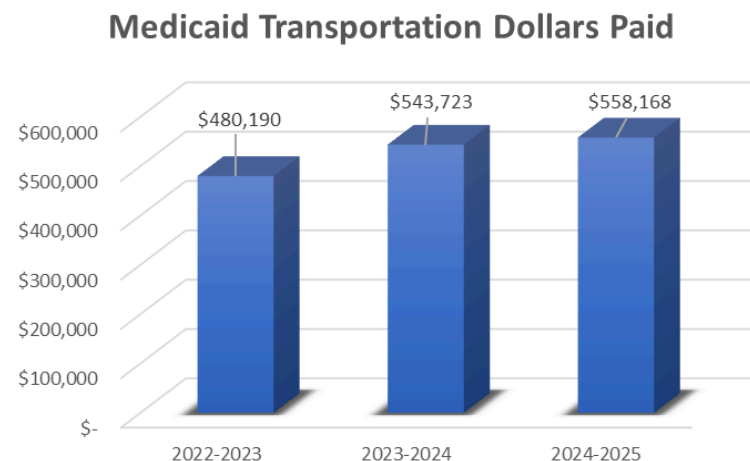
Medicaid is a health insurance program for income eligible individuals who cannot afford healthcare costs. This benefit ensures the disabled, elderly, children, pregnant women, and families get the medical attention they need. The Department administers 22 different Medicaid and sub-categories which requires evaluation of eligibility for each program.



Rutherford County's approximately \$31 million decrease in Medicaid service expenditures for FY 24-25 is most likely the result of statewide changes rather than local service reductions. The primary drivers are the post-COVID "unwinding" process, which removed many individuals from Medicaid after federal continuous coverage rules ended, and the ongoing transition to Medicaid Managed Care, which has changed both who is covered and how services and costs are allocated. Together, these factors reduced the number and type of claims attributed to the County, leading to a lower reported expenditure total.

MEDICAID TRANSPORTATION

Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) is provided to Medicaid beneficiaries who need assistance in accessing transportation to and from medical appointments.



MEDICAID EXPANSION

Medicaid Expansion in North Carolina officially began on December 1, 2023. This significant change allowed more low-income adults, particularly those without dependent children, to gain access to health insurance. Under this expansion, adults earning up to 138% of the federal poverty level are now eligible for Medicaid coverage. This expansion is part of a broader effort to reduce the number of uninsured individuals in the state, improve health outcomes, and ease the financial burden on healthcare providers. Since its launch, the program has enrolled over 500,000 North Carolinians, providing them with access to essential healthcare services, including preventive care and chronic disease management.

