

CHILDREN'S COMMISSION
2023 ANNUAL REPORT
TO THE
SUPREME COURT OF TEXAS



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“OUR MISSION IS TO STRENGTHEN COURTS FOR CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES IN THE TEXAS CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM AND THEREBY IMPROVE THE SAFETY, PERMANENCY, AND WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN.”

FROM LEADERSHIP

Fiscal Year 2023 was another significant year for the Supreme Court of Texas Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth, and Families (Children's Commission).

The Commission continues to provide a forum for critical conversations about complex, urgent topics impacting the child welfare system and responds with practical and relevant resources. Although the primary goal of the Children's Commission's work is to strengthen courts, the positive impact of the Commission's work extends to the broader child welfare system.

This report highlights multiple projects and resources produced by the Children's Commission in Fiscal Year 2023. The Commission developed in-person and online trainings and materials to underscore the importance of listening to and learning from individuals with lived experience including a pamphlet specific to fathers to outline fathers' legal rights in a child welfare case. An Incarcerated Parents Poster was created and distributed to facilities across the state to raise awareness about ways parents can participate in a child welfare case while incarcerated. Also, the Commission produced numerous webinars such as "Enhancing the Experience of Children and Youth in Court: How Judges and Attorneys Can Prepare and Support Youth Attending Court."

Another key initiative this year was implementing a trauma-informed courts project, in partnership with the Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services. In the final year of the project, four court teams solidified trauma-informed court environments and specific projects which emphasized sustainability and sharing best practices with other jurisdictions.

During the 88th Legislative Session, the Children's Commission served as a resource to the Legislature regarding child welfare law issues, tracked almost 400 bills, and provided information about the potential impact of proposed legislation. After the conclusion of the regular session, the Commission consolidated information about the changes in law into a comprehensive Legislative Report and Legislative Update presentation.

These are just a few key accomplishments in addition to many other projects featured in this Annual Report. We look forward to a continued emphasis on improving the legal response in child welfare cases so that children and families in Texas can experience positive outcomes in the areas of safety, permanency, and well-being.



Debra H. Lehrmann
Justice Debra H. Lehrmann
Chair



Rebeca Huddle
Justice Rebeca Aizpuru Huddle
Deputy Chair

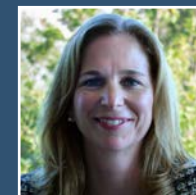
FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The theme of this year's annual report is coming full circle. Improving the child welfare system simply cannot be done in isolation. As Hellen Keller once said, "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."

As a Court Improvement Program, our primary focus is on the judicial and the legal systems. The Children's Commission develops training, tools, and resources with an aim of encouraging judicial leadership, promoting best practices, utilizing data-driven decision-making, and enhancing the quality of legal representation for parents, children, and the State.

The Children's Commission provides a unique forum to discuss and address issues that not only impact the judicial and legal systems, but also the broader child welfare system. To do so effectively, it is essential that our efforts are informed by diverse perspectives, including hearing from individuals with lived experience in the system we aim to improve. Judges, alongside attorneys, advocates, agency staff, community leaders, and others find new, innovative ways to address challenges and these solutions are only enhanced by the contribution of many individuals acting collectively.

The accomplishments included in this report are made possible by the support of the Supreme Court of Texas and our invaluable relationships with stakeholders throughout our State. Fiscal Year 2023 has come to a close but the circle of valued partnerships only continues to grow.



Jamie Bernstein
Jamie Bernstein
Executive Director



Collaboration

“THE CHILDREN’S COMMISSION HAS FOR YEARS BEEN A ‘GO-TO’ RESOURCE AND AUTHORITY FOR BOTH THE LEGISLATURE AND THE JUDICIARY IN CASES INVOLVING FAMILIES AND CHILDREN. I AM VERY PROUD OF THE COMMISSION’S WORK.”

CHIEF JUSTICE NATHAN L. HECHT,
2023 STATE OF THE JUDICIARY ADDRESS

FY2022-FY2026 Strategic Plan

The Children’s Commission five strategic goals are to:

- Administer the Court Improvement Program (CIP) funds to assess current and future needs of the courts, provide a forum for meaningful collaboration, encourage continuous quality improvement, and promote best child welfare and court practices to improve the child welfare system.
- Execute innovative projects aimed at ensuring equity, fairness, and justice for children, youth, and families; promoting judicial leadership in courts and communities; and expanding court and child welfare system capacity to support continuous, systemic improvement.
- Assist trial and appellate courts, judges, and legal advocates to ensure that children, youth, and families involved with child welfare experience a legal system in which they have access to justice and their rights are protected.
- Oversee and develop judicial and legal training efforts at all levels of practice that identify and promote best practices to improve outcomes and establish and maintain a well-informed judiciary and bar.
- Operationalize data-driven decision-making through continuous quality improvement and an analysis of publicly available child welfare and court data to identify legal processes and practices that produce desired outcomes, as well as which practices need improvement.

The Children’s Commission continues to foster connections with many collaborative partners, including the Office of the Governor (OOG), the Office of the Attorney General (OAG), the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), the Office of Court Administration (OCA), the Judicial Commission on Mental Health (JCMH), Casey Family Programs, Texas CASA, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD), the Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services (TACFS), the Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS), the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute (MMHPI), and the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

Children’s Commission Meeting Dates In Fiscal Year 2023

- November 4, 2022
- February 10, 2023: Data and Trends Presentation
- May 12, 2023: Reinstatement of Parental Rights Presentation
- September 15, 2023: Child and Family Services Review Presentation, and Supporting Kinship Caregivers Presentation

Children’s Commission Members Fiscal Year 2023*

Supreme Court of Texas	Justice Jeffrey S. Boyd	Justice Jane N. Bland
Chief Justice Nathan L. Hecht	Justice John P. Devine	Justice Rebeca Aizpuru Huddle
Justice Debra H. Lehrmann	Justice Jimmy D. Blacklock	Justice Evan A. Young
	Justice Brett Busby	

Commissioners

Justice Debra H. Lehrmann, <i>Chair</i>	Hon. Selina Mireles
Justice Rebeca Aizpuru Huddle, <i>Deputy Chair</i>	Katie Olse
Hon. Harriet O’Neill, <i>Chair Emeritus</i>	Hon. Robbie Partida-Kipness
Hon. Eva Guzman, <i>Chair Emeritus</i>	Sasha Rasco
Hon. Gary Coley, <i>Vice Chair</i>	Hon. Isaac Roldan
Hon. Rosie Alvarado	Hon. Frank Rynd
Karla Baker	Hon. Randy Shelton
Erica Bañuelos	Luanne Southern
Chantel Bedlington	Vicki Spriggs
Corey Benbow	Terese Stevenson
Paula Bibbs-Samuels	Hon. Thomas Stuckey
Dr. Gary Blau	Sen. Royce West, <i>ex officio</i>

Jurists in Residence

Hon. Rob Hofmann, <i>Senior Jurist in Residence</i>
Hon. Piper McCraw, <i>Jurist in Residence</i>

Special Advisors

Sheila Craig, <i>Equity Advisor</i>
Hon. Michael Massengale, <i>Senior Judicial Advisor</i>

Children’s Commission Staff

Jamie Bernstein <i>Executive Director</i>
Milbrey Raney <i>Assistant Director</i>
Jessica Arguijo <i>Communications Manager</i>
Renée Castillo-De La Cruz <i>Staff Attorney</i>
Aimee Corbin <i>Staff Attorney</i>
Tiffany Edwards <i>Executive Assistant</i>
Jocelyn Fowler <i>Staff Attorney</i>
Monica Mahoney <i>Program Specialist</i>
Chelsea Martinez <i>Program Specialist</i>
Dylan Moench <i>Legal Representation Director</i>
Patrick Passmore <i>Finance Manager</i>
Willette Sedwick <i>Accountant</i>
Andrea Vicencio <i>Program Specialist</i>

All-Committee Webcast on FY2023 Strategies & Budget

The four Children’s Commission standing committees - Systems Improvement, Legal Practice & Process, Training, and Data - met on August 30, 2023 for an All-Committee webcast to review the proposed FY2024 Strategies and Budget presented by Children’s Commission staff. Committee members were invited to provide feedback via survey. Subsequently, the FY2024 Strategies and Budget were presented to and approved by the Children’s Commission on September 15, 2023.

