



# Children's Commission

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



## Children's Commission Meeting Notebook

February 7, 2025



**Supreme Court of Texas**  
**Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth and Families**

February 7, 2025

Meeting Notebook  
Table of Contents

Meeting Agenda

Commission, Committee, and Collaborative Council Member List .....1

Minutes from November 15, 2024 Commission Meeting .....2

February 7, 2025 Report to Commission.....3

Financial Report .....4

Collaborative Council Materials.....5





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

State Bar of Texas  
Austin, Texas

February 7, 2025  
9:30 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.

### **Meeting Agenda**

- 9:30 Check-In / Networking
- 9:45 Commencement and Opening Remarks
- 10:15 Presentation on Foster Care & Higher Education
- 11:15 Children's Commission Staff Update
- 11:45 Lunch
- 12:15 Office of Court Administration Update
- 12:45 Department of Family & Protective Services Update
- 1:30 Commissioner Roundtable
- 1:50 Collaborative Council Member Announcements
- 2:00 New Business / Adjourn

Meeting Schedule: Friday, May 9, 2025 (virtual)  
Friday, September 26, 2025 (in person)  
Friday, November 14, 2025 (virtual)



**INSERT - TAB 1**



## CHILDREN'S COMMISSION MEMBERS

Hon. Debra Lehrmann, Chair	Hon. Rosie Alvarado	Hon. Susan Brown	Anne Heiligenstein
Hon. Rebeca Huddle, Deputy Chair	Karla Baker	Hon. Julie Countiss	Hon. Aurora Martinez Jones
Hon. Eva Guzman, Chair Emeritus	Erica Bañuelos	Sheila Sturgis Craig	Hon. James Mosley
Hon. Harriet O'Neill, Chair Emeritus	Chantel Bedlington	Hon. Roy Ferguson	Hon. Robbie Partida-Kipness
	Corey Benbow	Hon. Angela Graves-Harrington	Sasha Rasco
	Dr. Gary Blau	Hon. Bill Harris	Hon. Randy Shelton
			Luanne Southern
			Vicki Spriggs
			Terese Stevenson
			Hon. Thomas Stuckey
			Michelle Thompson-Janis
			Sen. Royce West

## COMMITTEE MEMBERS

<u>EXECUTIVE</u>	<u>SYSTEMS IMPROVEMENT</u>	<u>LEGAL PRACTICE &amp; PROCESS</u>	<u>TRAINING</u>	<u>DATA</u>
Hon. Debra Lehrmann, <i>Chair</i>	Hon. Rob Hofmann, <i>Chair</i>	Hon. Thomas Stuckey, <i>Chair</i>	Hon. Piper McCraw, <i>Chair</i>	Hon. Susan Brown, <i>Chair</i>
Hon. Rebeca Huddle	Hon. Rosie Alvarado	Mark Briggs	Hon. Mark Atkinson	Hon. Rosie Alvarado
Hon. Susan Brown	Chantel Bedlington	Marcus Crosby	Tymothy Belseth	Chelsea Cornelius
Hon. Rob Hofmann	Dr. Gary Blau	Cindy Dyar	Denise Campbell	Nathan Ezell
Hon. Piper McCraw	Hon. Julie Countiss	Hon. Charles Griffin	Barbara Elias-Perciful	Dr. Monica Faulkner
Hon. Thomas Stuckey	Sarah Crockett	Hollye Pickett	Hon. Angela Graves-Harrington	Hon. Delia Gonzales
	Adrianna Cuéllar Rojas	Crystal Leff-Piñon	Margaret Halpin	Elizabeth Kromrei
	Anna Saldaña Ford	Kenneth Thompson	Judy Powell	Hon. Robin Sage
<i>Staff:</i>	Hon. Leigh Mathews Rodriguez	Janet VanderZanden	Kellie Price	Vicki Spriggs
<i>Jamie Bernstein</i>	Gabriella McDonald		Hon. Tracey Scown	Sub Uppaluri
	Emily Miller	<i>Staff:</i>	Diane Sumoski	Hon. Carlos Villalon
	Hon. Robin Sage	<i>Renée Castillo-De La Cruz</i>	Hon. Elizabeth Watkins	
	Hon. Ian Spechler	<i>Brenda Kinsler</i>		<i>Staff:</i>
	Sarah Worthington		<i>Milbrey Raney</i>	<i>Jamie Bernstein</i>
			<i>Renée Castillo-De La Cruz</i>	<i>Brenda Kinsler</i>
	<i>Staff:</i>		<i>Andrea Vicencio</i>	<i>OCA Advisory:</i>
	<i>Aimee Corbin</i>			<i>Darrell Childers</i>
	<i>Jamie Bernstein</i>			<i>Alejandra Peña</i>
				<i>Charlotte Velasco</i>

## COLLABORATIVE COUNCIL MEMBERS

Erin Argue	Mike Foster	Gabriella McDonald
Kristene Blackstone	Fedora Galasso	Dr. Jill McLeigh
Andrew Brown	Barbra Grimmer	Hollie Mims
Dania Carter	Julia Hatcher	Kate Murphy
Sarah Crockett	Kasey Jackson	Kellie Pittman
De Shaun Ealoms	Kerrie Judice	Judy Powell
Barbara Elias-Perciful	Norman Ladd	Susan Ramirez
Dr. Monica Faulkner	Stephanie Madrigal	

## STAFF AND JURISTS IN RESIDENCE

Jamie Bernstein, Executive Director  
 Milbrey Raney, Assistant Director  
 Jessica Arguijo, Communications Manager  
 Renée Castillo-De La Cruz, Staff Attorney  
 Aimee Corbin, Staff Attorney  
 Tiffany Edwards, Program Specialist  
 Brenda Kinsler, Staff Attorney  
 Chelsea Martinez, Program Specialist  
 Patrick Passmore, Finance Manager  
 Willette Sedwick, Accountant  
 Andrea Vicencio, Program Specialist

Hon. Rob Hofmann, Senior Jurist in Residence  
 Hon. Piper McCraw, Jurist in Residence



**INSERT - TAB 2**



# Supreme Court of Texas Children’s Commission Meeting Minutes

**Friday, November 15, 2024  
9:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.**

## ATTENDANCE

<b>Commissioners</b>	<b>Attended</b>	<b>Did Not Attend</b>
<i>Chair</i> , Hon. Debra Lehrmann, Senior Justice, Supreme Court of Texas, Austin	✓	
<i>Deputy Chair</i> , Hon. Rebeca Huddle, Justice, Supreme Court of Texas, Austin		✓
Hon. Rosie Alvarado, Judge, 438 <sup>th</sup> District Court, San Antonio	✓	
Karla Baker, Parent Liaison, Region 4, Parent Collaboration Group Representative, Chandler	✓	
Erica Bañuelos, Associate Commissioner for Child Protective Services, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, Austin	✓	
Chantel Bedlington, Supervisor of the Kinship Navigator Program, ACH Services, Fort Worth	✓	
Corey Benbow, Chief Executive Officer, The Tax Box, Austin	✓	
Dr. Gary Blau, Senior Advisor for Children, Youth and Families; Office of the Assistant Secretary, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Houston	✓	
Hon. Susan Brown, Presiding Judge, 11 <sup>th</sup> Administrative Judicial Region, Houston		✓
Hon. Julie Countiss, Justice, First Court of Appeals, Houston	✓	
Sheila Craig, Consultant and Director (ret.), Texas Health and Human Services Commission, Austin		✓
Hon. Roy Ferguson, Judge, 394 <sup>th</sup> District Court, Alpine	✓	
Hon. Angela Graves-Harrington, Judge, 246 <sup>th</sup> Family District Court, Houston	✓	
Hon. Bill Harris, Chair, State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law Section, Paris	✓	
Anne Heiligenstein, Senior Director Strategic Consultant, Casey Family Programs, Austin	✓	
Hon. Aurora Martinez Jones, Judge, 126 <sup>th</sup> District Court, Austin	✓	
Hon. James Mosley, Judge, 316 <sup>th</sup> District Court, Stinnett	✓	
Hon. Robbie Partida-Kipness, Justice, Fifth District Court of Appeals, Dallas	✓	
Sasha Rasco, Associate Commissioner for Family Support Services, Texas Health and Human Services Commission, Austin		
Hon. Randy Shelton, Judge, 279 <sup>th</sup> Civil District Court, Beaumont	✓	
Luanne Southern, Chief Strategist for Behavioral Health, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, Austin		✓
Vicki Spriggs, Chief Executive Officer, Texas CASA, Austin		✓
Terese Stevenson, Vice President, Grants, The Rees-Jones Foundation, Dallas	✓	
Hon. Thomas Stuckey, Associate Judge, Centex Child Protection Court South, Seguin	✓	
Michelle Thompson-Janis, Director, Department of Social Services, Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas	✓	
Hon. Royce West, Texas Senate, District 23, Dallas		✓
<b>Jurists in Residence</b>		
Hon. Rob Hofmann, Judge, 452 <sup>nd</sup> District Court, Senior Jurist in Residence, Mason		✓
Hon. Piper McCraw, Judge, 469 <sup>th</sup> District Court, Jurist in Residence, McKinney	✓	
<b>Attending Committee Members &amp; Guests</b>		
Cindy Dyar, Texas Legal Services Center		
Barbara Elias-Perciful, Director, Texas Lawyers for Children		
Anna Saldaña Ford, Attorney, Belong/SJRC Texas		
Hon. Charles Griffin, Associate Judge, Gulf Coast Children's Court		
Hon. Katrina Griffith, Associate Judge, Harris County CPS Impact Court		
Brenda Kinsler, Managing Attorney Regions 4,5,6, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services		
Crystal Leff-Piñon, Senior Policy Analyst, Texas Indigent Defense Commission		
Vince Leibowitz, Legislative Director/Fiscal Analyst, Office of Senator Royce West		
Emily Miller, Attorney, Emily Miller Law Office		

Audrey O'Neill, Deputy Commissioner for Programs, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services  
Hon. Robin Sage, Judicial Engagement Team, Casey Family Programs  
Kenneth Thompson, Fatherhood Specialist, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services  
Sarah Worthington, Director, Texas Foster Youth Justice Project

**Office of Court Administration Staff**

Marcus Crosby, Children's Court Program Manager  
Megan LaVoie, Administrative Director  
Alejandra Peña, Director of Data and Research  
Charlotte Velasco, Business Analyst

**Attending Children's Commission Staff**

Jessica Arguijo, Communications Manager  
Jamie Bernstein, Executive Director  
Renée Castillo-De La Cruz, Staff Attorney  
Aimee Corbin, Staff Attorney  
Tiffany Edwards, Program Specialist  
Chelsea Martinez, Program Specialist  
Patrick Passmore, Finance Manager  
Milbrey Raney, Assistant Director  
Andrea Vicencio, Program Specialist

**CALL TO ORDER AND OPENING REMARKS**

Justice Debra Lehrmann called the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m. and welcomed everyone to the final Children's Commission meeting of 2024. Justice Lehrmann expressed her gratitude to those in attendance for participating and being such an important part of the work done on behalf of Texas children and families involved with the child welfare system.

**Adoption of September 13, 2024 Meeting Minutes**

Justice Lehrmann directed members to the September 13, 2024 Commission Meeting Minutes behind Tab 2 of the Meeting Notebook, distributed in advance of the meeting.

