



# Children's Commission

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



## Children's Commission Meeting Notebook

May 17, 2024



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

May 17, 2024

Meeting Notebook  
Table of Contents

Meeting Agenda

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

Minutes from February 2, 2024 Commission Meeting .....2

May 17, 2024 Report to Commission.....3

Financial Report.....4

Collaborative Council Materials.....5





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

Friday, May 17, 2024  
9:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.

## Meeting Agenda

9:30 Commencement / Opening Remarks

First Order of Business – Adopt Minutes from February 2, 2024

9:45 Children's Commission Committee Discussion

- Systems Improvement
- Legal Practice & Process
- Training
- Data

10:45 Department of Family & Protective Services Update

11:15 Office of Court Administration Update

11:25 Collaborative Council Member Announcements

11:30 New Business / Adjourn

Meeting Schedule: September 13, 2024 (in person)

November 15, 2024 (virtual)



**INSERT - TAB 1**





## CHILDREN'S COMMISSION MEMBERS

Hon. Debra Lehrmann, <i>Chair</i>	Hon. Rosie Alvarado	Mark Briggs	Anne Heiligenstein	Hon. Randy Shelton
Hon. Rebeca Huddle, <i>Deputy Chair</i>	Karla Baker	Hon. Susan Brown	Rep. Stephanie Klick	Luanne Southern
Hon. Eva Guzman, <i>Chair Emeritus</i>	Erica Bañuelos	Hon. Darlene Byrne	Hon. Selina Mireles	Vicki Spriggs
Hon. Harriet O'Neill, <i>Chair Emeritus</i>	Chantel Bedlington	Hon. Julie Countiss	Katie Olse	Terese Stevenson
	Corey Benbow	Sheila Sturgis Craig	Hon. Robbie Partida-Kipness	Hon. Thomas Stuckey
	Dr. Gary Blau	Hon. Roy Ferguson	Sasha Rasco	Sen. Royce West
		Madelyn Fletcher	Hon. Isaac Roldan	

## COMMITTEE MEMBERS

<b>EXECUTIVE</b>	<b>SYSTEMS IMPROVEMENT</b>	<b>LEGAL PRACTICE &amp; PROCESS</b>	<b>TRAINING</b>	<b>DATA</b>
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	Karla Baker	Hon. Mark Atkinson	Hon. Rosie Alvarado
Hon. Eva Guzman	Chantel Bedlington	Mark Briggs	Tymothy Belseth	Chelsea Cornelius
Hon. Harriet O'Neill	Dr. Gary Blau	Sarah Bryant	Denise Campbell	Nathan Ezell
Hon. Susan Brown	Hon. Julie Countiss	Hon. Delia Gonzales	Teal De La Garza	Dr. Monica Faulkner
Hon. Rob Hofmann	Sarah Crockett	Hon. Charles Griffin	Barbara Elias-Periciful	Hon. Delia Gonzales
Hon. Piper McCraw	Adrianna Cuéllar Rojas	Brenda Kinsler	Hon. Angela Graves-Harrington	Elizabeth Kromrei
Hon. Thomas Stuckey	Gabriella McDonald	Crystal Leff-Piñon	Margaret Halpin	Hon. Robin Sage
	Emily Miller	Janet VanderZanden	Hon. Robbie Partida-Kipness	Hon. Michael Schneider
	Hon. Robin Sage	Charlote Velasco	Judy Powell	Vicki Spriggs
<b>Staff:</b>	Hon. Ian Spechler		Kellie Price	Hon. Carlos Villalon
<i>Jamie Bernstein</i>	Natalie Taylor	<b>Staff:</b>	Hon. Tracey Scown	<b>Staff:</b>
	Sarah Worthington	<i>Dylan Moench</i>	Hon. Elizabeth Watkins	<i>Dylan Moench</i>
		<i>Renée Castillo-De La Cruz</i>		<b>OCA Advisory:</b>
	<b>Staff:</b>			<i>Darrell Childers</i>
	<i>Jamie Bernstein</i>			<i>Casey Kennedy</i>
	<i>Aimee Corbin</i>			<i>Alejandra Peña</i>
				<i>Mena Ramon</i>
				<i>Charlote Velasco</i>