Committee Members

Hon. Rosie Alvarado	Hon. Yahara L. Gutierrez
Hon. Mark Atkinson	Margaret Halpin
Karla Baker	Tracy Harting
Tymothy Belseth	Brenda Kinsler
Dr. Gary Blau	Elizabeth Kromrei
Mark Briggs	Hon. Piper McCraw
Sarah Bryant	Jenn Meier
Denise Campbell	Sharibeth Niehaus
Hon. Julie Countiss	Hon. Robbie Partida-Kipness
Jeff Cox	Kellie Price
Sarah Crockett	Mary Christine Reed
Hon. Anne Darring	Hon. Robin Sage
Teal De La Garza	Hon. Michael Schneider
Lori Duke	Hon. Tracey Scown
Barbara Elias-Perciful	Hon. Ian Spechler
Hon. Angela Ellis	Vicki Spriggs
Nathan Ezell	Hon. Thomas Stuckey
Dr. Monica Faulkner	Diane Sumoski
Hon. Denise Fortenberry	Janet VanderZanden
Hon. Richard Garcia	Charlotte Velasco
Hon. Delia Gonzales	Hon. Carlos Villalon
Hon. Angela Graves-Harrington	Hon. Elizabeth Watkins
	Jordan Watson

*Please note that throughout this report, title and membership reflect member roles at the time of participation.

Collaborative Council Meeting

The [Collaborative Council](#) assists the Children’s Commission by informing commission members of local and statewide activities, events, and issues that affect judicial and court practices in child welfare cases, and to help facilitate participation in Children’s Commission activities and projects.

The 2022 annual Collaborative Council meeting was held on Monday, October 24, 2022, in conjunction with the 15th Annual Child Welfare Judges Conference in Georgetown, Texas. The 2023 annual Collaborative Council meeting was convened immediately before the September 15, 2023 Children’s Commission meeting. Members shared their priority areas of focus for FY2024.

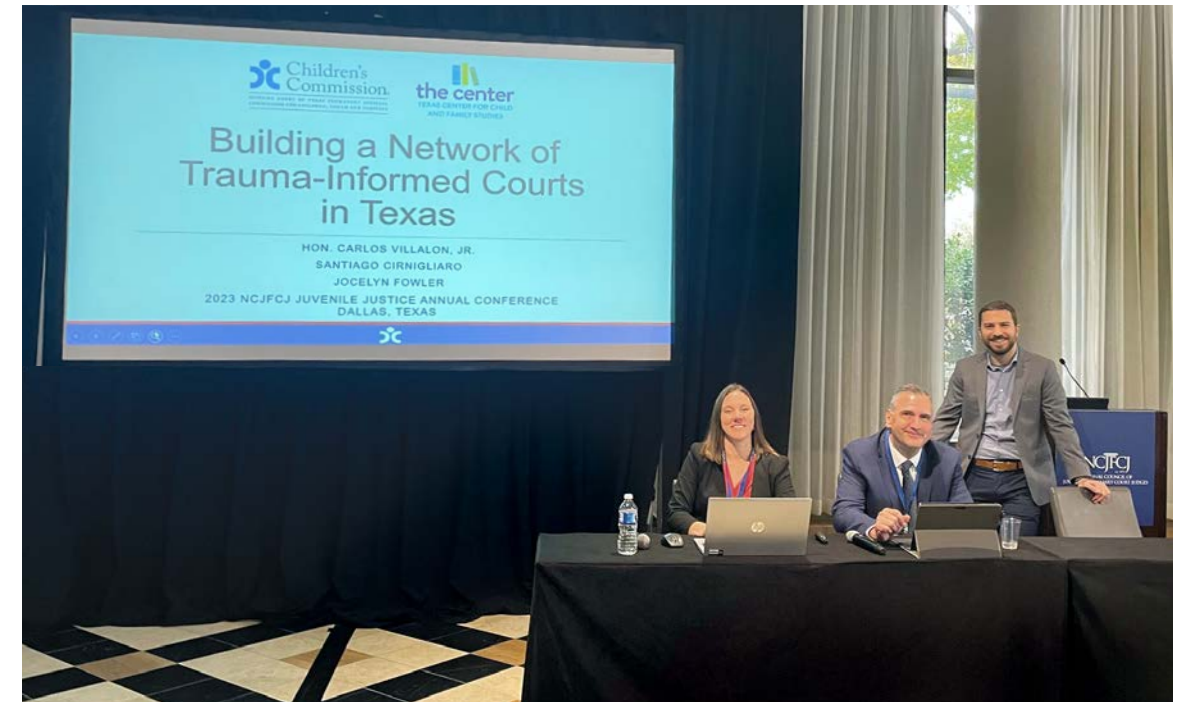
In FY2023, the Children’s Commission hosted biweekly calls with members of the Collaborative Council, DFPS, OCA, and various child welfare system stakeholders from across the state to exchange announcements and discuss emerging issues.



Collaborative Council members at the October 24, 2022 annual meeting.

Collaborative Council

Mikey Betancourt	Fedora Galasso	Dr. Jill McLeigh
Andrew Brown	Dr. Linda Garcia	Kate Murphy
Dania Carter	Barbra Grimmer	Judy Powell
Irene Clements	Julia Hatcher	Mary Christine Reed
Sarah Crockett	Félix Herrera	Tanya Rollins
Teal De La Garza	Tina Hosaka	Danielle Schaefer
De Shaun Ealoms	Kerrie Judice	Johana Scot
Barbara Elias-Perciful	Bruce Kendrick	Andrea Sparks
Mike Foster	Brian Klas	Theresa Thomas
Will Francis	Norman Ladd	Kenneth Thompson
	Stephanie Madrigal	Ruth Thornton
	Gabriella McDonald	Sarah Worthington



Jocelyn Fowler (Children’s Commission), Hon. Carlos Villalon (Child Protection Court of the Rio Grande Valley West), Santiago Cirnigliaro (Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services) prepare to present at the NCJFCJ Juvenile Justice Conference.

Children’s Commission External Presentations

In FY2023, the Children’s Commission staff gave the following presentations at external meetings, conferences, and events:

- Remarks on Supervised Independent Living Programs and Higher Education Opportunities for Youth in Care, WHIT Program, February 23, 2023
- Building a Network of Trauma-Informed Courts in Texas, National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) Juvenile Justice Conference, March 21, 2023
- Value of Collaboration and Partnership, CASA Forum, March 29, 2023
- K-12 to Higher Education, 2023 Education Reach Conference, April 3, 2023
- Texas Insights and Lessons Learned, NCSC Continuing Upwards from the Summit, May 9, 2023
- Resources for Case Planning and Management: Support for Intake and Trauma, June 8, 2023
- What Practitioners Need to Know from the 88th Regular Session: Advanced Family Law, August 9, 2023
- Foster Care & the Law: The Rights of Children in Foster Care, September 21, 2023

FISCAL YEAR 2023 GRANTS

Each fiscal year, the Children’s Commission solicits project proposals for grant funding from agencies and organizations that align with one or more of the Commission’s five strategic goals and aim to improve safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for children, youth, and families.

In FY2023, the Children’s Commission awarded a total of \$920,476 in grant funding to provide judicial training, conduct research and data analysis, support and produce resources to increase the understanding of the child welfare legal process, and improve the efficiency of court hearings. Additional information about each of the projects completed with Commission grant funding is included throughout this report.

Resource Letters for Judges and Attorneys Handling Child Welfare Cases

The Children’s Commission regularly publishes resource letters for judges and attorneys about emerging, relevant, and changing policy, laws, practice, and training opportunities that are of interest to judges and attorneys handling child welfare cases. The Children’s Commission’s distribution list for the [Resource Letter](#) reaches nearly 4,000 Texas judges, attorneys, court staff, and stakeholders.