**ACTION:** Justice Lehrmann asked if there were any changes to the minutes as written. Hearing none, after a motion and a second the Commissioners voted to adopt the minutes for the September 13, 2024 Children's Commission meeting.

**Commission, Committee, and Staff Member Changes**

Justice Lehrmann reported that Tribal Judge Isaac Roldan rolled off the Children's Commission. She also shared that Representative Stephanie Klick roll of the commission after serving as the *ex officio* member from the Texas House since 2019. Justice Lehrmann expressed her gratitude for Judge Roldan and Rep. Klick's participation on the Children's Commission.

Justice Lehrmann announced that the following new commissioners will begin their initial three-year term:

- Hon. Angela Graves-Harrington, Judge of the 246<sup>th</sup> Family District Court in Harris County;
- Hon. Aurora Martinez Jones, Judge of the 126<sup>th</sup> District Court in Travis County;
- Hon. James Mosley, Judge of the 316<sup>th</sup> District Court in Hutchinson County; and

- Michelle Thompson-Janis, Director of the Department of Social Services for the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas.

Justice Lehrmann also shared that the following commissioners agreed to serve for a second term:

- Karla Baker, Region 4 Parent Liaison of the Parent Collaboration Group;
- Hon. Roy Ferguson, Judge of the 394<sup>th</sup> District Court;
- Anne Heiligenstein, Senior Director Strategic Consultant at Casey Family Programs;
- Terese Stevenson, Vice President of Grants at the Rees-Jones Foundation; and
- Hon. Thomas Stuckey, Judge of the Centex Child Protection Court South.

Justice Lehrmann reported that Sasha Rasco intends to serve the Commission in her new role with the Health and Human Services Commission and that Luanne Southern will also continue to serve in her new role with the Department of Family and Protective Services. Lastly, Justice Lehrmann announced that the commission created a new standing position for a Regional Presiding Judge and that Judge Susan Brown of the 11<sup>th</sup> Administrative Judicial Region will serve in this position.

Regarding committee member changes, Justice Lehrmann announced that Anna Saldaña Ford of Belong/SJRC Texas joined the Systems Improvement Committee. Marcus Crosby of OCA, Cindy Dyar of Texas Legal Services Center, Hollye Pickett of DFPS, and Kenneth Thompson of DFPS joined the Legal Practice and Process Committee. Karla Baker, Sarah Bryant, Judge Delia Gonzales, and Charlotte Velasco will roll off the Legal Practice and Process Committee. Teal de la Garza and Justice Robbie Partida-Kipness will roll off the Training Committee and Judge Michael Schneider will roll off the Data Committee.

Regarding Collaborative Council member changes, Justice Lehrmann reported that Erin Argue of Heart Galleries of Texas; Kristene Blackstone of Texas Alliance of Child & Family Services; Dr. Monica Faulkner of Texas Institute of Child and Family Wellbeing; Hollie Mims of Office of Community-Based Care; Kellie Pittman of Texas Foster Family Association; Susan Ramirez of National Angels; and Amanda Vasquez of Office of the Attorney General Child Support Division will join the Collaborative Council. Lastly, she shared that Irene Clements, Dr. Linda Garcia, Teal de la Garza, Will Francis, Sandra Hachem, Félix Herrera, Tina Hosaka, Danielle Schafer, and Ruth Anne Thornton will roll off the Collaborative Council.

## **OFFICE OF COURT ADMINISTRATION (OCA) UPDATE**

Ms. Megan LaVoie reported that the active family case clearance rate at the district level at the end of the fiscal year was up to 102 percent and that the active pending CPS cases were down 11 percent. She shared that Tarrant County is the first county to implement the Text Reminder System with 25 other counties in line to participate in the program. Ms. LaVoie offered that any additional counties which are interested in joining this program system can contact OCA.

Ms. LaVoie shared that the HB 2384 data at court level project is complete, and OCA hopes to have all data available by the end of December 2024 in order to input the data into a searchable dashboard for the courts in the future. She highlighted that the standardized protective order

form is available online and shared that a study on the efficacy of protective orders is published on the OCA website.

Ms. LaVoie announced that OCA is preparing for the upcoming legislative session and reported that a record number of bills were filed on the first day of pre-filing. Ms. LaVoie shared that an update on the court workload staffing study is due January 1, 2025. As a part of the staffing study, OCA developed a tool to help courts determine how many court staff are needed. Lastly, she shared that OCA is working on finalizing its reports on bail, guardianship, annual statistics, business courts, and judicial compensation.

## **TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY & PROTECTIVE SERVICES (DFPS) UPDATE**

Ms. Erica Bañuelos reported that DFPS is implementing enhanced training to help with staff retention, and that these efforts included input from individuals with lived experience and kinship care providers. She shared that the Parent Collaboration Group was invited to give feedback on their current training and suggest helpful resources that could be provided to staff.

DFPS also developed a new training called Parent Voice and Training that was delivered to staff from December 2023 through August 2024. Ms. Bañuelos shared that the Parent Collaboration Group created videos to help with parent engagement for incoming staff. She reported development of a separate course that focuses on listening and incorporating the parent voice into the department's work, along with valuing lived experience in the foster care system.

Ms. Bañuelos announced that in June 2024, the department collaborated with Casey Family Programs to host a Family Reunification Conference. She noted that the panels with judges and caregivers provided helpful suggestions for successful reunifications. As a result of this conference, DFPS developed individual reunification plans at the regional level and will host another conference at the end of the fiscal year to maintain their accountability on reunification.

Ms. Bañuelos reported on DFPS' partnership with the Citizens Review Team to review and provide feedback on the department's domestic violence trainings. This effort culminated in development of a domestic violence training for supervisors and program directors that will be released in October 2024. Lastly, she shared that in January 2025, DFPS will release a new Family Engagement and Parenting Support Course to teach effective engagement strategies for parents who may be hesitant to engage with staff. Ms. Bañuelos is hoping to see an increase in reunifications and staff retention in the new fiscal year as a result of these training efforts.

## **CHILDREN'S COMMISSION UPDATE**

Ms. Milbrey Raney shared that in partnership with the Texas Center for the Judiciary, the Commission hosted the 17th annual Child Welfare Judges Conference on October 21-23, 2024. Over 100 judges attended from across the state. This year, a greater number of general jurisdiction judges attended that conference by than ever before as well as some judges who were new to the bench. Overall, there were 13 presentations, including a national keynote speaker, as well as 12 concurrent regional breakout sessions where judges met with agency and Single Source Continuum Contractor (SSCC) staff to review their regional data with the goal of improving

outcomes for children, youth, and families. The conference provided 14 hours of Continuing Judicial Education, 9.25 hours of Family Violence credit hours, and 2.25 hours of ethics.

Ms. Jamie Bernstein announced that the Commission partnered with the State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law (CPL) Section to supplement Reasonable Efforts trainings with additional CLE for attorneys. The first combined Reasonable Efforts and CPL training occurred in El Paso in early November. The next training will take place in December 2024 in Midland.

Regarding recommendations to the Judicial Council, Ms. Bernstein reported that the Legislation and Policy Resource Committee pulled down one of its recommendations before the slate was presented in response to feedback from commissioners at the September commission meeting. The other seven recommendations were adopted by the Judicial Council.

Ms. Bernstein announced that the 2024 Child Protection Law Bench Book is available on the Children's Commission website and she encouraged judges handling a child welfare case who want a printed copy to contact the Commission. Lastly, she shared that Ms. Brenda Kinsler will join the Children's Commission as the newest staff attorney in December 2024.

#### **COLLABORATIVE COUNCIL MEMBER UPDATES**

Ms. Barbara Elias-Perciful with Texas Lawyers for Children announced that on January 23, 2025, there will be an 'Ask the Expert' webinar with Ana Gomez. She also shared that Texas Lawyers for Children will launch a new communication tool where judges and attorneys will have their own line of communication to ask Ms. Gomez questions about mental health. Ms. Elias-Perciful also reported that Texas Lawyers for Children's 15-hour comprehensive trauma training received family violence CJE credit.

Ms. Amanda Vasquez with the Office of the Attorney General Child Support Division announced that the office will participate in the DFPS Family-Based Safety Services conference in February 2025 and will present on several topics. She shared that her office relaunched the "Get Child Support Safely" website in October 2024 in partnership with the Texas Council on Family Violence and the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC). Finally, Ms. Vasquez reported that the office modernized their legislatively mandated parenting and paternity awareness program, which is offered throughout the state in middle and high schools. In partnership with HHSC, they expanded the initiative across the state by offering this video-based curriculum statewide.

#### **NEW BUSINESS**

Justice Lehrmann announced that the 2025 Commission Meeting schedule is as follows: February 7 (in person), May 9, (virtual), September 26 (in person), and November 14 (virtual).

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

The meeting was adjourned at 10:54 a.m.



**INSERT - TAB 3**



# REPORT TO THE COMMISSION

## February 7, 2025

### GOAL I (COLLABORATION)

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.

**Objective: Utilize the CIP funds to execute the strategies of the Supreme Court of Texas Children's Commission.**

1. Strategy: Provide regular updates to the Children's Commission and the Systems Improvement, Legal Practice & Process, Training, and Data Committees about Commission initiatives.

**Background:** The Children's Commission is a statewide, multidisciplinary collaborative body that includes high-level membership from the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of Texas government, along with child welfare partners in the non-profit and private sectors. The Children's Commission holds Commission meetings four times throughout each year. The Children's Commission receives federal grant funds which are used to operate the Commission as well as to fund meeting facilitation and travel reimbursement, training expenses and scholarships, and pass-through grants to sub-grantees. The Children's Commission also confers regularly with national organizations and other CIPs and submits annual reports to the Supreme Court of Texas and CIP strategic plans to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). Leadership from the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), Texas Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), the State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law Section, and a Regional Presiding Judge have standing positions on the Children's Commission and at least one state-level DFPS staff member serves as a member in each of the Systems Improvement, Legal Practice & Process, Training, and Data Committees.

The Children's Commission helps institutionalize collaboration by maintaining a statewide judicially-led commission, holding regular meetings that include child welfare stakeholders, partnering with the state child welfare agency, and engaging with other state and national level executives, partners, and organizations. The Children's Commission creates an environment and facilitates a space for stakeholders to collaborate, communicate, and share information on an ongoing basis. The Systems Improvement, Legal Practice & Process, Training, and Data Committees are standing committees that meet before every Children's Commission meeting and oversee related Commission projects and initiatives.

**02/07/25 Update:** The November 15, 2024 Commission meeting was held remotely and archived on the Commission's YouTube channel and website.

The Systems Improvement, Legal Practice & Process, Training, and Data Committees convened on January 8, January 24, January 23, and January 7, 2025 respectively, to discuss new and ongoing projects.

The Children's Commission continues to collaborate with various partners, including, but not limited to, the Office of the Governor, the Office of the Attorney General, the Office of Court Administration (OCA), the Judicial Commission on Mental Health, the Texas Juvenile Justice Department, the Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services (TACFS), and the Child Protection Round Table.