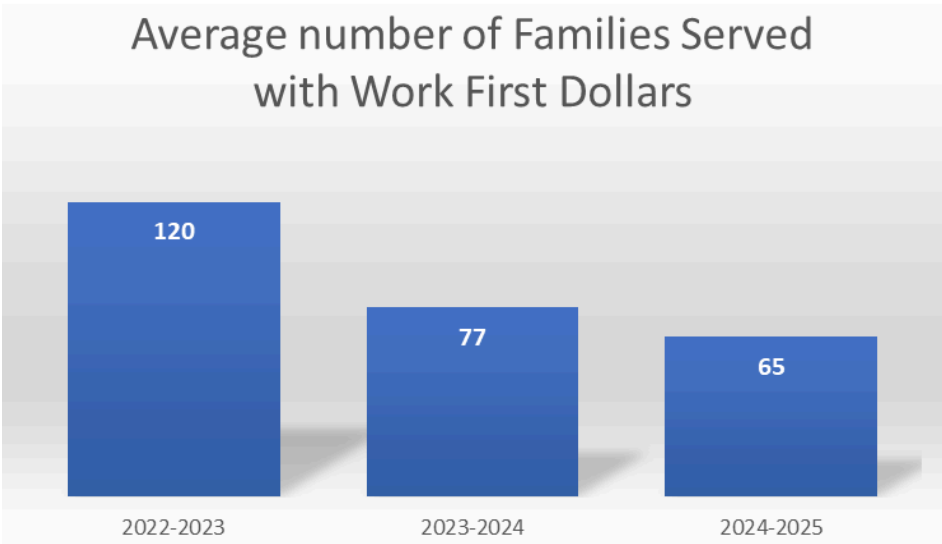
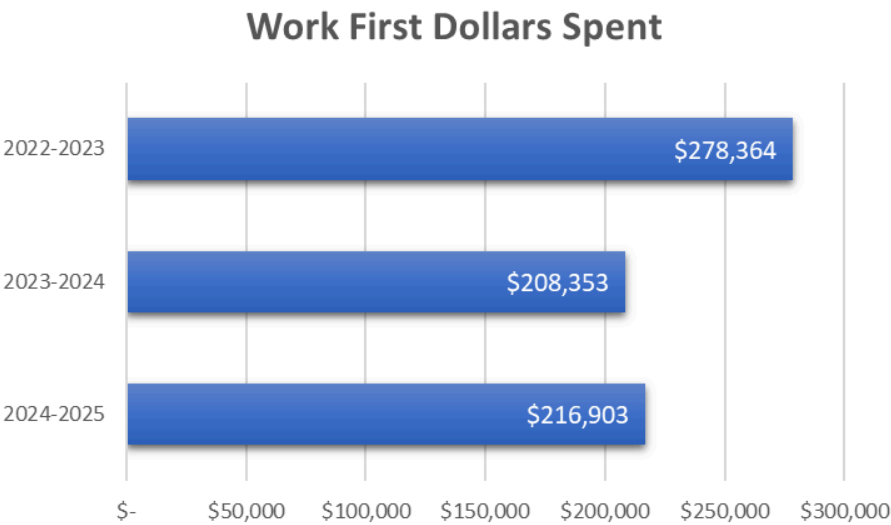
The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) identified 4,054 individuals in Rutherford County as eligible for Medicaid Expansion and set a two-year timeframe for DSS to achieve this enrollment target. As of June 2025 the county has successfully enrolled 5,236 beneficiaries. Medicaid dollars paid to providers this fiscal year was \$3,191,527.96.



Rutherford County DSS partners with Work Force Development to identify employees for Medicaid Expansion

WORK FIRST FAMILY ASSISTANCE

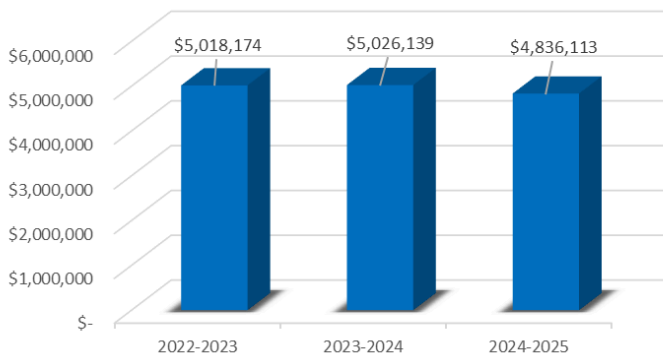
This is a cash assistance, employment-based program. Families found eligible receive a monthly check. Eligibility is based on household income and reserve. The program's purpose is to enable citizens to become self-sufficient by linking them with resources and skills that help them secure and maintain employment. Families that receive a monthly check must cooperate with Child Support Enforcement, register with the Employment Security Commission, complete a substance abuse screening, and actively participate in work-related activities leading to self-sufficiency.