Between October 1, 2022 and September 30, 2023, some examples of resource letter topics include:

- 10/6/2022: National Survey on Virtual Child Welfare Hearings
- 10/17/2022: New Resources Now Available
- 10/31/2022: October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month
- 11/17/2022: Celebrating Adoption Month in November
- 11/18/2022: Now Available on LawBox: 2022 Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing the Department of Family and Protective Services in Child Welfare Cases
- 11/29/2022: A Culture of Kin: Texas Kinship Steering Committee Workgroups Recommendations Report
- 12/6/2022: Proposed Rule on the Use of Restraints in Juvenile Court
- 1/5/2023: New Report on Child Welfare Representation from Texas Indigent Defense Commission
- 1/9/2023: January is Human Trafficking Prevention Month
- 2/23/2023: New Resources! School of Origin, Incarcerated Parents Poster
- 3/7/2023: Trial Skills Training Opportunity
- 3/9/2023: Jurist in Residence Letter: Resources for Developing or Enhancing Family Treatment Courts
- 4/12/2023: April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month
- 4/24/2023: Upcoming Webinar: Overview of Treatment Foster Family Care
- 5/18/2023: May is National Foster Care Month
- 6/14/2023: June is Reunification Month
- 7/10/2023: NCJFCJ Implementation Sites
- 7/31/2023: Upcoming Webinars: Reasonable Efforts, Psychotropic Medication
- 8/22/2023: Educational Resources for the 2023-2024 School Year
- 9/21/2023: The Importance of Kinship Care

Scan the QR code for a complete list of Resource Letters.



GRANTEES

 <p>HOUSTON PEARLS FOUNDATION \$25,000</p>	 <p>OFFICE OF COURT ADMINISTRATION (OCA) \$250,000</p>
 <p>TEXAS CENTER OF CHILD AND FAMILY STUDIES (THE CENTER) \$71,732</p>	 <p>TEXAS CENTER FOR THE JUDICIARY (TCJ) \$254,571</p>
 <p>TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY & PROTECTIVE SERVICES (DFPS) \$12,000</p>	 <p>TEXAS FOSTER YOUTH JUSTICE PROJECT \$26,328</p>
 <p>TEXAS LEGAL SERVICES CENTER (TLSC) \$125,000</p>	 <p>TEXAS NETWORK OF YOUTH SERVICES (TNOYS) \$25,580</p>



Systems Improvement

"We can't thank you enough. Our job is very isolating and meeting with others around the state/sharing ideas etc. is just invaluable."

Building Bridges, Connecting Communities

The Systems Improvement Committee focuses on executing innovative projects aimed at ensuring equity, fairness, and justice for children, youth, and families; promoting judicial leadership in courts and communities; and expanding court and child welfare system capacity to support continuous, systemic improvement.

The Systems Improvement Committee met on October 27, 2022, and January 31 and May 1, 2023.

Prevention and Early Intervention

During FY2023, DFPS' Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) division, OCA, and the Children's Commission continued the Early Intervention Court Liaison (EICL) pilot in Galveston, Bell, and Lubbock Counties. The Court Liaisons act as special assistants to the court, serve to identify and connect early childhood and family support programs to the courts and community, and offer a judicial perspective within community stakeholder meetings. At the July 2023 Child Protection Court Convening, a judge participating in the EICL pilot presented on a panel entitled "Moving Upstream: Early Intervention Court Liaisons and Texas Family First Pilots." Currently, the Court Liaisons have responded to over 600 formal requests for resources from DFPS caseworkers, attorneys, CASA, and in-court observations.

Commission staff also participated on PEI's Prevention Framework Workgroup which is comprised of statewide stakeholders with a goal of developing a prevention framework to guide communities throughout Texas. During April 2023 Child Abuse Prevention Month's events, staff attended the Proclamation of Child Abuse Prevention Month held in the Capitol Extension to help spread awareness.



Jurists in Residence

The Jurists in Residence (JIRs) develop relationships with retired and sitting judges, and act as consultants, trainers, and speakers to provide expert and seasoned judicial advice on child welfare matters affecting courts and the legal system. Judge Rob Hofmann of the 452nd District Court in Mason County serves as Senior Jurist in Residence and Judge Piper McCraw of the 469th District Court in Collin County serves as Jurist in Residence. Both JIRs participated in multiple Children’s Commission meetings, proposed legislation, policy and rules, topics such as Community-Based Care, prevention and early intervention, placement capacity, and other issues.

Between October 1, 2022 and September 30, 2023, some examples of JIR activities include:

- Chaired the Children’s Commission’s Systems Improvement Committee, Training Committee, and Trial Skills Training Faculty;
- Attended Child Protection Court Convening and facilitated Judicial Discussion Breakout Session;
- Attended and presented at the State Bar of Texas Advanced Family Law Seminar, and Texas State Council Luncheon;
- Presented two sessions at the Texas Center for the Judiciary Annual Judicial Education Conference;
- Attended many state and national meetings including: the National Center for State Courts Rural Justice Collaborative Advisory Council Meeting, Leadership Luncheon with Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Administrator Liz Ryan;
- Attended the HHSC Public Private Partnership Meeting, DFPS Region 9 Judicial & Legal Representation Meeting, the Hill Country CASA Ad Litem Training, Far West Texas Regional Public Defender Oversight Committee Meetings, and the graduation of a youth with experience in foster care at Corpus Christi A&M University;
- Participated in a Families First Pilot Meeting and follow-up interview;
- Continued work as Treasurer for NCJFCJ and attended Executive Committee Meetings;
- Served as feature presenter at the American Bar Association/NCJFCJ Webinar Judicial Leadership to Ensure Educational Success for Children Who Experience the Child Welfare System; and
- Participated in the Texas CASA Distinguished Speaker Series.



OFFICE OF COURT ADMINISTRATION (OCA)
VISITING JUDGE SUPPORT

The Texas Family Code authorizes presiding judges of the administrative judicial regions to appoint associate judges with expertise related to child abuse and neglect to preside in child welfare cases. In FY2023, over 193 child welfare cases were heard by visiting associate judges contracted with OCA to sit by assignment when active Child Protection Court (CPC) associate judges were absent from the bench for reasons that are enumerated in statute. Without funding for visiting associate judges to provide docket coverage, these cases would have been reset until the sitting associate judge was available, resulting in case processing delay. The grant funds allowed for coverage by judges who have extensive knowledge of child welfare proceedings and statutory timelines as well as a clear understanding of the complexity of such cases, thus promoting timely permanency.



HOUSTON PEARLS FOUNDATION
PEARLS COURT

The PEARLS (Preparation, Esteem, Achievement, Resiliency, Learning, Strength & Stamina) program includes developing, supporting, and facilitating curriculum for youth and young adults in foster care twice a month. Each young person is provided a mentor within the community as a role model. The youth take an active role in participation by giving back to the community in a Day-of-Service and by enhancing their own self-esteem and goals in a Day-of-Opportunity.

The program has successfully achieved its initial goals of addressing teenage pregnancy, increasing high school graduation rates, and enhancing placement stability among participants. Notably, there have been no pregnancies among the participants, high school graduation rates have increased, placement changes have decreased, and three girls have enrolled in college. The program attributes its success to the establishment of mentor relationships, regular programming that includes shared meals and activities, as well as outings in the community. These activities fostered a sense of normalcy, bonding, and engagement among the participants and mentors. Additionally, the program addressed logistical challenges by relocating its programming to a more accessible and secure community center, and by partnering with local restaurants to provide shared meals for large groups.

DFPS Partnership

Children’s Commission staff continue to participate in many Department initiatives including participation by the Executive Director and Senior Jurist in Residence on the Public-Private Partnership, the advisory body for the rollout of Community-Based Care in Texas.

As of January 2023, the Children’s Commission participates in monthly calls with DFPS and the Administration for Children and Families to prepare for the federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR). Texas is expected to participate in CFSR Round 4 in 2024. The Children’s Commission continues to provide support in the CFSR process and actively participates by providing a forum for collaboration with legal stakeholders and encouraging judges and attorneys throughout the state to participate in the review process. At the Data Committee meeting on August 31, 2023, DFPS presented information regarding the CFSR process as well as the September 15, 2023 Children’s Commission meeting.



Texas Family First

During FY2023, the Children’s Commission staff met on a monthly basis with DFPS staff from Investigations, Family-Based Safety Services, Prevention and Early Intervention, Data and Evaluation, Legal, and Finance departments on the Texas Family First (TFF) Pilot Implementation Steering Committee. During meetings, DFPS provided updates on steps taken to identify the target population served and implement the TFF pilot. At the July 2023 Child Protection Court Convening, a judge participating in the TFF Pilot presented on a panel entitled “Moving Upstream: Early Intervention Court Liaisons and Texas Family First Pilots.” DFPS expanded the eligibility criteria for families who can receive services under the TFF program. On August 4, 2023, the Commission facilitated a meeting between DFPS staff and attorneys practicing in the TFF pilot areas. The Single Source Continuum Contractor representatives provided insight into their evidence-based programs and attorneys had the opportunity to ask questions about the pilot. At the end of FY2023, there were over 100 families actively engaged in the pilot and many families successfully completed TFF in the four DFPS regions participating in the pilot.