**Objective: Collaborate with high-level state and judicial leaders, as well as with multidisciplinary child welfare stakeholders, to maintain productive dialogue aimed at strengthening the child welfare system.**

2. Strategy: Engage with the Collaborative Council and participate in and provide forums and opportunities for child welfare stakeholders to partner and to share information about child welfare practices, policies, needs, and strengths.

**Background:** The Children’s Commission convenes an annual Collaborative Council meeting to elicit feedback from member about their areas of interest and priorities. The Children’s Commission also conducts a bi-weekly collaborative call with DFPS, OCA, and Collaborative Council members as well as numerous other calls and meetings related to Children’s Commission workgroups to provide consistent opportunities to collaborate, share timely information, and assess engagement and areas in need of improvement.

**02/07/25 Update:** Bi-weekly stakeholder calls, including updates and participation from agency staff and Collaborative Council members, continue to take place every other week. The annual Collaborative Council meeting took place on the morning of the September 13, 2024 Children’s Commission meeting and centered around member priorities areas of focus for the coming fiscal year.

**Objective: Communicate Children’s Commission areas of focus through easily accessible, user-friendly resources for judges, attorneys, and child welfare stakeholders.**

3. Strategy: Develop, maintain, and enhance usability and function of the Children’s Commission website, social media, print and online materials, and other communication mediums.

**Background:** The Children’s Commission maintains a website that features published reports, guides, announcements, scholarships, training opportunities, and resources. CIP grant applications and grant recipient information are also included on the website. Announcements such as the Resource Letter are also distributed through the Commission’s social media platforms.

**02/07/25 Update:** The Commission website is routinely updated for content and to highlight newly released reports and resources. While the website is designed for judges and attorneys, materials are often accessed by additional stakeholders such as parents and youth involved with the child welfare system. In 2025, the Commission plans to expand the website to include additional webpages to highlight materials available to parents and youth. OCA is currently implementing an update to the Content Management System (CMS) Umbraco to provide the most current version. The Children’s Commission continues to explore design functionality and work with OCA to schedule further testing and improvements. The Children’s Commission continues to research and develop utilization of social media platforms, expanding the LinkedIn business page, [Texas Children's Commission](#), and X, formerly Twitter ([@TXChildrensComm](#)).

**Objective: Confer regularly with the Department of Family and Protective Services on federal plans, audits, and requirements as mandated by federal program instructions.**

4. Strategy: Confer with DFPS on the Child and Family Service Reviews, Program Improvement Plans, Child and Family State Plans, and the Court Improvement Program Strategic Plans.

**Background:** The Children’s Commission maintains a longstanding collaboration with the state child welfare agency, DFPS. The Children’s Commission engages in ongoing participation with ACF and DFPS regarding the federally required Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP), Annual Progress and Services Report (APSR), Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) and Program Improvement Plan (PIP), and CIP Strategic Plan. The Children’s Commission also maintains an Attorney Advisory Group comprised of experienced child welfare

attorneys from across the state who have agreed to offer input and perspective on an ad hoc basis via email or conference call on matters of DFPS policy changes when requested by DFPS, gauging the impact of a legislative proposal, or providing feedback on trends or practice issues and concerns.

**02/07/25 Update:** Texas is currently undergoing Round 4 of the federal Child and Family Services Review, with increased emphasis on legal and judicial involvement in this round. On November 5, 2024, ACF presented a Final Report which addresses strengths in the Texas child welfare system as well as areas in need of improvement. Texas has 90 days from the issuance of the Final Report to submit a proposed Program Improvement Plan. To inform the development of the Program Improvement Plan, DFPS conducted breakout meetings on safety, permanency, and wellbeing with interested stakeholders from throughout the State on November 5-6, 2024; the Children's Commission staff participated in each of these meetings. The Children's Commission will continue to actively participate in the CFSR process. This includes conducting case reads as needed, providing a forum for collaboration with legal stakeholders, and encouraging judges and attorneys to participate in the development of the Program Improvement Plan. It is anticipated that there will be legal and judicial involvement in the Program Improvement Plan strategies as well as implementation.

## GOAL II (SYSTEMS IMPROVEMENT)

Execute innovative projects aimed at encouraging 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.

**Objective: Encourage judicial leadership through Jurist in Residence (JIR) support to ensure that judges are equipped to make well-informed decisions and conduct hearings that will contribute to better outcomes for children, youth, and families.**

5. Strategy: Utilize Jurists in Residence to promote best practices to the judiciary and support the legal and child welfare systems through judicial leadership and expertise.

**Background:** The Jurist in Residence position was created to foster judicial leadership and promote greater expertise among judges hearing child welfare matters. The JIR develops relationships with retired and sitting judges, and acts as a consultant, trainer, and speaker to provide expert and seasoned judicial advice on matters affecting courts and legal system handling of child welfare cases and issues. JIR activities include continued emphasis on elevating judicial leaders with expertise and interests related to prevention of removal to foster care, child and family well-being, best practices, and enhancing child and family voice in child welfare system reform.

The Children's Commission has two Jurists in Residence: Hon. Rob Hofmann, Judge of the 452nd District Court in Mason County and Hon. Piper McCraw, Judge of the 469th District Court in Collin County. Both JIRs participate multiple Children's Commission meetings, provide input on the impact of proposed legislation and rules, and engage in discussions about Community-Based Care, prevention and early intervention, placement capacity, and other issues.

**02/07/25 Update:** Between November 15, 2024 and February 7, 2025, a few examples of JIR activities include:

- Continued work as President for the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) and attended multiple Executive and other Committee Meetings
- Attended monthly Judicial Child Welfare Forum Meetings, November-February, Virtual
- Presented at the Region 11 Community Based Care Convening, December 6, Weslaco
- Chaired the Children's Commission Systems Improvement Committee Meeting, January 8, Virtual
- Chaired the Children's Commission Training Committee Meeting, January 23, Virtual
- Chaired the Children's Commission Trial Skills Training Faculty Meeting, February 6, Virtual
- Participated in calls with Commission leadership and staff regarding various issues

**Objective: Support efforts to build capacity to address complex mental health needs and embed a culture of trauma-informed care in the Texas child welfare system.**

6. Strategy: Engage stakeholders in the child welfare, juvenile justice, and mental health systems to apply principles of trauma-informed care and address gaps in services for children, youth, and families with complex mental health needs.

**Background:** The Children’s Commission initiated a Statewide Collaborative on Trauma-Informed Care (SCTIC) in 2017 to elevate trauma-informed policy and practices in the Texas child welfare system by creating a statewide strategy to support system reform, organizational leadership, cross-systems collaboration, and community-led efforts with data-informed initiatives. Based on the work of the SCTIC, the Children’s Commission published a final report in February 2019 entitled Building a Trauma-Informed Child Welfare System: A Blueprint. Efforts to implement the recommendations and priorities included in the report continue through training and a recent trauma informed courts initiative.

The Children’s Commission recently initiated the Consortium on Trauma Informed Court Practices to provide a statewide network for judges to have a forum for discussion and education about trauma-informed and trauma-responsive court practices. Chaired by Hon. Carlos Villalon Jr., Associate Judge of the Child Protection Court of the Rio Grande Valley West, the Consortium will further broaden the reach of the SCTIC by sharing and expanding the work of the four Trauma Informed Court Pilot judges and their court teams. (The Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services issued a [report](#) on the work of these four courts, which was done in collaboration with the Children’s Commission.) These four judges serve as mentors to participating judges in a bi-monthly virtual meetings. Commission staff provides meeting support; continuing legal education credit, TBLS credit, and family violence hour credit as appropriate; and a related resource library.

**02/07/25 Update:** On October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2024, Hon. Linda Dunson, Judge of the 309<sup>th</sup> Family Court in Harris County presented on how to create a trauma informed ecosystem in the courtroom. She also shared how she and her team created deliverables for families such as a video for parents to watch before coming to court, a pamphlet for parents, and a survey for parents about their experience in court. Judge Dunson also presented on how she and her team created community collaboratives such as the “Connection Room” and a monthly meeting series where the court community and external child welfare partners educate themselves about trauma-related issues in child welfare cases. On January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2025, Hon. Angela Graves-Harrington, Judge of the 246<sup>th</sup> Family Court in Harris County led a discussion on how her pilot court developed a monthly brown bag series and a Community Coat Closet, and how both initiatives are aimed at improving outcomes for families. Additionally, resources related to best practices on trauma-informed and trauma-responsive courts are updated regularly on the SCTIC-related webpage, [www.TraumaInformedTexas.com](http://www.TraumaInformedTexas.com).

Commission staff participates in the Cross Systems Trauma-Informed Care (CSTIC) Initiative Workgroup. Led by Holly Fulmer, Trauma-informed Policy and Training Specialist at HHSC, members are representatives from state agencies such as the Texas Juvenile Justice Department, the Texas Indigent Defense Commission, and the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) who are working on implementing trauma-informed practices in their agencies. The CSTIC Initiative Workgroup met on November 20, 2024. Ms. Fulmer shared updates in January 2025 on the “Trauma-Informed Basics” training modules, now located virtually at the University of Texas’ Texas Institute for Excellence in Mental Health and other available trainings.

The Children’s Commission participated in the HHSC Children’s Mental Health Strategic Plan Subcommittee and in the related Governance Workgroup as well as the Youth and Family Voice Workgroup. Each of these groups met regularly from early spring into mid-summer 2024 in order to develop a shared understanding of the landscape of behavioral health governance, funding, and the service array. Commission staff reviewed and provided suggestions on child welfare for the draft recommendations. The Subcommittee submitted the Children’s Behavioral Strategic Plan to the Office of the Governor and the Legislative Budget Board on December 1, 2024. This strategic plan focuses on the mental and behavioral health needs of Texas children and shares a blueprint for understanding and meeting these needs with a long term strategy. The fundamental principle is a Continuum of Children’s Behavioral Health Care. This is a tiered model of services and supports

for children that increase in intensity, cost, and length of treatment based on the severity, complexity, and acuity of their needs. The two most specific parts of the report related to the Commission are a high-level summary of the child welfare system and the recommendation under Behavioral Health Outpatient Care to fund the Commission to expand implementation of state and local dual status initiatives. The report has recommendations for services and funding from FY 25-29.

**Objective: Support efforts to encourage fairness and strengthen engagement of children, youth, and families in the Texas child welfare system so that they receive services and supports that meet their individual needs.**

7. Strategy: Emphasize the importance of engaging children and youth in the case planning and court process as well as promote normalcy and the inclusion of young adults with lived experience in statewide system improvement efforts.

**Background:** Inclusion of youth and family voice is critical to the Children’s Commission goal of improving the child welfare system by increasing awareness, encouraging judicial leadership, promoting best judicial and attorney practices, and informing policy and practice affecting child welfare in Texas. The Children’s Commission aspires to expand systems-level engagement of youth and family members with lived experience in child welfare and seeks to prioritize and encourage participation by compensating them for contributing their time and expertise to Children’s Commission efforts. In furtherance of this goal, the Children’s Commission created a “Lived Experience Participation Policy” so that participants are compensated based upon their time and preparation.

The Children’s Commission underscores the importance of educating judicial leaders and child welfare professionals on age-appropriate activities for children and youth in foster care through an emphasis on normalcy. The Children’s Commission continues to support and promote awareness of the Texas CASA [guide](#) entitled *Normalcy Matters: A Guide to Supporting Children & Youth in Texas Foster Care*, as well as a companion [video](#). The guide and video are hosted as resources on the Commission website.