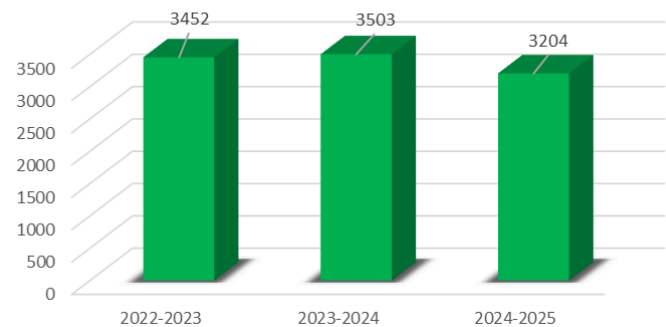
CHILD SUPPORT

The Rutherford County Department of Social Services is responsible for the provision of Child Support Services. Services can be provided to any North Carolina parent or custodian regardless of income level. Available services include location, establishment of paternity, establishment of legal obligations, collection, and enforcement.

Child Support Dollars Collected



Number of Children Receiving Child Support



Child Support staff and Director attended the 2025 Child Support conference.

COLLABORATIVE GRANT PARTNERSHIPS

DUKE ENDOWMENT GRANT RECEIVED

We are very pleased to share with you the grant award news from The Duke Endowment application we submitted earlier this year. As you recall, their Board of Trustees was to meet on May 7th. Pisgah Legal has been notified of the \$1.4 million award to pilot a pre-petition legal representation and advocacy program for children and families at risk of entering foster care be distributed over three years. This is such an exciting opportunity for us to work together on a Pilot Program with Henderson County and Rutherford County to reduce unnecessary removal and placement of children from low-income families into foster care. We are extremely grateful for your agreeing to do this work with us. We hope our work together will be a model that can be used for every county in NC.

Thank you for partnering with us to keep low-income families together and children out of foster care.

Sincerely,

Jackie

Jaclyn Kiger, JD, MSW

Update:

Twenty One client referrals have been made to Pisgah Legal Services this fiscal year, helping prevent children from entering foster care.

GRANT RECIEVED THROUGH OPIATE SETTLEMENT FUNDING

Preferred Choice Healthcare implemented a pilot program to provide Family Centered Treatment-Recovery to all families who are engaged in the In Home Services Program at the Rutherford County Department of Social Services on July 1, 2024, with particular attention to families who are impacted by substance use. This project is funded through a generous grant opportunity provided through Rutherford County Opiate Abatement Settlement funding.

Family Centered Treatment is an evidence based, trauma-specific, in home, family treatment provided to families who desire or who are in need of systemic change to build upon protective factors to increase physical, emotional, and psychological safety within the family system. Within this program, Family Centered Treatment is available to all families, regardless of insurance or ability to pay, with seamless delivery.

The literature is clear-children have better health outcomes when they are able to reside with a safe and healthy caregiver in their natural environments. If we are able to work with the family system, and not just a member of a family who may be experiencing addiction, we know that the likelihood of sustained recovery increases. Recovery is a family systems issue. If an individual experiences recovery, the experience of trauma within the family system is reduced.

In partnership with the Rutherford County Department of Social Services, our ultimate goal is to increase community safety, decrease the requirement of out of home placements for children, and improve opportunities for recovery in our community.

Since beginning services, Preferred Choice Healthcare is seeing the obvious representation of the despair caused by addiction and substance misuse. We are seeing families who have made efforts towards recovery, but who have lacked the wrap-around, systemic approach to recovery that Family Centered Treatment-Recovery provides. We are meeting with families who have a strong desire for recovery, and with children who just want to be safe at home with their families.

Thank you,

Sarah Horne, Ph.D, LCSW, LCAS, CCS

Update:

Total Number of Referrals 33

Total Number of Join-Up (initial) Sessions Completed 23

Total Number of Sessions Completed 190

Total Number of Family Members Served 86



A Home of Hope: The Lighthouse at Building D

In June 2025, Rutherford County Department of Social Services celebrated a landmark achievement with the opening of The Lighthouse at Building D—a safe, comforting, and child-centered temporary home for children in transition.

This innovative project ensures that every child entering DSS custody experiences a nurturing environment during one of the most difficult moments in their lives. The Lighthouse symbolizes hope, safety, and the unwavering commitment of our agency to meet needs with both compassion and creativity.