Hon. Selina Mireles, 4th and 5th Administrative Judicial Regions Child Protection Court, is filmed for the Texas CASA video series.



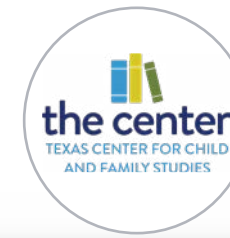
Hon. Rob Hofmann, 452nd District Court, is filmed for the Texas CASA video series.

Texas CASA Videos: Roles in Child Welfare Cases

Texas CASA partnered with the Children’s Commission to develop new resources to explain the role of the professionals involved in a child welfare case. Designed for parents, children, youth, and kinship caregivers, five handouts and accompanying videos are available in both English and Spanish and can be used as a set or individually: Judge, Guardian ad Litem or CASA Volunteer, Attorney ad Litem, Parent’s Attorney, and Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) Attorney. The resources are available on the Texas CASA website, and both the English and Spanish versions of the video can be found on the Texas CASA YouTube channel.

Related Resource Letter:

- 2/21/23: New Videos for Families Involved in the Child Welfare System



TEXAS CENTER OF CHILD AND FAMILY STUDIES
(THE CENTER)
TRAUMA INFORMED CARE

The trauma-informed courts project was designed as a partnership between the Children’s Commission and the Texas Center for Child and Families Studies to support the implementation of trauma-informed and trauma-responsive practices that promote child and family safety within the Texas court system as well as improved permanency and well-being outcomes for children and families. Project goals included supporting development and implementation of customized trauma-informed court projects, facilitating shared learning by convening the cohort of court teams, and documenting implementation successes and challenges to build a body of information that can be used to enhance court practices across the state.

Four court-site teams continued for a second year to further support court process and community expansion, project implementation, and data collection. Judicial leads for these teams were Judge Linda Dunson (309th Family District Court); Judge Angela Graves-Harrington (246th Family District Court); Judge Andrea James (2nd Region Child Protection Court No. 2); and Judge Cheryl Vaughan (Child Protection Court Eighth Region North). Projects selected and implemented by the court teams included exploring phased services plans, building collaboration and shared learning through community trainings, and creating improved guidance for parents and children about the court and child welfare case processes. Project sites maintained routine check-ins with the project oversight team.

A session on the Trauma-Informed Courts project was presented at the March 2023 NCJFCJ Juvenile Justice Conference in Dallas, Texas and included video spotlights from the leading judges of each project site along with discussion about the project’s challenges and successes.

The court teams overcame challenges associated with implementing trauma-informed practices in adversarial legal settings. By fostering collaboration, embracing a strength-based and trauma-responsive approach, and centering the family’s voice, the teams reported improved teamwork and shared understanding. Through collaboration with the Children’s Commission and the Center, the court teams gained skills and tools necessary for success, including assistance with data collection, surveys, and information sharing. Two in-person cohort convenings further enhanced cross-court learning and sustained trauma-informed practices. Overall, the Trauma-Informed Courts Project demonstrated successful implementation and a commitment to ongoing improvement and expansion of trauma-informed practices within the Texas court system.



Tribal/State Collaboration

The Commission remains committed to strengthening Tribal/State partnerships and collaborating with Tribal partners to provide education on the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). Commission staff participate in the ICWA Constituency Group monthly calls organized by the Capacity Building Center for Courts (CBCC). Additionally, Commission staff meet regularly with the Tribal liaison from DFPS State Office and Tribal partners, including building connections with ICWA Tribal liaisons from Tribes based outside Texas.

The Commission provided a communique regarding the ruling of the Supreme Court of the United States in the *Haaland v. Brackeen* case on the constitutionality of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). Information on ICWA was also updated in the Commission's Texas Child Protection Law Bench Book.

Equity Workgroup

In FY2023, the Equity Workgroup adjusted the meeting schedule to convene every other month to support shared learning and advance workgroup projects. The Equity Workgroup continues to work on data-based training and resources. Several members of the workgroup also attended the Travis County Child Welfare Race Equity Collaborative Convening on August 3-4, 2023. Additionally, during FY2023, Equity Workgroup members remained actively engaged in the Casey Family Programs' Race Equity Collaborative.

Related Resource Letter:

- 6/30/2023: U.S. Supreme Court Upholds the Indian Child Welfare Act

Youth Voice & Normalcy

During FY2023, education and incorporation of normalcy was embedded into all areas of the Commission's work. Young adults with experience in the child welfare system lent their voices and experiences to multiple projects at the Commission.

On October 20, 2022, Children's Commission highlighted the importance of youth voice by partnering with young adults to develop and present a live webcast entitled "[Enhancing the Experience of Children & Youth in Court: How Judges and Attorneys Can Prepare and Support Youth Attending Court.](#)" On October 26, 2022 the Child Welfare Judges Conference included a panel of young adults with experience in foster care to educate judges about considerations for serving youth aging out of care and transitioning to adulthood.

At the September 21, 2023 Foster Care & Education Summit, young adults participated in a judicially-led panel discussion of their experience in foster care with education and normalcy. The Commission partnered with the Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) to develop a training as a collaboration between youth with lived experience and the Judicial Workgroup on Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) on the topic of CSEC and child welfare.

"This was the best presentation I have witnessed for youth in court! I look forward to getting the recording and sharing it with others!"

Qualified Residential Treatment Programs

Following the 87th Regular Legislative Session, the Children's Commission partnered with DFPS to develop a plan for implementation of Senate Bill (SB) 1575. The result was the creation of a workgroup to examine the oversight of and best practices related to Residential Treatment Center (RTC) placements, including placements in Qualified Residential Treatment Programs (QRTPs). On October 1, 2022, the Children's Commission submitted a [comprehensive report](#) to the Legislature pursuant to SB 1575 regarding best practices and recommendations related to the legal process. SB 1930 passed during the 88th Regular Legislative Session and contains the recommendations from the SB 1575 Workgroup regarding procedures for placing a child in an RTC or QRTP, including attorney and guardian ad litem duties as well as court requirements.

Related Resource Letter:

- 10/4/2022: Recently Released Reports on Senate Bill 1578, Children's Mental Health, and Senate Bill 1575

Foster Care & Education

During FY2023, the Foster Care & Education Committee continued to develop projects for the workgroups in the following priority areas: caregiver supports; data and information sharing; and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). On March 24, 2023, Senior Jurist in Residence Hon. Rob Hofmann presented Educational Success for Texas Students in Foster Care to a national audience through the American Bar Association.

The Every Student Succeeds Act Workgroup completed and published its [School of Origin one-pager](#). This one-pager provided resource guidance and various scenario explanations about when a student in foster care may change residential or school placements. TEA, DFPS, and the Children’s Commission also developed accompanying foster care guidance related to ESSA Points of Contact, Education Best Interest Decision Making, and Dispute Resolution Guidance.

TEA, DFPS, and the Children’s Commission presented on creating a path from K-12 to Higher Education at the 2023 Education Reach for Texans Conference in San Marcos, Texas.



Children’s Commission staff Jamie Bernstein, Chelsea Martinez, and Aimee Corbin attend the Foster Care & Education Summit.

TEA, DFPS, and the Children’s Commission hosted a Foster Care and Education Summit in the Houston area on September 21, 2023. Approximately 200 educators and child welfare professionals attended to receive training on ESSA-related issues such as dispute resolution, transportation, and designated points of contact. Commission staff provided a presentation on Foster Care & the Law: The Rights of Children in Foster Care to an engaged audience.

Children’s Mental Health

The Children’s Commission participated in Texas State Agency Collaborative Listening Sessions on July 8, 10, and 12, 2023 alongside DFPS, HHSC, TEA, JCMH, and other state agency representatives. The listening sessions centered around what is working well, what is not working, experiences with learning about and getting behavioral health services for youth, and ideas on how to improve behavioral health services for youth in Texas. The Children’s Commission also participates in the HHSC Children’s Mental Health Strategic Plan Subcommittee.