**02/07/25 Update:** On July 2, 2024, Commission staff met with the Commissioner Representing Labor from the Texas Workforce Commission, the DFPS Commissioner, Casey Family Programs, and TACFS leadership to discuss ways of strengthening training and employment opportunities for youth aging out of foster care. Ideas circulated on how to include youth with lived experience for future planning. The workgroup continued this discussion most recently on January 29, 2025.

Commission staff observed several court hearings held in the Gulf Coast Children’s Court in Harris County led by Judge Charles Griffin. Staff observed how young adults participated in the court process, including differences in engagement during in-person and virtual hearings, and how child welfare professionals spoke to or about the youth.

On September 26-27, 2024, DFPS, Texas Education Agency (TEA), and the Children’s Commission hosted a Foster Care and Education Summit at Angelo State University in San Angelo, Texas. The Summit featured a panel of Angelo State University students who experienced foster care and provided insight to an audience of education professionals on ways to improve the educational experience for students in foster care.

On October 21-23, 2024, the Commission hosted its annual Child Welfare Judges Conference, which included two panels that highlighted the voices of young adults with lived experience in the child welfare system. The first such panel, entitled “The REALLY Panel: Redefining Engagement, Advocacy, and Listening to Lived Experience Youth,” was moderated by Hon. Selina Mireles, Judge of the 4th and 5th Administrative

Judicial Regions Child Protection Court. The REALLY panel included two young adults in college who shared how they achieved their goals, the impact that judges had during their case, how prepared they were for college, and suggestions for positive change. The second panel was entitled “Housing Options, Challenges, and Solutions for Transition Age Youth and Young Adults.” This panel was moderated by Hon. Katrina Griffith, Judge of the Harris County Child Protection Court and included three young adult speakers with experience in various types of Supervised Independent Living programs (SIL), as well as in-care and out-of-care programs. The panel also included two DFPS speakers, a Housing Program Specialist with the Transitional Living Services staff and the Program Lead for Extended Foster Care and SIL. The young adults with lived experiences shared how having (or not having) safe and stable housing impacted their case and their lives, and along with the speakers from DFPS, reviewed information about housing options for transition age youth and young adults, challenges to securing and maintaining housing, and how to overcome related barriers.

**Objective: Support statewide efforts to transition from a reactive child welfare system to a prevention-oriented system that aims to maintain child safety and keep families together.**

8. Strategy: Engage judges and lawyers in systemic efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect and address occurrences of child abuse and neglect while maintaining family preservation.

**Background:** The Children’s Commission collaborates closely with DFPS on the implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), as required by the federal Administration for Children and Families. FFPSA restructures federal child welfare funding, particularly Title IV-E and Title IV-B of the Social Security Act, which Texas uses to pay for services for children in foster care and their families. FFPSA seeks to reduce entry in foster care, to limit the use of congregate care, and to increase access to behavioral and mental health services. The Children’s Commission collaborates with Casey Family Programs, DFPS, and other state and national workgroups on best practices for implementation of all FFPSA provisions, including the development of IV-E prevention programs and court involvement in encouraging a prevention approach.

In 2021, DFPS’ Prevention Early Intervention (PEI) division proposed creating a new position for an Early Intervention Court Liaison in three jurisdictions. PEI partnered with the Children’s Commission and OCA to identify Texas communities that would benefit from the Court Liaison position. This position acts as a special assistant to the court, serves to identify and connect family support programs to the local Child Protection Courts and community, and offers a judicial perspective within community stakeholder meetings. The pilot sites for the court liaison positions are Galveston, Bell, and Lubbock Counties.

During the 87th Texas Legislative Session, House Bill (HB) 3041 created a Family Preservation Services pilot program, referred to as the Texas Family First (TFF) pilot. Pursuant to Texas Family Code §§ 262.401 - 262.417, DFPS must provide family-focused preservation services to children and families who are at imminent risk of having a child removed from the child’s home and placed in conservatorship due to a continuing danger. The TFF pilot operates under direct court supervision and DFPS is directed to utilize federal Title IV-E funds for services. Pilots are located in the following DFPS Regions: 1, 2, 3W, and 8B, with expansions into 6A and 8A.

**02/07/25 Update:** For the Early Intervention Court Liaison pilot, the Commission contracted with Texas A&M University to conduct a formal evaluation of the pilot program. Texas A&M completed its evaluation and provided a final report. OCA and PEI agreed to renew the early intervention pilot grant for 2024-2026. Easter Seals, a provider in the Rio Grande Valley, partnered with the Child Protection Court of Rio Grande Valley West and obtained a position similar to the Early Intervention Court Liaisons.

Children’s Commission staff meet monthly 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 Pilot Implementation Steering Committee. During meetings, DFPS provides updates on steps taken to identify the target population served and implement the pilot. In October 2024, TFF expanded into Harris County. In February 2025, TFF expanded to Bexar County. The Commission held meetings for DFPS and Bexar County attorneys on January 24, 2025 and with Bexar County judges on January 27, 2025.

In 2024, DFPS entered a contract with the Commission to conduct regional trainings on the Texas Family First Pilot and Reasonable Efforts (see Strategy 30 for more information). The TFF training content covers the pilot, including defining the eligible population, providing details on the current progress, and clarifying many questions related to referrals, referral sources, and time limitations. Trainings were conducted in DFPS 3W Region (Fort Worth), Region 1 (Lubbock), and Region 2 (Abilene). Additional TFF trainings will occur in 2025 when DFPS expands TFF into Houston and San Antonio.

**Objective: Encourage the improvement of education outcomes for children and youth in foster care, leading to a more productive and stable adult life.**

9. Strategy: Identify opportunities to develop sustainable partnerships between legal, child welfare, and education stakeholders in an effort to identify and address the educational needs and goals of children and youth who experience foster care.

**Background:** Since the inception of the Education Committee in 2010 and the release of the Texas Blueprint in 2012, the Children’s Commission has convened a multidisciplinary, statewide effort aimed at improving education outcomes for children and youth in foster care. The Foster Care and Education (FC&Ed) Committee was established in 2015 to continue the implementation of the Texas Blueprint recommendations. The FC&Ed Committee utilizes a project-centered model. The FC&Ed Committee will continue to develop priorities and provide oversight for the statewide effort. As projects are identified, small groups will each meet periodically with a defined scope, deliverables, and a timeline. The core principles of strengthening collaboration between the education, courts, and child welfare systems, developing cross-training opportunities, and encouraging data-driven decision making remain fundamental to the FC&Ed Committee model.

**02/07/25 Update:** A two-day Foster Care & Education Summit was held on September 26-27, 2024 at Angelo State University in San Angelo. This training provided approximately 200 professionals who work with school-aged students with guidance on the educational needs and requirements for students in foster care.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Workgroup completed and published three one-pagers on Designated Points of Contact, Dispute Resolution, and Education Best Interest Decision Making. The one-pagers will help provide guidance to professionals in the child welfare and education systems.

The FC&Ed Committee last met on January 28, 2025, and discussed updating the higher education guide, improving data and information sharing, and continuing to develop the ESSA tools. The next meeting will be held in April 2025.

TEA, DFPS, and the Children’s Commission are currently revising the 2022 Foster Care and Student Success Guide with updated resources and edits for publication in 2025. This guide is a resource to support Texas schools and child welfare professionals in addressing the educational needs of students in foster care.

On September 20, 2024, the Commission hosted a 1-hour webinar entitled “Supporting School Aged Children in Care.” Three DFPS Education Specialists presented on the role of education specialists in

supporting students in foster care and serving as a resource to judges and attorneys.

**Objective: Promote awareness of and provide training, resources, and support so that judges and lawyers can assist in preventing and responding to the specialized needs of children and youth in foster care.**

10. Strategy: Partner with national, state, and local leaders to better support children, youth, and families with specialized needs such as addressing sexual abuse and complex medical cases.

**Background:** The Children’s Commission partners with many key stakeholders with a goal of raising awareness on addressing specialized issues and needs that children and youth in foster care may experience such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, and running away. The Children’s Commission works with the Office of the Texas Governor’s Child Sex Trafficking Team, the DFPS Human Trafficking and Child Exploitation Team, TEA, OCA, and various other statewide stakeholders to develop strategies to improve judicial handling of child welfare cases where children and youth are at high risk of being subjected to sexual abuse or running away, which increases their vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation. The Children’s Commission is focused on providing information to judges and attorneys responsible for child welfare cases to raise awareness about these specialized issues and needs that impact children and youth involved with the child welfare system.

**02/07/25 Update:** Commission staff participate in quarterly TEA Child Abuse Prevention and Awareness Workgroup which focuses on prevention and awareness of child abuse and human trafficking within Texas schools. This workgroup last met on November 13, 2024.

On November 7, 2024, Commission staff attended the quarterly Human Trafficking Prevention Task Force meeting led by the Office of the Attorney General. This meeting is comprised of multiple agencies from across the state including the Department of Public Safety, Department of Licensing and Regulation, Texas Alcohol and Beverage Commission, DFPS, and Office of the Governor, along with local county agencies who work to prevent and end trafficking.

On October 29, 2024, the Children’s Commission along with the Officer of the Governor, DFPS, and other stakeholders had their third meeting to develop a resource highlighting the relevant laws aimed at protecting children who survive sexual abuse. The workgroup is led by Hon. Selina Mireles, Judge of the 4th & 5th Administrative Judicial Regions Child Protection Court, and the goal is to provide an easy-to-use guide that child survivors and their caregivers can use to identify and understand their legal rights. Youth with lived experience will be consulted on the resource.

**Objective: Create opportunities to bring together subject matter experts, judicial and executive branch leaders, and key policy makers to examine important and urgent issues, and to identify recommendations and solutions.**

11. Strategy: Work with DFPS and other child welfare stakeholders to identify critical and urgent topics for Round Table discussions and hold Round Table events as needed.

**Background:** Round Table discussions are designed to address key, urgent issues affecting the Texas child welfare system through a half-day program that is facilitated by a subject-matter and legal expert. The topics vary year to year and the number of Round Tables hosted each year also varies according to the interest of stakeholders and issues demanding attention. The Children Commission’s role typically consists of forming a small workgroup to discuss the overall purpose, creating an invitation and distribution list, securing a venue, handling all invitations, RSVPs, travel reimbursements, and producing a written report or paper within about 4 to 6 months following the Round Table event.

**02/07/25 Update:** This is an ad hoc strategy and there are no updates during this reporting period.

12. Strategy: Engage stakeholders in the legal system in statewide efforts to develop and expand placement capacity, including kinship care and the rollout of Community Based Care.

**Background:** Placement capacity is an issue across the state of Texas, both in urban and rural areas. Judges and attorneys are key partners in identifying gaps and encouraging community supports to provide safe and stable placements for children who experience foster care. Several initiatives at the Children’s Commission aim to engage the legal and judicial communities in efforts to develop placement capacity statewide. Additionally, the Community-Based Care (CBC) continues to rollout throughout Texas. In the CBC model, most Child Protective Services duties will transfer to a local service network led by a Single Source Continuum Contractor (SSCC).