Meeting an Urgent Need

During times of crisis or uncertainty, children deserve dignity, safety, and stability. The Lighthouse was created with that belief at its core. Designed to feel like a home rather than a facility, it features:

- Comfortable bedrooms for rest
- A family visitation space for foster children and their parents
- A family-style kitchen and dining space
- Play and learning areas to foster connection

Every design choice reflects trauma-informed principles, providing children with warmth and reassurance as they await placement.



For the first time in agency history, no child had to sleep on an office floor while awaiting placement.

Community and Partnership in Action

The success of The Lighthouse was made possible through the generous gift of Dogwood Health Trust, along with the steadfast support of Rutherford County leadership, the Board of Social Services, and dedicated DSS staff.

This collaboration demonstrates the strength of community partnerships and the power of shared vision. The Lighthouse now serves as a statewide model—illustrating what can be achieved when agencies, funders, and local government work together to reimagine child welfare.

Statewide Recognition and Knowledge Sharing

Recognizing the state-wide crisis and the need to share The Lighthouse, Director Dee Hunt submitted a proposal to the 2025 North Carolina Social Services Institute to present a workshop on how the home was conceived, funded, and built. The proposal was accepted, and Director Hunt led a well-attended session sharing the full story behind The Lighthouse. She answered questions from agencies across the state and provided participants with grant resources and guidance—helping other counties explore how to replicate the project in their own communities. Some counties have called directly and all information including the proposal was shared.

The presentation and sharing not only showcased the agency’s creativity and leadership but also reinforced Rutherford County DSS as a statewide leader in child welfare innovation and collaboration.

A Model for the State

“The Lighthouse is a reminder that small acts of kindness, guided by purpose, can light the way for others and create lasting change.”

— Dee Hunt, DSS Director



As other counties across North Carolina look to replicate this model, Rutherford County DSS stands proud as a leader in child welfare innovation and compassionate care.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS TO DATE

AGENCY WIDE

- The agency is implementing strategies to improve our service delivery and increase the effectiveness and access to services.
- The agency practices data-driven decision making.
- Our workers are up to date on training and committed to professional development.
- We implemented a quarterly all-staff meeting to ensure that all staff in our three buildings can meet regularly to receive agency, county, state, and federal updates.
- Hurricane Helene Recovery: Much of our staff was inundated with extra work while facing personal home-life challenges as other community residents were facing. DSS Economic Services was still open and meeting the needs of Rutherford County residents and volunteered for the Red Cross Shelters while still working in the office.

FISCAL

- Our fiscal management team is sound and passed their recent audit.

SERVICES

- The agency is committed to collaborative relationships with various community partners including United Way, Dogwood Health Trust, Mosaic Hope, Rutherford Regional Health System, Peace in the City, and various churches.
- The agency continues to recruit foster parents through RPOP. We are also getting out into the community to share our need for foster parents; 'Be the Village' is our theme.
- Our agency completed and started using the home that was built on our campus that temporarily houses foster children awaiting placement June 23, 2025. Through the end of June we have housed one female for two nights.
- Preferred Choice Healthcare implemented a pilot program to provide Family Centered Treatment-Recovery to all families who are engaged in the In Home Services Program at the Rutherford County Department of Social Services on July 1, 2024, with particular attention to families who are impacted by substance use. This project is funded through a generous grant opportunity provided through Rutherford County Opiate Abatement Settlement funding. This program has helped 86 family members with family centered treatment this fiscal year.
- We received a grant award through Duke Endowment to pilot a pre-petition legal representation and advocacy program for children and families at risk of entering foster care to be distributed over three years and will be partnering with Pisgah Legal Services. This program has had 21 client referrals this fiscal year.