Related Resource Letters:

- 7/6/2023: DFPS Listening Session on Behavioral Health Services
- 12/9/2022: Behavioral Health Resources from DFPS



TEXAS FOSTER YOUTH JUSTICE PROJECT HOTLINE DATA COLLECTION

The data collection project aimed to maintain a statewide hotline, email address, and website to address inquiries related to information, referrals, and legal representation for current and former foster youth. Key objectives included outreach to foster youth, tracking inquiries, and analyzing collected data. Outreach activities involved community presentations, disseminating informational materials, and direct contact with various entities. The project conducted 17 presentations, distributed brochures and posters, and developed new resources such as a printable brochure on aging out of foster care.

The project tracked inquiries through a paralegal position funded by the grant. Data collection involved creating a new tool within the existing case management system, Legal Server, to record information from calls, emails, and website inquiries. The paralegal collected data, and a data collection report summarized and analyzed the information. Despite a staff transition, the project adapted with minimal time loss. The collected data, consisting of 230 inquiries, was examined to inform internal service delivery, advocacy efforts, and the development of informational materials. The project’s data collection efforts provide valuable insights into the legal issues and barriers faced by youth aging out of foster care, enabling proactive court support and addressing systemic problems. The grant’s impact is evident in the project’s ability to assist a population that is often challenging to reach, with future plans emphasizing ongoing support, improvement, and expansion of services.



TEXAS NETWORK OF YOUTH SERVICES (TNOYS)
COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN AND
YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

In FY2023, TNOYS provided youth-informed training to judges and lawyers across Texas, focusing on understanding, preventing, identifying, and responding to commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth (CSEC/CSEY) within the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. TNOYS led the program that involved the development and delivery of a distinct youth-informed and youth-led training that considered the unique roles of judges and lawyers in CSEC/CSEY prevention and response. Leveraging a network of over 80 youth-serving providers, TNOYS incorporated best practices and the latest research in the field while actively involving youth and young adults (YYA) with lived experiences to ensure the training addressed their needs and priorities.

The training focused on areas such as recognizing signs and risk factors of exploitation, employing evidence-based strategies for youth-adult partnership and engagement, understanding complex trauma, and increasing knowledge of available resources. TNOYS used a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) model, involving YYA in the research and analysis phase, resulting in a comprehensive and youth-centered approach. The trainings were received by approximately 92 judges during the Child Welfare Judges Conference and approximately 800 professionals across 19 training events. TNOYS plans to continue its work in preventing and addressing CSEC and CSEY through ongoing training, technical assistance, and research initiatives, demonstrating a commitment to systemic reform and capacity building within the legal community and youth services stakeholders.

Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children Judicial Workgroup

In FY2023, the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children Judicial Workgroup focused on developing training opportunities for child welfare professionals and the legal community to educate and spread awareness on the identification, treatment efforts, and recovery process for children exposed to commercial sexual exploitation and the child welfare system.

Commission staff also continued collaboration by participating in the following initiatives:

- TEA School-Aged Human Trafficking Prevention and Awareness Statewide Implementation Workgroup
- OAG Texas Human Trafficking Prevention Task Force
- DFPS three-day Light the Way statewide training
- ACF Region VI Human Trafficking Workgroup

Judicial Workgroup on Capacity

In response to the growing numbers of children without placement (often referred to as CWOP), the Children's Commission convenes a Judicial Workgroup on Capacity. The workgroup met on a monthly basis during the legislative session but typically meets on a bimonthly basis to provide a forum for judges from jurisdictions throughout the state to brainstorm effective approaches to identifying placement options for children. The group is now referred to as the Judicial Child Welfare Forum to reflect the broad array of issues discussed.

Assistance to Local Jurisdictions

On August 16, 2023, the Children's Commission partnered with the Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services to present information about Community-Based Care to the judges with child welfare jurisdiction in Harris County. The purpose of the convening was to inform the judiciary about the rollout of community-based care as Houston will make this transition in 2024 which will impact capacity throughout the entire state.

Dual Status Task Force (Child Welfare & Juvenile Justice)

The Child Protection Court dual status pilot continued in FY2023 in the Child Protection Court of the Rio Grande Valley West, the Child Protection Court of Taylor County, and the Child Protection Court of the Hill Country. Researchers at the University of Texas at San Antonio distributed a survey in April 2022 to the participating stakeholders to assess the impact of the pilot in each jurisdiction. On July 28, 2023, the dual status pilot court judges presented at the biennial Child Protection Court Convening hosted by the Children's Commission and OCA. The panelists discussed some of the challenges and benefits of the pilot and offered practical tips for judges considering a dual status approach to improve outcomes for these youth.



Legal Practice & Process

“Everyone deserves a second chance; it’s refreshing to be in a court where everyone understands what the clients are dealing with.”

Amplifying Information, Magnifying Voices

The Legal Practice & Process Committee focuses on assisting trial and appellate courts, judges, and legal advocates to ensure that children, youth, and families involved with child welfare experience a legal system in which they have access to justice and their rights are protected.

The Legal Practice and Process Committee met on October 14, 2022 and January 20, April 28, and August 25, 2023.

Appellate Practice

The Appellate Representation Workgroup was created in FY2023 to identify the needs of appellate attorneys and develop projects to enhance the quality of appellate representation. The workgroup identified presenting appellate-focused training, developing a one-page bench/attorney card on post-judgment representation, and adding appellate information to the Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing Parents and Children as priority projects for 2023. The workgroup is also collaborating with the Appellate Law Section to help recruit attorneys to take child welfare appeals.

Children's Materials

The Children's Materials Workgroup, in collaboration with the TNOYS Young Adult Leadership Council (YALC), completed two videos explaining the attorney-client relationship. The videos feature young adults with lived experience in foster care discussing their experiences with their attorneys and articulating basic facts about the attorney-client relationship. [Part 1](#) of the videos explains the attorney-client relationship and [Part 2](#) explains what options youth have if they have a problem with their attorney. The videos are available on the TNOYS YouTube Channel and have received over 500 views.



Screenshot from the *Your Lawyer Works for You!* Video Series

Children's Commission hosted a live webcast on October 22, 2023 entitled "Enhancing the Experience of Children & Youth in Court: How Judges and Attorneys Can Prepare and Support Youth Attending Court." The webcast featured a panel with a judge, attorney, and leaders with lived experience in the child welfare system. The discussion focused on the importance of youth voice and best practices for preparing a child client for a court appearance, including speaking with the judge about their needs and goals.

Important Information for Incarcerated Parents Involved in Child Welfare Cases

RIGHTS OF INCARCERATED PARENTS IN CPS CASES

If you have been notified that there is a Child Protective Services (CPS) case involving your child, it is important for you to know that you still have rights. Unless a court orders otherwise, your rights are equal to a non-incarcerated parent. However, your ability to participate in the case is still subject to your institution's policies and procedures regarding visitation, legal mail, services availability, and court attendance.

You have a right to a lawyer to help you with your CPS case.

You have the right to be a part of the case.

You have the right to information about your child.

Incarcerated Parents

The Children's Commission Legal Representation Committee developed a [resource poster](#) highlighting the rights of incarcerated parents in CPS cases. This resource identifies basic rights in child welfare legal proceedings and explains how parents can participate in the case and in their child's life, subject to the rules of the institution where they are incarcerated. The Commission collaborated with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) to have the poster regularly published in *The Echo*, the monthly Windham School District newspaper that is available in TDCJ facilities. Commission staff is also working with county and municipal organizations to ensure the poster is available in other correctional facilities.

FATHER'S RIGHTS IN CPS CASES

You have the right to be treated fairly when the court decides how and when you get to see your child.

You have a right to be there when decisions are made about your child.

You have the right to attend every CPS meeting and court hearings involving your child.

You have a right to have a say in where your child lives.

If your child was not removed from you, the court must place the child with you unless that would put the child in danger.

If the court doesn't place your child with you, the court must treat you equally when deciding where the child lives, including considering placement with your side of the family.

Fathers' Rights

The Children's Commission Legal Representation Committee completed a resource pamphlet highlighting fathers' rights in a CPS case. Modeled after the Commission's "What Does a Parent's Attorney Do?" pamphlet, the resource informs fathers of their basic rights in child welfare legal proceedings and explains the different legal statuses for fathers. The [Fathers' Rights Pamphlet](#) is available on the Children's Commission website and printed copies were made available at the October 2022 Child Welfare Judges Conference.