**02/07/25 Update:** Children’s Commission staff serve on the Partners for Children and Families Committee (PCFC), the advisory body for the rollout of Community-Based Care in Texas. The most recent PCFC meeting took place on November 14, 2024. The committee will oversee multiple workgroups with a focus on topics such as intake and investigations, Community-Based Care, placement, services and supports, foster care and kinship policy, and contracts.

**Objective: Address the needs of children and youth who experience both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems and encourage cross-system partnerships through judicial leadership.**

13. Strategy: Prioritize areas in need of improvement in the handling of juvenile justice cases as well as recommendations developed by the Dual Status Task Force.

**Background:** The Dual Status Task Force (DSTF) was formed to establish a common, statewide definition(s) for the population, identify resources needed to meet the needs of dual status youth, and make other recommendations as may be necessary to improve outcomes for dual status youth. The [Dual Status Task Force Report](#) was released in December 2021 and captured recommendations that were formulated over an eighteen-month period, beginning in July 2019. The report contains various recommendations for agency coordination, data, definitions, legal representation and advocacy, judicial practices, and training that highlight the unique needs of this population of youth.

In FY2024, the Children’s Commission created a juvenile justice committee to study broader issues related to children and youth involved with the Texas juvenile justice system.

**02/07/25 Update:** There are no updates during this reporting period.

## GOAL III (LEGAL PRACTICE & PROCESS)

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.

**Objective: Improve legal representation so that parents, children, and DFPS experience high-quality court proceedings.**

14. Strategy: Convene and support a Legal Representation Committee to sustain efforts to ensure high-quality legal representation for parents, children, and DFPS.

**Background:** When a family is involved in a child welfare proceeding, quality legal counsel is essential for all parties to ensure that the court strikes the appropriate balance between the rights and duties of all parties involved. The Children's Commission has maintained a Legal Representation Committee (LRC) since its inception. The committee exists to identify training needs, advise child welfare system stakeholders on best legal and judicial system practices, evaluate proposed statutory amendments, assess the quality of legal representation throughout the state, and to help ensure that court proceedings safeguard due process, promote child and family engagement, and produce quality legal representation outcomes for the children and families involved.

**02/07/25 Update:** The LRC met on October 11, 2024 to discuss deliverables for FY2025. The LRC identified pre-petition legal representation programs as the priority area of focus for the fiscal year. To inform the committee about existing programs and community needs, the committee members decided to formulate a statewide survey. A small group is drafting the survey and the committee reviewed and discussed the draft at the January 31, 2025 meeting.

**Objective: Encourage standards of practice for attorneys representing parties in child welfare cases so that attorneys throughout the state provide high-quality legal representation.**

15. Strategy: Support development and adoption of Standards of Representation for attorneys representing parents, children, and DFPS in child welfare cases.

**Background:** Though attorneys for parents and children are required by the Texas Family Code to become familiar with the American Bar Association (ABA) standards of practice for attorneys who represent parents and children in abuse and neglect cases, Texas does not require compliance with the ABA standards as a condition of appointment, nor has Texas adopted its own standards of practice for court-appointed attorneys. The Children's Commission 2018 Legal Representation Study surveyed stakeholders regarding the effect that the lack of enforceable standards of practice has on the legal representation of parents and children. Across stakeholder groups, participants demonstrated a high level of confidence that the creation and enforcement of standards would improve the quality of representation, including 70% of responding court-appointed attorneys indicating that standards would have a positive effect.

The Children's Commission Child Welfare Law Standards of Representation Committee (Standards Committee) is charged with drafting proposed standards to submit to the State Bar of Texas. The Honorable Roy Ferguson, Judge of the 394th District Court, is the Committee Chair; Justice 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 expertise in child welfare law and

represent the diversity of jurisdictions across Texas.

**02/07/25 Update:** The Standards Committee is currently drafting standards for attorneys representing children. The committee most recently met in person on September 26-27, 2024 and via Zoom on November 7, 2024 to provide final comments on Phase 1 (Attorney-Client Relationship), conclude the initial draft of Phase 2 (Investigatory), and begin the drafts of Phase 3 (Preparatory) and Phase 4 (Conciliatory and Alternative Dispute Resolution). The committee next meets on February 20-21, 2025.

**Objective: Raise the level of understanding and expertise for attorneys by highlighting opportunities for specialization in child welfare law.**

16. Strategy: Assist the Texas Board of Legal Specialization (TBLS) Advisory and Exam Committees in efforts to certify Texas attorneys as specialists in child welfare law.

**Background:** In 2017, the Supreme Court of Texas officially recognized Child Welfare Law as the 20th area of certified legal specialization. Children’s Commission staff serve on the Exam Commission, which is responsible for drafting and grading the certification exam. The Children’s Commission partners with TBLS to provide reimbursement scholarships to cover application and exam fees for TBLS Child Welfare Law exam applicants who successfully pass the exam.

**02/07/25 Update:** The 2024 Child Welfare Board Certification Exam took place over a two-day period on September 30 and October 1, 2024. Twenty-six applicants sat for the exam, and a total of 9 obtained certification by the Texas Board of Legal Specialization. All newly board-certified members appear in the TBLS online directory. The Children’s Commission will continue to reimburse exam fees for attorneys who pass the exam and become certified, as detailed on the Commission’s website. During this reporting period, two TBLS attorneys submitted requests for reimbursement.

**Objective: Develop resources to help parents involved in the child welfare system to navigate the process, encourage authentic parent engagement, and ensure parental rights are protected.**

17. Strategy: Convene and support a Parent Resource Workgroup and maintain the parent resource guides to sustain efforts to increase parental understanding and engagement in the child welfare system.

**Background:** The Children’s Commission supports a Parent Resource Group which is comprised of parent mentors, parent advocates, parent attorneys, DFPS staff, and other interested stakeholders. Prior to establishing the Texas Legal Services Center Family Helpline (see Strategy 20 for additional information), the Children’s Commission partnered with the University of Texas and other stakeholders to produce the Parent Resource Guide, which is available in print and online on the Children’s Commission website as well as on many other stakeholder websites, in both English and Spanish.

**02/07/25 Update:** The Pre-Litigation Resource Guide subgroup completed their edits to the guide, and it is now under review by Commission staff. To ensure that updated and current information is available when the guide is released, online publication of the Pre-Litigation Resource guide will occur after the conclusion of the 89<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session.

The Parent Resource Workgroup met on January 30, 2025, to discuss upcoming projects. The Parent Materials Subgroup will convene later this month to discuss their parent voice video project.

18. Strategy: Support efforts to provide early and reliable access to information and resources for Texas families through programs such as the Texas Legal Services Center Family Helpline.

**Background:** In 2017, the Children’s Commission partnered with the Texas Access to Justice Commission and the Children’s Justice Act to fund the Texas Legal Services Center (TLSC) to establish the Family Helpline for Strong Families and Safe Children (Family Helpline). The Family Helpline provides easy, statewide access for parents and family members to basic information, education, and resources addressing parental rights as they relate to Child Protective Services (CPS) Investigations, the provision of Family-Based Safety Services (FBSS), Parental Child Safety Placements, Texas Family Code Chapter 34 non-parent agreements, termination of parental rights, custody, access, visitation, service plans, the court’s role in conducting hearings and oversight, right to legal counsel, non-offending parents, minor parents, incarcerated parents, survivors of family violence, intergenerational issues, and other situations.

**02/07/25 Update:** Since November 2024, TLSC completed an analysis of demographics and legal issues discussed at the Family Helpline in Fiscal Year 2024. Final numbers show that Helpline attorneys completed 1,659 calls which originated from 143 counties across Texas. The top five counties remain the same as FY2023: Harris, Bexar, Dallas, Travis, and Tarrant. The Family Helpline also received 62 calls from out of state residents with matters related to a Texas child welfare issue.

Data collected from Family Helpline calls show that attorneys addressed 100 unique issues with callers. Of note is that 17 of the top 20 issues remained the same in FY2023 and FY2024. Three issues that received the most calls in FY2023 fell out of the of the top 20 list in FY2024: service plans, placement (in TMC case), and parental fitness. Three new categories moved into this year’s top 20 issues discussed: child abuse/neglect prevention, criminal offenses, and domestic violence. Additionally, the percentage of calls regarding domestic violence significantly increased from 18% of calls in FY2023 to 27% of calls in FY2024.

Child Protection Investigations was again the most discussed topic this year with 974 calls. This is also reflected in the increased number of callers who had an open Investigation case. Many callers have questions about their rights, whether they must submit to drug tests, whether they have to sign safety plans or PCSPs that they do not agree with, and how long an investigation can remain open based on policy. Other callers sought clarification on how to know their investigation concluded and what an investigation finding meant, as well as how to navigate an Administrative Review of Investigation Finding.

On January 10, 2025, TLSC launched [Family Help Link](#) with support from a grant from the Texas Access to Justice Foundation. This is a free online intake and referral system available 24-hours a day, 7 days a week for anyone in Texas facing legal issues that impact the health and stability of children. This measure enables families and young people to easily access legal information, referrals, counsel, and representation. Current referral partners include Disability Rights Texas, Legal Aid of Northwest Texas, and Texas RioGrande Legal Aid’s Foster Youth Project.

**Objective: Strengthen the legal and judicial response in child welfare cases so that Native American children, youth, and families stay connected to their community, culture, customs, and beliefs.**

19. Strategy: Establish and support meaningful relationships with federally recognized Tribes and promote awareness, education, and application of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA).

**Background:** The Children’s Commission supports partnering with system stakeholders to promote ongoing knowledge and understanding of ICWA and its significance. The Commission also works with national ICWA and leading organizations on understanding and implementation of the related Federal Rule and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Guidelines. The Children’s Commission also partners with DFPS in supporting tribal/state collaborative meetings and collaborates with the Capacity Building Center for Courts and the participants of the CIP ICWA Constituency Group. Commission staff maintain contact with the three federally recognized

Tribes in Texas and continue to communicate any resources that may be helpful.

**02/07/25 Update:** On January 16, 2025, Commission staff participated in the tribal/state collaborative call hosted by DFPS to discuss the collaborative's goals for the year, which include beginning the planning process for an in-person ICWA summit. Additionally, guest speaker Dr. Valerie Jackson provided the collaborative with a presentation on her current study on the obstacles to supported permanency for kinship caregivers. The ongoing collaborative call takes place on the third Thursday of each month.

**Objective: Ensure availability of high-quality judicial and attorney resources and tools that provide clear, relevant information about law, policy, and best practices.**

20. Strategy: Maintain a comprehensive Bench Book for judges hearing child welfare cases.

**Background:** The Children's Commission maintains a Bench Book that outlines the state and federal statutory requirements for judges handling child welfare cases, including topical sections and checklists. The Bench Book also highlights special issues and includes best and promising practices. It is updated annually with new information, as needed, and is disseminated to judges at training events and upon request. The Bench Book is also hosted on the Children's Commission website and through LawBox, both versions of which can be accessed at no cost through the Commission website.

**02/07/25 Update:** The 2024 edition of the Texas Child Welfare Law Bench Book (Bench Book) is now available online. The 2024 edition is organized by the following sections: Statutory, Legal Essentials, Federal, Health, Well-being, Safety, System Issues, and Family Connections. The related Bench Cards provide high-level legal and topical information through at-a-glance, easy-to-use checklists that outline relevant laws at the various stages of a child welfare case. The Bench Book and Bench Cards were distributed at the October Child Welfare Judges Conference and mailed to other judges upon request and subject to availability.