INCOME MAINTENANCE

- DSNAP – the DSNAP effort was a huge success for the 1st time Rutherford had ever managed a site. Our site received accolades from the USDA Audit that stated ours should be considered a model for other counties to emulate.
- Employee turnover has been high, but our dedicated leadership and staff continue to meet the goals as set forth by the HB 630 standards.
- Passed the Single Audit with no findings.
- Medicaid continues to pass the Report card monthly ensuring the majority of our applications are processed within the state's mandated time frame.
- FNS/Energy and WFFA also continue to meet and surpass their state mandated timeliness goals.

CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

AGENCY WIDE

- Losing experienced staff — our future leaders — to better pay and less stress elsewhere.
- Locating, hiring, and retaining qualified staff.
- Fostering ongoing employee engagement and commitment.
- Inadequate budget to retain staff or implement new initiatives.
- Fiscal restraints and limited resources.
- Employees leaving the agency to go to neighboring counties that pay more.
- Lack of multilingual staff creates cultural and language barriers.

SERVICES

- Substance misuse and its impact on child abuse and neglect.
- Lack of foster homes creates children awaiting placements that must be supervised by agency or contract workers until a placement is located.
- Increased petitions leading to more kids in custody.
- Elder abuse and exploitation.
- Increasing elderly population with complex issues.
- Economic uncertainty and poverty.
- Homelessness and housing insecurity.
- Dental providers who do not accept Medicaid.

LEGAL

- Delays in the judicial system.
- Legislative and policy demands with staffing shortage.
- Need for digital transformation.
- Growing demand for mental health services due to mental health and behavioral issues.



Rutherford County Department of Social Services Strategic Plan (2024-2028)

Our agency plays a vital role in fostering the well-being and resilience of the community. As the primary agency responsible for delivering essential social services, our mission is to ensure that every individual and family has access to the support and resources they need to lead healthy, stable, and fulfilling lives.

In an ever-evolving social landscape, the challenges we face are complex and multifaceted. To address these challenges effectively, we must remain adaptable, innovative, and focused on continuous improvement. This strategic plan serves as our roadmap for the coming years, outlining our commitment to delivering high quality services, strengthening our partnerships, and advocating for the rights and needs of those we serve.

Through this plan, we aim to enhance our operational efficiency, expand access to services, and foster a culture of accountability and transparency. By aligning our efforts with best practices and evidence-based strategies, we will ensure that our services remain responsive and impactful. Moreover, this plan reflects our dedication to building a supportive and inclusive workplace environment that empowers our staff to excel in their roles.

We are confident that, through the implementation of this strategic plan, DSS will continue to be a leader in social services, making a meaningful and lasting difference in the lives of those we serve. Together with our community partners, policymakers, and stakeholders, we will work tirelessly to fulfill our mission and uphold the values that guide our work.

Goal 1: Ensure High-Quality Services

We are committed to delivering the highest quality of services by developing, implementing, and continuously improving best practice standards. Regular evaluations and client feedback mechanisms will be instituted to ensure services meet or exceed expectations.

Key Actions:

- Develop and refine service delivery standards.
- Implement continuous training programs for staff on best practices.
- Establish a client feedback system for ongoing quality assessment.

Goal 2: Exercise Sound Fiscal Management

We will practice responsible fiscal management by creating a long-term strategic financial plan, establishing performance metrics, and ensuring that all financial decisions align with our strategic goals.

Key Actions:

- Develop a comprehensive financial strategy.
- Implement performance metrics to monitor financial health and service impact.
- Regularly review and adjust financial plans to adapt to changing conditions.

Goal 3: Increase Agency Visibility

We aim to enhance the visibility of our agency through active participation in public speaking engagements, local events, and forming collaborative partnerships. This will showcase the positive impact of DSS, helping us reach more clients while deepening our relationships within the community.

Key Actions:

- Develop a schedule of public speaking engagements and event participation.
- Form partnerships with local organizations to co-host events.
- Increase social media and online presence.