OFFICE OF COURT ADMINISTRATION (OCA) NOTICE & ENGAGEMENT

The Notice and Engagement tool in Child Protection Court Management System (CPCMS) involves using non-confidential case data to provide email and/or SMS notice to users about upcoming child welfare hearings. The number of Notice and Engagement system users continues to increase. During FY2023, 152 new users signed up through the Notification and Engagement system to receive hearing notifications, bringing the total number of users to 2,228. CPS caseworkers account for 60% of the new users for FY2023 and 38% of total users. Hearing notifications were sent for 8,310 hearings with a total of 23,316 notifications sent.

OCA created an Application Programming Interface (API) that will allow courts other than those using the CPCMS to upload their hearing data into the system. The goal of the API is to expand the hearing notification tool to all courts hearing child welfare cases in order to provide parties with up-to-date hearing information and to provide courts with an alternate means of notification free of charge. OCA is working to identify jurisdictions interested in adopting the API in the future.

Standards of Representation

In FY2023, the Children's Commission created the Child Welfare Law Standards of Representation Committee which is charged with drafting proposed child welfare attorney practice standards. Hon. Roy Ferguson of the 394th District Court is the Committee Chair, Hon. Debra Lehrmann of the Supreme Court of Texas is the Executive Chair, and Professor Stephanie Tang of the Baylor University School of Law serves as the Reporter. Committee members were selected for their experience practicing child welfare law and represent the diversity of jurisdictions across Texas. The committee conducted a detailed review of the American Bar Association Standards, the National Association of Council for Children Standards, as well as state standards for the twenty states which have adopted child welfare standards of representation. The committee determined a framework for standards by dividing representation into six phases: establishing the attorney-client relationship, the investigatory phase, the preparatory phase, the conciliatory phase, the adversarial phase, and the appellate and post-judgment phase.

Legislative Matters

The Children's Commission tracked legislation during the 88th Regular Legislative Session related to the practice of child welfare law as bills moved through the legislative process. The Children's Commission hosted a live [88th Regular Legislative Session Update webinar](#) which examined House and Senate bills related to child welfare law, including the subject of each bill, the statutes affected, and the effective date. The Children's Commission also published the 88th Regular Legislative Session Report which lists the legislative changes by bill number and by statute, including changes to the Texas Family Code.

- Commission Bills Tracked: 364
- Child Welfare Bills Passed: 57
- Resource Papers Submitted: 11
- Legislative Presentations Provided: 7
- Invited Testimony Given: 3

Child Welfare Legal Specialization

The 2022 Texas Board of Legal Specialization [Child Welfare Board Certification](#) Exam was held on October 3-4, 2022. The exam was administered over two days to account for public health considerations and the safety of examinees and staff. Twenty-three attorneys were newly certified as child welfare law experts in December 2022. The Children's Commission reimbursed exam fees for 11 attorneys who passed the exam and became certified in FY2023.

Related Resource Letters:

- 9/1/2023: New Legislation Effective Today
- 3/8/2023: TBLS Now Accepting Applications for Board Certification in Child Welfare Law for 2023
- 6/22/2023: Webinar: 88th Regular Legislative Session Update

The Texas Child Welfare Law Bench Book is available in these formats:

PDF for Print Online & Interactive LawBox App

Texas Child Protection Law Bench Book

The [Texas Child Welfare Law Bench Book](#) was updated in October 2022. The revised version included updates throughout, as well as new chapters regarding dual status youth and required participation, also referred to as court ordered services. The resource is available on the Commission’s Texas Child Welfare Law Bench Book webpage as a free, downloadable PDF for print and also as an interactive resource through LawBox.

Mediation

The Mediation Workgroup participated in a discussion with the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) to help identify points of interest for data collection on mediation in the second phase of the NCSC’s study of virtual court practices. Several members of the workgroup volunteered to participate in the second phase of the study, which began data collection in December 2022, and provided additional feedback on the final proposed mediation survey created by the NCSC and Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) language necessary for participation in the study.



TEXAS LEGAL SERVICES CENTER (TLSC)
FAMILY HELPLINE

With Children’s Commission funding, the Family Helpline fills the niche of providing legal information regarding child welfare to parents and families who do not have access to court-appointed attorneys, and where free or affordable legal representation is not readily available.

In FY2023, the Family Helpline in Texas fulfilled its primary objective of providing legal information, referrals, and education related to Child Protective Services and child safety, responding promptly to 2,145 calls, impacting 2,392 adults and 3,814 children. The inquiries spanned various aspects of child welfare cases, including investigations, conservatorship, legal representation, parent-child visitation, child’s best interest, safety plans, and substance use. Approximately 58% of callers had open CPS cases, reflecting the helpline’s role in addressing complex legal situations involving child abuse, neglect, domestic violence, poverty, and substance abuse.

The Family Helpline demonstrated a broad reach, serving callers from 158 different counties in Texas, addressing the legal needs of parents, non-parent relatives, friends, unrelated individuals, and children themselves. The Helpline’s success extended beyond providing immediate assistance, as it actively participated in community education, outreach, and collaboration with organizations such as TexasLawHelp.org.

Additionally, Texas Family Helpline staff assisted in the creation of several resources and participated in various presentations related to family and child welfare law. For example, the Helpline created a video series explaining legal issues in family law and CPS cases and finalized a Reinstatement of Parental Rights Guide. Family Helpline staff also presented at the Hill Country CASA Ad Litem Seminar, provided training to kinship navigators at DePelchin Children’s Center on Family Law 101 topics, and recorded an episode on the Texas CASA “CASA on the Go.”



Training

"It was a great conference. The trainings affirmed that our court is headed in the right direction. My battery was recharged."

Driving Success

The Training Committee focuses on overseeing and developing judicial and legal training efforts at all levels of practice that identify and promote best practices to improve outcomes and establish and maintain a well-informed judiciary and bar.

The Training Committee met on October 13, 2022, and January 19, April 25, and August 28, 2023.

Enhancing the Experience of Children & Youth Involved in Child Welfare Cases

On October 22, 2022, the Children's Commission presented "Enhancing the Experience of Children & Youth in Court: How Judges and Attorneys Can Prepare and Support Youth Attending Court." The discussion focused on the importance of youth voice and best practices for preparing a child client for a court appearance, including speaking with the judge about their needs and goals. The webcast featured a panel with a judge, attorney, and leaders with lived experience in the child welfare system. The panel included Hon. Delia Gonzales, Associate Judge of the Dallas County Child Protection and Permanency Court; Lori Duke, Co-Director and Clinical Professor at the Children's Rights Clinic at the University of Texas School of Law; Betty Bajika, former Young Adult Leadership Council Member, Texas Network of Youth Services; Leroy Berrones Soto, Project Coordinator, Child Welfare Reviews Project, JBS International, Inc.; and Ryan Harris, former Conservatorship Caseworker, Department of Family and Protective Services.

Scan the QR code for access to the YouTube On-Demand MCLE Videos Playlist.



Webcasts

88th Regular Legislative Session Update

On July 18, 2023, the Commission presented “88th Regular Legislative Session Update,” which provided an update on bills affecting child welfare law that passed during the 88th Regular Legislative Session, the statutes affected, and their effective dates.

Overview of Treatment Foster Family Care

In collaboration with DFPS, the Commission presented “[Overview of Treatment Foster Family Care](#)” on May 17, 2023. The webcast provided judges, attorneys, and child advocates with an overview of the Treatment Foster Family Care (TFFC) model, goals, and benefits, and explained the difference between a TFFC home and a traditional foster home, the placement process, eligibility criteria, and how it relates to the judicial system.

Reevaluating Reasonable Efforts Findings

On August 17, 2023, the Commission hosted a webinar entitled “[Reevaluating Reasonable Efforts](#).” Children’s Commission Jurist in Residence Hon. Piper McCraw; Legal Representation Director Dylan Moench; and Staff Attorneys Renée Castillo-De La Cruz and Aimee Corbin provided an overview of federal and state law on reasonable efforts and included a fictional scenario to demonstrate reasonable efforts followed by a Q&A discussion.

“Thank you very much for giving us attorneys who handle CPS cases the opportunity to attend these fascinating and informative webinars!”