21. Strategy: Maintain tool kits for attorneys representing parents, children, and the Department of Family and Protective Services in child welfare cases.

**Background:** The Children's Commission's Tool Kit Committee is responsible for updating the Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing Parents and Children in Child Welfare Cases, and the DFPS Representation Subcommittee is responsible for updating the Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing DFPS in Child Welfare Cases. At the conclusion of each legislative session, the committees meet and develop a plan to review, edit, and update the tool kits to ensure they reflect current case law, statutory law, and best practices. The committees also develop and review plans for publicizing and distributing the tool kits to ensure they are accessible to practitioners.

**02/07/25 Update:** 200 printed copies of the 2024 Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing DFPS were ordered and will be distributed at upcoming conferences in spring 2025. Commission staff will also work to identify other means of distribution for the intended audience of this resource. The Commission plans to update both the Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing Parents and Children and the Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing DFPS at the conclusion of the 89<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session. The 2024 tool kits remain available online for download and print through the Commission's website and are also available in an interactive format provided by LawBox.

**Objective: Improve and expand engagement of families and caregivers in court hearings so that court hearings are higher quality and more meaningful for the families and children involved.**

22. Strategy: Support increased child and family engagement through the use of technology, including the use

of the Office of Court Administration (OCA) Notice and Engagement tool.

**Background:** All parties involved in child welfare cases continue to struggle with securing consistent and timely notice of scheduled hearings from DFPS. This issue includes foster placements and DFPS service provider facilities where the children/youth are in placement and this results in many parties not being able to attend and participate in scheduled court hearings. The Notice and Engagement tool involves using non-confidential case data to provide email notice to users about upcoming hearings. OCA will market the Notice and Engagement tool and periodically re-issue announcements, survey users on the usefulness and effectiveness of the system, and monitor the system login and search information. Notices will be monitored to evaluate whether the correct hearing data are populating according to search criteria. Reports/data are produced by OCA and provided to the Children's Commission.

**02/07/25 Update:** The number of Notice and Engagement system users continues to increase. 58 new users signed up to date in FY2025 (from October 1, 2024 to present) through the Notice and Engagement system to receive hearing notifications, bringing the total number of users to 2,438. Hearing notifications were sent for 2,236 hearings with a total of 7,254 notifications sent this fiscal year.

OCA created an Application Programming Interface (API) that will allow courts other than those using the Child Protection Court Case Management System (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 aims to identify jurisdictions interested in adopting the API in the future.

**Objective: Promote the value of mediation in child welfare cases, including opportunities to achieve timely permanency and increase efficiency in child welfare cases.**

23. Strategy: Establish an understanding and framework regarding availability and cost of mediation services and promote the training and support necessary to raise the quality and usefulness of mediation in child welfare cases.

**Background:** Mediation is used in child welfare cases throughout Texas and can be an effective and financially prudent method of resolving cases. One benefit of mediation is that it can enhance participants' experience that they were treated fairly. Studies show that an enhanced sense of fair treatment increases both acceptance and compliance with court decisions. Though the use of mediation to resolve child welfare cases prior to trial has become widely accepted, the Children's Commission is exploring whether mediation is being underutilized in child welfare cases because mediation often occurs too late in the case timeline for the benefits of increased compliance to be realized.

**02/07/25 Update:** The Mediation Workgroup last met in December 2024 to create the outline for their planned webinar on the topic of non-party participation in mediations. The webinar is scheduled to take place on March 28, 2025 and will focus on considerations for including non-parties in child welfare mediations, ethical issues that mediators and attorneys must be aware of, and ensuring that agreements including non-party participants are enforceable. Additional plans for FY2025 include completing child welfare mediation check lists and a potential webinar on considerations for mediations involving incarcerated parents.

**Objective: Support innovation and encourage best practices for Texas courts hearing child welfare cases.**

24. Strategy: Build capacity in the legal system to implement the Texas Family First Pilot and improve practice regarding Reasonable Efforts determinations.

**Background:** Reasonable Efforts findings are required by federal and state law in child welfare hearings. Neither federal nor Texas law defines reasonable efforts. To do so would be a direct contradiction of the intent of the law which requires determinations to be made on a case-by-case basis. In Texas, the child welfare agency must make reasonable efforts to maintain the family unit, to prevent or eliminate the need for removal, to return the child home, to safely reunify the child and parent, and to finalize permanency. Additionally, the child welfare agency must document all reasonable efforts made. During the 88th Regular Legislative Session, new reasonable efforts legislation was passed which effected all child welfare statutory hearings and added a third prong to findings in termination of parental rights final hearings (with just a few statutorily-defined exceptions). Providing training to expand knowledge of and encourage high-quality hearings regarding Reasonable Efforts determinations is critical for judges, attorneys, DFPS, other child welfare advocates, and stakeholders in order to implement the new laws and facilitate best outcomes.

**02/07/25 Update:** The Children’s Commission continues to provide education and training on federal and state Reasonable Efforts law and its impact on child welfare cases and hearings.

In FY2024, Children’s Commission, in partnership with DFPS, offered Texas Family First/Reasonable Efforts training events at no cost for members of the legal and child welfare community in DFPS Region 3W in June 2024; DFPS Region 1 in July; DFPS Region 2 in August; and Region 7 (Austin) in September. In FY2025, Commission staff continued this training and traveled to Region 6B (area surrounding Houston) in October, Region 11 (El Paso) in November, and Region 10 (Midland) in December. Fictional scenarios facilitated hands-on practice with making legal arguments related to reasonable efforts. During the November and December 2024 trainings, the Commission staff was joined by the Child Protection Law Section of the State Bar. The Section presented additional child welfare trainings such as topics related to discovery; mediation; and permanency hearings. The Children’s Commission will host additional regional trainings in partnership with DFPS and the Child Protection Law Section throughout FY2025. The next trainings planned are for DFPS Regions 4 and 5 and will focus on reasonable efforts.

25. Strategy: Track and assess the impact of changes in law, policy, and rule affecting the legal process in child welfare cases.

**Background:** The Children’s Commission created a new committee focused on legislative and policy matters in FY2024. Changes to the Texas Family Code and other areas of law and policy have a significant impact on the child welfare legal process and the entire child welfare system.

The purpose of the committee is to create a formal structure to identify judicial considerations on changes to child welfare law, policy, and rule. Possible committee activities could include meeting regularly, drafting proposals for the Texas Judicial Council, and contributing to related written materials.

**02/07/25 Update:** The Legislation and Policy Resource Committee (LPRC) last met on January 16, 2025 to review pre-session filed legislation. The committee agreed to regular meetings during the legislative session to track bills and assess their impact on the child welfare system. The LPRC’s legislative proposals were submitted and approved by Texas Judicial Council’s Civil Justice Committee in September 2024.

## GOAL IV (TRAINING)

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.

**Objective:** Provide high-quality and easily accessible training and resources that encourage judicial leadership both within the courtroom and in the broader child welfare community.

26. Strategy: Plan, fund, conduct, and evaluate judicial training through conferences, online content, and events.

**Background:** The Children’s Commission collaborates with the Texas Center for the Judiciary (TCJ) to design specialized judicial education and training opportunities for active, retired, and former Texas appellate, district, and county court at law judges, as well as associate judges and court personnel through its grant with TCJ.. Throughout the fiscal year, TCJ and the Children’s Commission partner to plan two annual Child Welfare Judges Conferences (CWJC) and to host one. The Child Welfare Judges Conference is the Commission’s largest annual in-person judicial training. Planning and funding activities include designing curricula and conference agendas, speaker support, determining the budget and number of attendees, participating in planning meetings, , surveying participants, and evaluating the process and event both internally and externally for future planning.

**02/07/25 Update:** The 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Child Welfare Judges Conference was held on October 21-23, 2024. This year’s training featured a three-hour pre-conference hosted by the Office of Court Administration for the Child Protection Court judges and court coordinators, which was followed by a full conference that was designed for judges who devote a minimum of 15% of their docket to hearing civil child welfare cases.

One hundred judges attended the 3-day conference from across the state, including a larger number of general jurisdiction judges than ever before. Overall there were 13 presentations, including a national keynote speaker, as well as 12 concurrent regional breakouts where judges met with agency and SSCC staff to review their regional data with the goal of improving outcomes for children, youth, and families. The curriculum provided 14 hours of Continuing Judicial Education, 9.25 hours of Family Violence Credits, and 2.25 hours of ethics.

Presentations included a Keynote Address from Vivek Sankaran, Clinical Professor of Law, University of Michigan Law School; Director, Child Advocacy Law Clinic and Child Welfare Appellate Clinic, entitled “Improving the Child Welfare System One Family at a Time: Research-Based Strategies to Strengthen Judicial Practice.” Presentations which followed were: How to Attract and Keep High Quality Legal Representation on Your Court Appointment Wheel; The Importance of Engaging Fathers in Child Welfare Cases; Office of Court Administration Update; Dealing with Death, Grief, and Loss on the Bench; The Science of Resiliency; The REALLY Panel: Redefining Engagement, Advocacy, and Listening to Lived Experience Youth; The Future of Foster Care in Texas: Texas Child-Centered Care (T3C) System; DFPS Leadership and Statewide Data Updates; Community Based Care Panel; Housing Options, Challenges, and Solutions for Transition Age Youth and Young Adults; IV-E Meets IV-D: Child Support Matters in Child Welfare Cases; and Recognizing Judicial Leadership and Innovation.

Speakers included members of the judiciary, DFPS leadership, OCA leadership, SSCC leadership, and youth and young adults with lived experience in the child welfare system. For more information on regional breakouts at the conference, please see Strategy 37.

In addition to providing in person judicial training, the Commission has online training content available for judges to access at their convenience, many of which offer Family Violence Credit Hours and/or TBLS hours in addition to Minimum Continuing Legal Education (MCLE) and ethics hours.

27. Strategy: Support specialized training for the Child Protection Court (CPC) program, judges, and support staff.

**Background:** Child Protection Courts, also known as CPCs, were created to specialize the management of child welfare dockets. Like child support court associate judges, these associate judges are appointed by their regional presiding judges and are OCA employees. CPC judges hear child welfare cases exclusively. The goal for CPC dockets is to help children and families achieve safety, permanency, and well-being in a timely manner. The Children’s Commission partners with OCA to provide training and other support for CPC judges and court coordinators to conduct hearings and manage cases. There are currently 30 CPCs and 1 Harris County Child Protection Court; these courts hear child welfare cases in 148 Texas counties.

**02/07/25 Update:** The Children’s Commission partners with OCA to host trainings for the CPC judges and court coordinators. Traditionally these trainings take the form of a biennial pre-conference at the Child Welfare Judges Conference (see Strategy 27) and a biennial Child Protection Court Convening. Commission staff are currently coordinating with the Children’s Courts Program Manager at OCA regarding the logistics and curriculum for the summer 2025 biennial Child Protection Court Convening. A Save the Date announcement for a one-day virtual training on July 18 has been shared with the CPC judges and court coordinators. The CPC Convening Curriculum Committee will meet on February 24th.