Goal 4: Foster a Positive Workplace Environment

We are dedicated to creating a safe, secure, and welcoming workplace environment that encourages professional growth and supports the well-being of all staff members.

Key Actions:

- Implement regular workplace safety and well-being assessments.
- Develop professional development programs and opportunities.
- Encourage open communication and feedback within the agency.

Goal 5: Champion Social Services

We will advocate for the importance of social services by engaging with policymakers, stakeholders, and the public. Our goal is to promote increased access to our services and highlight the critical role of social services in the community.

Key Actions:

- Build relationships with policymakers and advocacy groups.
- Develop public awareness campaigns to highlight our services.
- Actively participate in policy discussions and forums.

Goal 6: Expand Access to Services

We will work to ensure that our services reach underrepresented and underserved populations by expanding our outreach efforts, reducing barriers to access, and developing programs tailored to the unique needs of these groups.

Key Actions:

- Identify and target underrepresented communities.
- Develop outreach programs to connect with underserved populations.
- Collaborate with community organizations to expand service delivery.

Goal 7: Advocate for Client Rights

Our agency will advocate for the rights and well-being of our clients by ensuring that our services are client-centered, and by promoting policies that protect and enhance the lives of those we serve.

Key Actions:

- Regularly review and update client rights policies.
- Provide advocacy training for staff.
- Engage in public advocacy efforts on behalf of our clients.

Goal 8: Promote Interagency Collaboration

We believe in the power of collaboration to enhance service delivery. By fostering strong relationships with other agencies, we can create a more cohesive and comprehensive support network for our clients.

Key Actions:

- Establish regular communication channels with partner agencies.
- Develop joint programs and initiatives with other service providers.
- Share resources and best practices to improve service outcomes.

Goal 9: Cultivate Accountability and Transparency

Our agency is committed to creating a culture of accountability and transparency in all aspects of operations, ensuring that our actions align with our mission and values.

Key Actions:

- Develop and implement transparency and accountability policies.
- Regularly report on agency performance and financial status to stakeholders.
- Encourage staff accountability through clear expectations and regular evaluations.

Goal 10: Implement Sound Policies and Procedures

We will oversee the development and implementation of sound policies and procedures that support our mission, protect our clients, and ensure the efficient operation of our agency.

Key Actions:

- Conduct a comprehensive review of current policies and procedures.
- Update or create new policies as needed to reflect best practices.
- Ensure all staff are trained on and adhere to agency policies.
- Managers and leaders of each program area developed goals, objectives, and activities with their team to ensure the achievement of goals of the strategic plan.

OUR EMPLOYEES

The Rutherford County Department of Social Services has 155 employees who serve the citizens of Rutherford County. We have 51 social work staff positions providing services in the areas of Child Protective Services, In-Home Services, Permanency Planning, and Adult Services. We have 70 economic services staff positions determining eligibility and arranging services in the areas of Food & Nutrition Services, Family and Children's Medicaid, Adult Medicaid, Transportation, Emergency Assistance, Work First, and Program Integrity. We have 10 Child Support positions and three Legal support positions. Our operational support and administrative staff include 21 employees.



Looking back on this past fiscal year, we are filled with gratitude for the dedication and hard work of our team. As we navigate the future, DSS faces various challenges that require our attention and innovative solutions. We remain committed to building strong partnerships, working with our community partners, county team, board of directors, and state team to meet the needs of the communities we serve. We are determined and confident in our ability to overcome challenges and make a positive impact in Rutherford County in the years ahead.

Your DSS Leadership Team



Dee Hunt
Director



Tiffany Dodd
Program Administrator



Susan Epley
Program Administrator



Josh Howell
Legal



Rhonda Ruppe
Child Support



Pam Price
Fiscal Officer



Kayla Fox
Administrative Officer



Kim Murray
Executive Assistant

Help foster happiness
in children without
a permanent home.

Be the village

kinship ♡ foster ♡ adopt

RPOP
RESOURCE PARENT
OUTREACH PROGRAM



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