Related Resource Letters:

- 9/14/2023: Now Available: Trauma History and Psychotropic Medications: What Judges and Attorneys Need to Know, Replay and Materials
- 9/12/2023: Children’s Commission Webcast: Enhancing the Experience for Parents Involved in Child Welfare Cases

Trauma History and Psychotropic Medications: What Judges and Attorneys Need to Know

The webinar entitled “[Trauma History and Psychotropic Medication: What Judges and Attorneys Need to Know](#)” was hosted by the Commission on September 7, 2023. Hon. Delia Gonzales, Associate Judge of the Dallas County Child Protection and Permanency Court, moderated a discussion with panelists Dr. Anu Partap, Medical Director of Health Equity at Cook Children’s Healthcare System in Fort Worth, and parent and child attorneys Tiffany Crouch-Bartlett and Michelle Latray. The webinar addressed the importance of having a patient’s complete trauma history to assist health professionals with providing proper medical diagnoses and treatment plans, which may lead to increased well-being and permanency outcomes for children. Duties, responsibilities, and best practice tips for attorneys representing parents and children in child welfare cases when psychotropic medications are or may be prescribed to a child were also covered.



Scholarships

The Children’s Commission administers various judicial and attorney scholarship opportunities throughout the fiscal year. For all scholarships, the Children’s Commission determines scholarship criteria and deploys an application process that includes pre- and post-conference evaluations to identify the knowledge gained and new or updated practices which attendees plan to implement. The surveys also inquire about topics of interest to inform planning for future trainings. All attorney applicants must represent DFPS or take appointments on a child welfare docket, be in good standing with the State Bar of Texas and with their primary judge, and commit to completing a post-event survey from the Commission. A total of \$72,500 was allocated for scholarship recipients.



Attendees at the TDCAA Crimes Against Children Conference.

Advanced Child Protection Law Conference | \$15,000

The Commission provided 29 registration scholarships for qualified attorneys to attend the 5th Annual Advanced Child Protection Law Course, hosted by TexasBarCLE and the Child Protection Law Section of the State Bar of Texas (CPL) on March 23-24, 2023, in Houston, Texas and 24 registration scholarships for the webcast replay on May 2-3, 2023. Additionally, the Commission offered 11 registration scholarships for the separate Child Protection Law 101 Course, which was featured as a pre-conference event at the 5th Annual Advanced Child Protection Law Course on the morning of March 23 in Houston and on May 1 via webcast replay.

Advanced Family Law Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop | \$10,000

The 2023 Advanced Family Law Conference Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop was held on August 9, 2023, in San Antonio. Commission Legal Representation Director Dylan Moench co-presented a legislative update at the Workshop with CPL CLE Committee Chair Kellie Price. The Commission awarded registration scholarships for 21 qualified attorneys to attend the live one-day workshop and 29 scholarships for subsequent replays.

National Association of Counsel for Children Annual Conference | 10,000

The National Association of Counsel for Children’s 46th National Child Welfare Law Conference was held in a dual-format, with the in-person conference on August 10-12, 2023 in Minneapolis, Minnesota and a virtual conference on September 20-22, 2023. The Commission allocated \$10,000 to provide scholarships to qualified Texas judges and attorneys to attend the annual conference in Minneapolis. Eight scholarships were awarded to cover registration costs and assist with conference-related travel expenses.

“I learned so much and really enjoyed the variety of seminars to attend. It was great being able to talk to attorneys from across the country and get a different perspective on ways to help protect children in the Department’s care.”



National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) Conference attendees: Renée Castillo-De La Cruz (Children’s Commission), Hon. Angela Graves-Harrington, Hon. Rob Hofmann, Hon. Cheryl Vaughan, and Hon. Leigh Matthews Rodriguez.

National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges Conferences | \$58,600

In 2023, the Children’s Commission offered scholarships to the NCJFCJ Juvenile Justice Conference and 86th Annual Conference for judges hearing civil child welfare cases. The NCJFCJ Juvenile Justice Conference was held on March 19-22, 2023 in Dallas, Texas. The conference focused on juvenile justice, trafficking, child welfare, court best practices, innovative solutions, and judicial self-care. The Commission awarded 29 scholarships to judges hearing child welfare or juvenile justice cases. The NCJFCJ’s 86th Annual Conference was held on July 16-19, 2023, in Baltimore, Maryland. The conference featured plenary sessions on family law, juvenile justice, child welfare, and family violence. The Commission awarded 8 judicial scholarships to this event. Each judicial scholarship to the 2023 NCJFCJ conferences allowed for funds to cover registration and eligible travel-related expenses.

“The conference is always a great opportunity to network with judges from other states. They are always so helpful and happy to discuss issues, provide ideas, and insights, etc.”

Texas District and County Attorney Association Training | \$12,500

The Texas District and County Attorney Association (TDCAA) hosted its biennial Prosecuting Crimes Against Children Conference on April 11-14, 2023, in San Antonio. In partnership with the Children’s Commission, TDCAA provided 12 hours of child welfare law related CLE as part of the conference breakout sessions held on April 12-13. The Children’s Commission allocated \$10,000 to provide registration scholarships for 28 attorneys representing DFPS to attend the conference.

Additionally, the Commission allocated \$2,500 to cover registration costs for new attorneys currently representing DFPS to complete the TDCAA “Fundamentals of Child Welfare Law” 6-hour online course that was produced in partnership with the Commission in 2022.

Attorney Training



Jurist in Residence Hon. Piper McCraw welcomes Trial Skills Training participants.



TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY & PROTECTIVE SERVICES (DFPS)
ATTORNEY TRAINING SUPPORT

The DFPS Regional Attorney Training was held in San Antonio on October 25-26, 2022. The Children’s Commission provided funding in the form of a \$12,000 grant to support this training. The conference provided approximately 8-10 hours of MCLE credit and an additional 4 hours of training for DFPS legal support staff and hands-on skills practice for new attorneys. Those sessions that are accredited for MCLE are recorded and made available for DFPS attorneys who cannot attend live and district and county attorneys. This was the first opportunity for the Department’s regional attorneys to gather together in-person for training, to work on team building, and to share ideas since 2019.

“Fantastic conference. It was my first in-person and I came back re-energized in the work.”

Trial Skills Training

The Children’s Commission hosted the 15th iteration of the [Trial Skills Training](#) (TST) in September 2023. The 3-day course included a one-day Zoom “Pretrial” on September 13, 2023, followed by two days of in-person “Trial” on September 20-21, 2023, in San Antonio. Seventeen attorneys participated in this three-day intensive and interactive training which consisted of 18.25 hours of MCLE, including 1.50 hours of ethics, and included additional pre-recorded material, providing up to the allotted annual 3.0 hours of self-study MCLE credit.

Child Protection Law Section

The State Bar’s Child Protection Law (CPL) Section provides high-quality training to judges and attorneys practicing child welfare law by providing MCLE and training opportunities to their membership, hosting an Annual Advanced Child Protection Law CLE, and planning the Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop curriculum for the Annual Advanced Family Law CLE held each August. The Commission collaborates with the CPL Section to connect on possible trainings and ways to partner together. As a part of this collaboration, a Commission staff member participates in the CPL CLE Committee.

TexasBarCLE Online Classroom

Through TexasBarCLE, the State Bar of Texas offers a number of online CLE courses in the Child Welfare Practice Area related to representation of all parties on the child welfare docket. Numerous webcasts have been archived in the Child Welfare Practice Area of the TexasBarCLE’s Online Classroom, many of which were produced by the Children’s Commission in partnership with TexasBarCLE. The topics cover issues of interest to attorneys who work in the area of child welfare, including legal representation, statutory duties, and best practices. Some or all of the content of these webcasts and archived webinars may be considered in some jurisdictions to satisfy the educational requirements for court-appointed attorneys under Texas Family Code §§ 107.004 and 107.0131.

Reasonable Efforts Academies

As part of the Commission’s research and efforts to create a Texas-specific Attorney Reasonable Efforts Academy and Judicial Reasonable Efforts Academy, Commission staff participated in the Colorado CIP Virtual Reasonable Efforts Attorney Academy on March 7-8, 2023 and in the in-person Minnesota CIP Reasonable Efforts Judicial Academy on May 18-19, 2023.