**Objective: Provide high-quality and easily accessible training and resources, along with information for attorneys representing parents, children, and DFPS, as well as other advocates and stakeholders.**

28. Strategy: Provide practical, experiential trial skills training that offers attorneys an opportunity to develop their skills in a small-group, low-stakes environment.

**Background:** Trial Skills Training (TST) is a hands-on training designed to improve the litigation skills of child welfare law attorneys in order to raise the caliber of legal services to children and families in child protection cases. The TST is directed by JIR Judge Piper McCraw. Trial Skills Training is held once a year and offers up to 20 MCLE (Minimum Continuing Legal Education) hours, including ethics hours. Twelve in-person and three virtual TSTs have been hosted by the Children’s Commission since its inception in October 2013. Each TST program has a competitive application process and is limited to 21 less-experienced attorneys. It includes a fictional child welfare case fact pattern with a complete case file covering all Texas-specific statutory hearings building up to final trial. TST provides parent, child, and state attorneys numerous litigation exercises in child welfare law and includes lectures and demonstrations from trained faculty comprised of seasoned attorneys and judges which are followed by personal critiques and coaching. Caseworkers, Pediatric Fellows and/or Pediatric Nurse Practitioners, and Parent Therapists serve as live witnesses. Materials are updated and new faculty is recruited and trained with each event. Extensive internal and external continuous quality improvement (CQI) process and outcome evaluation is involved with each event.

**02/07/25 Update:** The Fall 2024 Trial Skills Training Contested Hearing Practices Pilot took place on September 18 on Zoom and on September 25-26, 2024, in Dallas, TX. In preparation for the training, participants were asked to view 4.25 hours of MCLE, which included .25 hours of ethics. Twenty participants then completed the three-day intensive training that focused on improving their daily courtroom practice and earned an additional 16.25 hours of MCLE and .25 ethics hours. Five new lectures were introduced during this training: Building the Attorney Client Relationship, Understanding the Required Burdens of Proof and

Reasonable Efforts Findings in Child Welfare Cases, Preparing for the Initial Contested Hearing, Motions Practice, and Child Welfare Bench Trials.

The Trial Skills Training Faculty convened on February 6, 2025, to discuss plans for the 2025 course offering. The curriculum from the 2024 Pilot will be refined and a second iteration of the course will be offered in Fall 2025. Commission staff is currently working on securing a location for the training, which is tentatively scheduled for September 2025. It is our goal to have the TST application live on the Commission website by the end of March 2025.

29. Strategy: Create and maintain online content that offers information and guidance on relevant child welfare law issues.

**Background:** In response to the need for online training, Commission staff are developing more regular webinars to help educate child welfare stakeholders across the state. The Commission hosts regular webinars to address current and emerging issues, as well as gaps in training, to help educate child welfare attorneys, judges, and stakeholders across the state. These webinars focus on topics relevant to the legal and judicial communities and may be relevant to child welfare stakeholders as well. All of the Commission’s web-based content is archived and is available on the On-Demand Training and MCLE webpage. Additionally, the Commission has initiated a new training method in the form of a podcast entitled Children’s Commission Conversations in order to provide easily accessible education on child welfare matters, including law, policy, and practice.

**02/07/25 Update:** The Commission held a webinar entitled “Supporting School Aged Children in Care” on September 20, 2024. The webinar explored the role of a DFPS education specialists and how to best utilize them to ensure that the educational needs of child clients are met.

On October 8, 2024, the Commission hosted a webinar entitled, “Domestic Violence in Child Welfare Cases: Best Practices for Judges and Attorneys.” This webinar focused on best practices for the client and courtroom interactions when domestic violence is present in a child welfare case. Keeping safety and the best interest of the child at the forefront, the panel covered topics such as client communication, and courtroom and mediation dynamics in child welfare cases.

On Friday, November 22, 2024, the Commission hosted a webinar entitled, “Trial Skills for Child Welfare Cases: Preserving the Record for Appeal.” The panel provided an overview on how trial attorneys can preserve issues for appeal by securing rulings on the record, making offers of proof, and filing bills of exception.

The Commission is in the process of taping and producing podcasts which will be posted on the Commission’s website in Spring 2025. Some topics include: an introduction to the Commission and its resources; pre-petition advocacy; the importance of preserving sibling connections; and the attorney-client relationship for attorneys representing DFPS.

30. Strategy: Partner with the State Bar of Texas, DFPS, and other organizations to offer training to attorneys and advocates who serve children and families in child welfare cases throughout Texas.

**Background:** In partnership with the CLE branch of the State Bar of Texas, TexasBarCLE, the Children’s Commission has produced MCLE courses on child welfare and related issues to provide training for court-appointed attorneys and attorneys representing DFPS in child welfare cases. From 2012 through 2019, the Children’s Commission partnered with TexasBarCLE to produce numerous MCLE trainings; these live broadcasts are archived in the TexasBarCLE’s Child Welfare [Practice Area](#) in their Online Classroom. Both the live and archived recordings of these child welfare-related webinars are available at a reduced rate to

attorneys representing children and parents, and there are scholarships available through the Bar for attorneys who represent DFPS and need financial assistance to access this training. The Commission also worked with TexasBarCLE in 2022 to produce “Building Better Youth Outcomes: The Importance of Being Trauma Informed.” 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.

At this time, the Commission’s partnership with TexasBarCLE involves participation in the State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law Section’s Curriculum Committee and supporting that Section through a grant for scholarships to the annual spring Advanced Child Protection Law Course, which has been expanded to also include a half-day “101” course, as well as the annual summer Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop during the Advanced Family Law Course. Additionally, the Children’s Commission partners with DFPS and TDCAA to provide high-quality training for attorneys representing DFPS.

**02/07/25 Update:**

State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law Section: Commission staff participated in the CPL CLE Committee and provided feedback on the Section’s training efforts, including the annual Advanced Child Protection Law Course, scheduled for March 6-7, 2025 at the Sheraton Austin Georgetown Hotel & Conference Center. Curriculum planning for the 2025 Advanced Family Law Conference Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop in San Antonio will begin in the next few months.

Beginning in November 2024, the CPL has also collaborated with the Commission to provide additional free MCLE content at the regional Reasonable Efforts trainings conducted in DFPS Regions 10 (El Paso) and 9 (Midland). The Commission will continue to collaborate with the CPL for additional Reasonable Efforts trainings scheduled throughout 2025 (see Strategy 25 for more information).

Texas District and County Attorneys Association (TDCAA) Prosecuting Crimes Against Children Course: In collaboration with TDCAA, the Children’s Commission has created an agenda for the child welfare track of the 2025 Prosecuting Domestic Violence & Child Sex Assault Cases Conference to be held on April 8-11, 2025, in Sugarland, TX. Serving as the curriculum committee, the DFPS Representation Subcommittee developed twelve one-hour sessions that will take place over April 9-10. This is the third conference that TDCAA has invited the Children’s Commission to assist by providing a relevant and high-quality training track for prosecutors representing DFPS throughout the state.

**Objective: Ensure that judges and attorneys are knowledgeable and aware of educational opportunities in order to employ best practices in conducting hearings and in providing legal representation.**

31. Strategy: Develop and distribute information to judges and attorneys that communicates best practices or changes in law, policy, or practice and informs judges and attorneys of trainings and other relevant events.

**Background:** The Children’s Commission maintains an electronic distribution list and regularly publishes Resource Letters about emerging, relevant, and changing policy, laws, practice, and training opportunities. While Jurist in Residence (JIR) Letters are specific to Texas judges, the Resource Letter reaches nearly 4,000 attorneys, judges, court staff, and stakeholders to relay pertinent child welfare related information. All Letters are available on the Children’s Commission website.

**02/07/25 Update:** Several examples of Jurist in Residence (JIR) Letters and Judicial and Attorney Resource Letters (JARLs) issued between September 19, 2024 and January 22, 2025 include:

- 9/19/2024: Upcoming Domestic Violence Webinar; New TIDC Website and Reporting Requirements
- 10/3/2024: TIDC Family Protection Representation Appointments Reporting Deadline is October 15, 2024
- 10/10/2024: Upcoming Webinar: Trial Skills for Child Welfare Cases: Preserving the Record for Appeal
- 10/31/2024: Domestic Violence Awareness and Related Webinar Now Available
- 11/18/2024: November is National Adoption Month
- 12/5/2024: 2024 Texas Child Welfare Law Bench Book Now Available
- 12/10/2024: Now Available: Preserving the Record for Appeal Webinar
- 12/13/2024, Jurist in Residence Letter: Judicial Scholarships to 2025 NCJFCJ Conferences
- 12/30/2024: Child Welfare Training and Resources
- 1/9/2025: January is Human Trafficking Prevention Month
- 1/15/2025: Upcoming Webinars: Court Interpreters; Non-party Mediations

32. Strategy: Support attendance at state and national judicial and legal conferences and training events.

**Background:** The Children’s Commission administers various judicial and attorney scholarship opportunities throughout the fiscal year, including but not limited to: (1) the TexasBarCLE Annual Advanced Child Protection Law Course; (2) the TexasBarCLE Advanced Family Law Child Abuse and Neglect One-Day Workshop; (3) the National Association of Counsel for Children Annual Conference; and (4) the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges Juvenile Justice Conference and Annual Conference. For all scholarships, the Children’s Commission determines scholarship criteria and deploys an application process that includes pre- and post-conference evaluations to identify or confirm the knowledge gained and new practices that scholarship recipients plan to implement and/or change. The surveys also inquire about additional topics of interest to help inform planning for future conferences. All attorney applicants for Commission scholarships must currently 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.

**02/07/25 Update:**

The Advanced Child Protection Law Conference: The State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law (CPL) Section will host its 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Advanced Child Protection Law Course on April 6-7, 2025. The CPL Section will include 3 hours of “101” content, which includes one hour of ethics credit on the morning of April 6, 2025. This will be followed by the Advanced Course, which will provide an additional 10.5 hours of MCLE, with 1.25 hours of ethics. There are separate registrations for the two courses. The Commission will provide registration scholarships for qualified attorneys to attend the live “101” and Advanced courses or to watch any scheduled webcast replays.

National Conference on Juvenile Justice: The NCJFCJ 2025 National Conference on Juvenile Justice will be held on March 16-19, 2025, in Boston, Massachusetts. The Commission awarded 4 scholarships to qualified judges.

Texas District and County Attorney Association Training: The 2025 Prosecuting Crimes Against Children Conference will be held on April 8-11, 2025, in Sugarland, Texas. The Commission plans to award up to 20 scholarships to qualified attorneys.

National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges Training: The NCJFCJ 88<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference will be held on July 20-23, 2025, 2025, in Chicago, Illinois. The Commission awarded 7 reimbursement scholarships to qualified judges.

Advanced Family Law One-Day Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop: The Child Abuse and Neglect One-Day Workshop will be held on August 6, 2025, in San Antonio, Texas. The Commission plans to award scholarships to qualified attorneys.

National Association of Counsel for Children Annual Conference: The 48<sup>th</sup> Annual NACC Conference will be held on August 11-13, 2025 in Cleveland, Ohio. The Commission plans to award scholarships to judges and attorneys.

Civil Appellate Practice 101: 2024: The Civil Appellate Practice 101 will be held in September 2025. The Commission plans to award reimbursement scholarships to qualified attorneys.