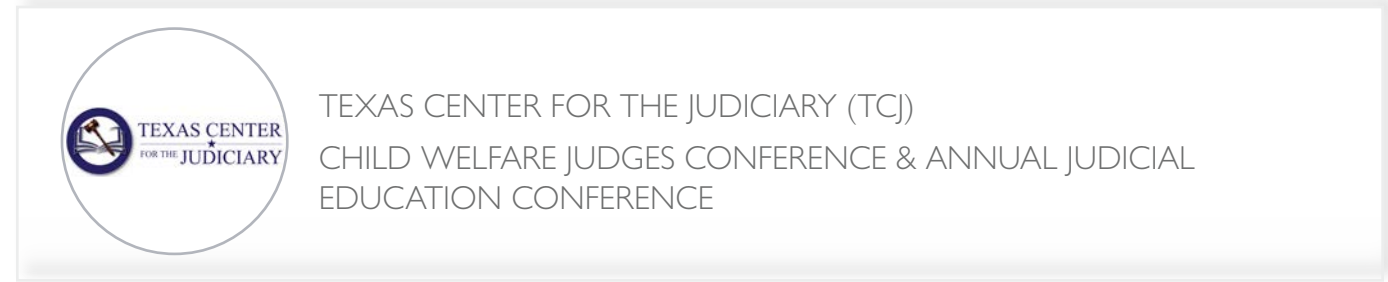
Judicial Training



Vicki Spriggs, Texas CASA CEO recognizes Hon. Gary Coley, judge of the 74th District Court with the Judicial Innovation & Leadership Award.

Child Protection Court Convening

The Commission hosted the biennial Child Protection Court Convening on July 27-28, 2023, in partnership with OCA. All 30 Child Protection Court judges and their court coordinators were invited to this training and the vast majority of them participated. This training is specifically tailored for the Child Protection Courts' needs and provided legislative and caselaw updates, child welfare hearing-related data, relevant topical presentations on immigration and prevention, as well as updates on the two ongoing CPC pilot projects (Early Intervention and Texas Family First Pilots and the Dual Status Pilot). The conference also featured a Presiding Judge panel moderated by OCA and separate moderated breakout discussions for CPC judges and for their court coordinators. Additionally, participants benefitted from a Casey Family Programs presentation that featured an interview of Judge Ernestine Gray of New Orleans by Judge Robin Sage that focused on Judge Gray's success in reducing the number of children entering foster care in New Orleans, Louisiana, judicial ethics, and the role of the court coordinator.



The Children's Commission partnered with the Texas Center for the Judiciary (TCJ) in FY2023 for two judicial training opportunities: the Commission's 15th annual Child Welfare Judges Conference and TCJ's Annual Judicial Education Conference.

The 2022 Child Welfare Judges Conference was held on October 24- 26, 2022, attended by 92 judges handling child civil child welfare cases from across the state, and featured a national keynote speaker on the intersection of children's mental health and child welfare, followed by 13 panel presentations by 46 speakers. Speakers included members of the judiciary, DFPS, OCA, and youth with lived experience. Following a DFPS panel presentation on statewide data, regional breakouts were convened for judges to meet with their local DFPS and Single Source Continuum Contractor staff to review and discuss regional data.

On the first evening of the Child Welfare Judges Conference, Texas CASA hosted their annual judicial reception and the Honorable Gary Coley, 74th District Court of McLennan County, was honored for his leadership. The conference also included the annual Collaborative Council meeting and a pre-conference for Child Protection Court judges and court coordinators (hosted by OCA).

Based on an articulated need for basic-level training for judges who sit on occasion as visiting judges on child welfare cases or handle child welfare cases, the Commission provided two breakout sessions at TCJ's Annual Judicial Education Conference on September 7, 2023. These sessions were presented by the Commission's Jurists in Residence. The first presentation covered the nuts and bolts of a child



Children's Commission Jurist in Residence Hon. Rob Hofmann presents at the TCJ Annual Judicial Education Conference.

welfare case from investigations through various final outcomes, and included a review of statutory requirements, recent legislative changes, the law on reasonable efforts, and required court findings. The second presentation shared best practices and practical tips on topical issues in child welfare cases such as engaging families in the court process, assessing child and youth medical care and mental health, making education and educational decisions, and discerning issues around placement and positive permanency. The JIRs and Commission staff also shared information about Commission resources at the conference.



Data

"Judges often hear things on the back end, but we can look at the data together and give everyone a real view of what is going on in these cases."

Data-Driven, Outcomes Focused

The Data Committee focuses on operationalizing data-driven decision-making through continuous quality improvement and an analysis of publicly available child welfare and court data to identify legal processes and practices that produce desired outcomes, as well as which practices need improvement.

The Data Committee met on November 8, 2022, and May 5 and August 31, 2023.

Child Welfare Judges Conference Data Presentation

The October 2022 Child Welfare Judges Conference included a Statewide Data Presentation, which was followed immediately by Regional Breakouts. The presentation was coordinated by Commission staff and was presented by the following DFPS staff: the Director of Research and Evaluation, the Contract Performance Manager, and the Division Administrator Child Protective Regional Systems Improvement. The 2022 Statewide Data Presentation incorporated data and trends and focused on safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes at the statewide level and how these topics intersect and impact each other. Regional Breakouts provided the opportunity for judges and their local DFPS and SSCC representatives to review and discuss their regional and county-level data together with the goal of improving outcomes for children, youth, and families. Judicial and agency feedback following these sessions was largely positive and focused on the helpful aspects of convening in person to examine the data and strengthen communication.



OFFICE OF COURT ADMINISTRATION (OCA)
CHILD PROTECTION COURT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM
(CPCMS)

Funded by the Children’s Commission and developed by OCA, CPCMS is a case management system unique to CPCs. OCA provides project management, programming, and testing services for CPCMS. OCA staffs a CPCMS Advisory Council of CPC judges, OCA staff, and Children’s Commission staff to identify and discuss various enhancements and issues. In FY2023, CPCMS managed 11,880 cases involving 19,859 children/youth in 146 Texas counties.

The CPCMS Advisory Council met regularly throughout the year to discuss planned updates and enhancements for CPCMS. The migration of CPCMS to the new server environment is complete and only a few minor issues have been reported. Updates to the CPCMS system in FY2023 included the ability to flag cases on appeal, track cases in the Texas Family First pilot program, enter additional data in the child’s education tab, the ability to run new reports and searches, a case consolidation feature, calendaring updates, new appellate fields, and the ability to flag cases involving children over 14 years old. The Advisory Council approved development of phased service plan functionality, new internal docket entries, child visit as a hearing type, Permanent Managing Conservatorship without Termination of Parental Rights search functionality, and new categories of non-parent respondents. The Council also received updates on software security and server environment changes, as well as updates on future enhancements to the system’s ability to track required documents for youth, edit or remove parties in the notice and engagement system, and track child disability data.

Data & Trends

In FY2023, OCA’s Senior Data Analyst began working on identifying data fields in CPCMS that would provide insightful case information to judges based on outputs and outcomes. An analysis of new cases and children was also conducted to identify trends across all Child Protection Courts. The Senior Data Analyst prepared a presentation based on the research performed in FY2022 related to virtual hearing observations and overall case statistics pre, during, and post Pandemic timeframe. Data used for the study included a high-level statewide overview from all CPCs in Texas, five of which were then selected for an in-depth review of CPC trends using Child Protection Case Management System (CPCMS) data, and supplemental publicly available data from DFPS.

Children’s Commission and OCA staff analyzed trends in referrals, investigations, and removals prior to and after changes to the Texas Family Code made by the 87th Texas Legislature. The Data Committee reviewed available data from DFPS, OCA, and judicial survey results from the 2022 Child Welfare Judges Conference and made a request to DFPS for additional data to clarify and add specificity. OCA Senior Data Analyst Jeff Cox, Hon. Thomas Stuckey, and DFPS Director of Research and Evaluation Sierra Fisher presented a report on these data at the February 10, 2023 Commission Meeting. The Data Committee will continue to identify trends and issues in child welfare law that would benefit from data analysis.

Virtual and Hybrid Hearings Study

The Data Analyst developed a court observation tool to collect data on court practices in virtual and hybrid court hearings. Court observations were completed in September 2022. Findings from the study were presented at the Child Protection Court Convening on July 27, 2023.

Child and Family Services Review

The Data Committee hosted a presentation by DFPS staff regarding the federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) data during its meeting on August 31, 2023. Judges were able to ask questions and offer perspective to gain a better understanding of the data and prepare for the onsite review and stakeholder interview phases of the CFSR scheduled for Spring 2024.



SUPREME COURT OF TEXAS PERMANENT JUDICIAL
COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES

Children's Commission

201 W. 14th Street

Austin, TX 78701

texaschildrenscommission.gov