**Objective: Support county, state, and national child welfare leaders and organizations to enhance knowledge and competency and share experience and expertise with and throughout Texas.**

33. Strategy: Provide training and technical assistance to and collaborate with local jurisdictions.

**Background:** The Children’s Commission provides various types of support for child welfare partners and stakeholders including meeting facilitation and support, travel reimbursement for meeting and training event attendees, presentations by Children’s Commission staff as requested, and assistance with securing speakers for local, regional, or national events, as appropriate. Children’s Commission staff also serve on many other stakeholder workgroups and subcommittees formed under the leadership of its child welfare partners.

**02/07/25 Update:** Providing assistance to local jurisdictions will help the Commission to expand its capacity to meet requests for training support and to be able to bring training to other jurisdictions. Applications for assistance must relate to safety, permanency, or wellbeing for the child and family and fit into one or more of the Children’s Commission’s goals: Collaboration, Systems Improvement, Legal Practice & Process, Training, and/or Data. Applicants must have a judicial sponsor and their application must include a budget. The description of the funds and the application are called Legal Training Support, to indicate that applicants can request help with planning their training content, financial support for a venue or speaker fees, Zoom or MCLE assistance, or other support in order to provide training.

## GOAL V (DATA)

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.

**Objective:** Use child welfare, court, and other data to improve safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for children and youth in foster care.

34. Strategy: Apply data-driven decision-making to Children’s Commission projects, initiatives, deliverables, and areas of focus.

**Background:** In FY2025, the Children’s Commission added a strategy to embed the application of data into new and ongoing Children’s Commission projects. Incorporating data into other projects will operationalize the commitment to Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI). This strategy will also supplement any standalone data projects.

**02/07/25 Update:** At the Data Committee meeting on January 7, 2025, discussion centered around potential CFSR Program Improvement Plan legal and judicial strategies. Committee members discussed key data elements to track as well as available and critical data sources to optimize the analysis of the impact of any PIP-related strategies. This feedback will be used to develop the implementation plan for a pilot when the PIP is approved.

35. Strategy: Utilizing all available data sources, analyze trends in child welfare data such as referrals, investigations, removals, and exits.

**Background:** The Data Committee is committed to identifying and analyzing available data that could enhance courts’ understanding of statewide trends in relevant benchmarks and whether the trends correlate with the changes made to the Family Code or to DFPS policy.

**02/07/25 Update:** There are no updates during this reporting period.

36. Strategy: At the annual judicial conference, partner with DFPS to provide a statewide data presentation as well as tailored data presentations on state, regional, and local challenges and opportunities and encourage data-driven systemic improvements and collaborative efforts.

**Background:** On an annual basis, DFPS and the Children’s Commission partner to offer a statewide data plenary presentation as well as Regional Breakouts to members of the judiciary at the Child Welfare Judges Conference, which is hosted by the Commission in partnership with TCJ. This strategy is achieved at the annual judicial conference through collaboration between the CIP and DFPS during the portion of the conference which focuses on educating the judiciary with statewide data and updates from the Department. The Regional Breakout sessions provide the opportunity for judges, their DFPS regional directors from Child Protective Investigations, their CPS regional directors, and their regional systems improvement specialists to discuss region-specific data elements and permanency outcomes in the context of statewide data. Due to the expansion of Community-Based Care (CBC), Single Source Continuum Contractors responsible for case management and placement are also included in the regional breakout presentations with judges serving CBC catchment areas, beginning in 2020.

**02/07/25 Update:** The October 2024 Child Welfare Judges Conference Regional Breakouts incorporated feedback from previous conferences in order to increase gains in knowledge and facilitate higher-level discussion and problem-solving. Statewide data was shared in the DFPS leadership panel presentation so that the processes which lead to data outcomes can be presented for a greater understanding of the intersection of law, policy, practice, and data. Key topics were covered along with accompanying data on safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes at the statewide level. At the Regional Breakouts, judges examined and discussed regional data with an eye towards improving outcomes for children and families. During these breakout sessions, judges met with DFPS Region with CPS Regional Directors, CPI Regional Directors, Regional Systems Improvement Specialists, and SSCC representatives as applicable. Judicial and agency feedback following these sessions at the 2024 conference was positive and focused on the helpful aspects of examining data and improving communication.

**Objective: Study the efficacy of virtual or hybrid court hearings in child welfare cases and develop training, tools, and resources designed to maintain the benefits of technology.**

37. Strategy: Partner with OCA to support the maintenance, enhancements, data collection, impact, and usability of the Child Protection Case Management System (CPCMS), including integrating CPCMS with other data systems.

**Background:** CPCMS is a case management system which is unique to Child Protection Courts and has been in use since 2009. OCA staffs a CPCMS Advisory Council of CPC judges, OCA staff, and Children’s Commission staff to identify and discuss various enhancements and issues. User-generated problems and enhancements are routed through the Advisory Council, which also advises on data collection and reporting features of CPCMS. The Children’s Commission regularly collaborates with OCA on the status of CPCMS’ functioning, problems, and enhancements.

The Data Committee facilitates meetings between OCA, DFPS, and Data Committee members to discuss data sharing and integration between OCA’s CPCMS system and DFPS’ IMPACT system. The goal of integration is reducing errors and increasing data accuracy while reducing court staff workloads. OCA has also created an API that will allow Courts other than Child Protection Courts to upload their hearing data into the system and utilize the data collection and case management features of CPCMS.

**02/07/25 Update:** The CPCMS Advisory Council last met on December 6, 2024 to discuss planned updates for CPCMS and to review new enhancement requests. The council reviewed and approved a request for adding placement selection options of “Kinship-Licensed” and “SIL-TIP.” Respectively, these allow for tracking of children placed in kinship homes that are also licensed foster homes, and tracking of whether children in extended foster care are in Supervised Independent Living. Additionally, approval was granted for addition of the substance abuse testing type of “nail test.”

Recent updates to the CPCMS system were released on December 12, 2024. In addition to security and maintenance updates, the CPCMS training videos section was updated for improved user-friendliness, date entry formatting was updated for improved ease of use, and two new administrative reports were deployed. New reports include a breakout of permanency placement discharge reasons and average time to permanency, plus monthly breakouts per fiscal year of caseloads by case type for new filings and for open cases. The next CPCMS release is being planned for deployment in the second quarter of FY2025.

**INSERT - TAB 4**



**Children's Commission  
Financial Report**

**FISCAL YEAR 2025 FEDERAL/STATE REVENUE**

Fiscal Year 2024 Carry Forward	\$	1,229,007
(+) Fiscal Year 2025 Federal Distribution	\$	1,863,710
(+) Fiscal Year 2025 COLA Payment	\$	91,124
<b>Funds Available for FY 2025</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>3,183,841</b>

**FISCAL YEAR 2025 OTHER REVENUE**

	<u>Contract Amount</u>	<u>Contract Payments</u>
(+) 2024 Casey Family Programs Contract	\$ 10,000	\$ 5,000
(+) FY2025 DFPS Training Contract	\$ 787,458	\$ 104,193
<b>Fiscal Year 2025 Other Income</b>	<b>\$ 797,458</b>	<b>\$ 109,193</b>

**FISCAL YEAR 2025 BUDGET**

	<u>Budget</u>	<u>Expenses To-date</u>	<u>Anticipated Expenditures</u>
<b>Operating</b>	<b>\$ 1,541,810</b>	<b>\$ 266,131</b>	<b>\$ 1,275,679</b>
<b>Commission Projects</b>	<b>\$ 188,800</b>	<b>\$ 71,018</b>	<b>\$ 117,782</b>
<i>Systems Improvement</i>	40,000	2,572	37,428
<i>Legal Practice and Process</i>	76,400	68,191	8,209
<i>Training</i>	72,400	255	72,145
<b>Scholarships</b>	<b>\$ 82,000</b>	<b>\$ 825</b>	<b>\$ 81,175</b>
<i>Appellate Law Section Boot Camp</i>	7,500	825	6,675
<i>Child Protection Law Section</i>	10,000	-	10,000
<i>General Judicial Scholarship</i>	5,000	-	5,000
<i>NACC - Annual Conference</i>	10,000	-	10,000
<i>NCJFCJ - Judicial Scholarship</i>	30,000	-	30,000
<i>State Bar CAN CLE</i>	7,500	-	7,500
<i>TBLS - CWL Specialization Exam Fee Waiver</i>	2,000	-	2,000
<i>TDCAA - Conference</i>	10,000	-	10,000
<b>Grants</b>	<b>\$ 481,240</b>	<b>\$ 124,806</b>	<b>\$ 356,434</b>
<i>DFPS Regional Attorney Training Support</i>	12,500	-	12,500
<i>OCA - CIP Technology Project</i>	128,279	22,226	106,053
<i>OCA - CPC Visiting Judge</i>	13,000	1,933	11,067
<i>Texas Center for the Judiciary (TCJ)</i>	232,460	90,988	141,472
<i>TLSC Family Helpline</i>	95,001	9,659	85,343
<b>Total Proposed Expenditures</b>	<b>\$ 2,293,850</b>	<b>\$ 462,781</b>	<b>\$ 1,831,069</b>

**FISCAL YEAR 2025 ENDING BALANCE**

Funds Available for FY 2025	\$	3,183,841
(-) FY 2025 Anticipated Expenditures	\$	(2,293,850)
(+) FY 2025 Contract Payments	\$	109,193
<b>Estimated FY 2025 Carry Forward</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>999,184</b>



**INSERT - TAB 5**



Children's Commission Meeting  
Collaborative Council Announcements  
February 7, 2025

- Texas Lawyers for Children





**Texas  
Lawyers for  
Children**

**NEW Communication  
Tool Available!**

**NEW!**

Ask questions to experienced mental health professionals regarding children's mental & behavioral health at [www.TexasLawyersforChildren.org](http://www.TexasLawyersforChildren.org)

### **JUDGES AND ATTORNEYS --**

TLC has launched new discussion boards (separate for judges and attorneys), for you to ask experienced mental health professionals questions about the unique mental health needs of children in the child protection system on an ongoing basis! While these will not be case consultations, the discussion boards are a place to discuss solutions and advocacy points in children's cases to ensure children receive the correct diagnosis and treatment to help them find healing from the trauma they have experienced.

**SPECIAL NOTE FOR JUDGES:** One of TLC's attorneys spoke with an attorney at the State Commission on Judicial Conduct about ethical parameters for judicial participation in this type of service. She was told that judges can participate as long as any discussion is general and the judge does not rely on the mental health professional's opinion when ruling on a specific case.

### **To access the Discussion boards:**

- Log in to [www.TexasLawyersforChildren.org](http://www.TexasLawyersforChildren.org), click on "Communication Tools" in the menu bar and select "Discussion Boards" in the dropdown.
- Judges and attorneys only have access to the board for their profession. Click on the red "Enter" button, read and agree to the guidelines (on your first visit only).
- You will see a list of topics upon entering the board. Select a topic by clicking on it to view discussions in that category.
- To add a discussion, click the "Start New Discussion" link.
- For more instructions go to the "Discussion Board Helpful Tips" page (also found in the dropdown under "Communication Tools").
- Questions? Email [Kristen@TexasLawyersforChildren.org](mailto:Kristen@TexasLawyersforChildren.org).