## COLLABORATIVE COUNCIL MEMBERS

Andrew Brown	Will Francis	Kasey Jackson	Tanya Rollins	Jamie Bernstein, <i>Executive Director</i>
Dania Carter	Fedora Galasso	Kerrie Judice	Danielle Schafer	Milbrey Raney, <i>Assistant Director</i>
Irene Clements	Dr. Linda Garcia	Norman Ladd	Johana Scot	Jessica Arguijo, <i>Communications Manager</i>
Sarah Crockett	Barbra Grimmer	Stephanie Madrigal	Andrea Sparks	Renée Castillo-De La Cruz, <i>Staff Attorney</i>
Teal De La Garza	Sandra Hachem	Gabriella McDonald	Kenneth Thompson	Aimee Corbin, <i>Staff Attorney</i>
DeShaun Ealoms	Julia Hatcher	Dr. Jill McLeigh	Ruth Thornton	Tiffany Edwards, <i>Executive Assistant</i>
Barbara Elias-Periciful	Félix Herrera	Kate Murphy	Sarah Worthington	Chelsea Martinez, <i>Program Specialist</i>
Mike Foster	Tina Hosaka	Judy Powell		Dylan Moench, <i>Legal Representation Director</i>
				Patrick Passmore, <i>Finance Manager</i>
				Willette Sedwick, <i>Accountant</i>
				Andrea Vicencio, <i>Program Specialist</i>
				Hon. Rob Hofmann, <i>Senior Jurist in Residence</i>
				Hon. Piper McCraw, <i>Jurist in Residence</i>

## STAFF



**INSERT - TAB 2**



# Supreme Court of Texas Children’s Commission Meeting Minutes

**Friday, February 2, 2024  
9:30 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.**

## **ATTENDANCE**

<b>Commissioners</b>	<b>Attended</b>	<b>Did Not Attend</b>
<i>Chair</i> , Hon. Debra Lehrmann, 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 CPS, 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		✓
Mark Briggs, Chair, State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law Section, El Paso		✓
Hon. Susan Brown, Presiding Judge, 11 <sup>th</sup> Administrative Judicial Region, Houston	✓	
Hon. Darlene Byrne, Chief Justice, Third Court of Appeals, Austin	✓	
Hon. Julie Countiss, Justice, First Court of Appeals, Houston	✓	
Sheila Craig, Director, Civil Rights Office, Health and Human Services Commission, Austin	✓	
Hon. Roy Ferguson, Judge, 394 <sup>th</sup> District Court, Alpine	✓	
Madelyn Fletcher, Budget and Policy Advisor, Office of the Governor, Austin	✓	
Anne Heiligenstein, Senior Director Strategic Consultant, Casey Family Programs, Austin		✓
Rep. Stephanie Klick, Texas House of Representatives, District 91, North Richland Hills		✓
Hon. Selina Mireles, Associate Judge, 4 <sup>th</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup> Admin. Judicial Regions Child Protection Court, Laredo		✓
Katie Olse, Executive Director, Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services, Austin	✓	
Hon. Robbie Partida-Kipness, Justice, Fifth District Court of Appeals, Dallas	✓	
Sasha Rasco, Chief Prevention and Community Well-Being Officer for Prevention, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, Austin		✓
Hon. Isaac Roldan, Tribal Court Judge, Ysleta Del Sur Pueblo Tribe, El Paso		✓
Hon. Randy Shelton, Judge, 279 <sup>th</sup> Civil District Court, Beaumont		✓
Luanne Southern, Executive Director, Texas Child Mental Health Care Consortium, 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	✓	
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>		
Sarah Bryant, Managing Attorney, Family Helpline, Texas Legal Services Center		
Sarah Crockett, Director of Public Policy, Texas CASA		
Tiffany Crouch Bartlett, Attorney at Law, Texas Lawyers for Children		
Hon. Angela Graves-Harrington, Judge, 246 <sup>th</sup> Family Court		
Hon. Katrina Griffith, Harris County Child Protection Court		
Crystal Leff-Piñon, Director of Family Protection Representation, Texas Indigent Defense Commission		
Audrey O’Neill, Deputy Commissioner, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services		
Tiffany Roper, Casey Family Programs		

Joel Schwartz, Director, Health and Human Services Office of the Ombudsman  
Raven Sowell, Foster Care Ombudsman, Health and Human Services Office of the Ombudsman  
Kaysie Taccetta, Project Manager, Texas Child-Centered Care (T3C)  
Kenneth Thompson, Fatherhood Specialist, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services  
Alejandrina Valdez, Deputy Director, Health and Human Services Office of the Ombudsman  
Sarah Worthington, Director, Texas Foster Youth Justice Project

**Office of Court Administration Staff**

Megan LaVoie, Administrative Director

**Attending Staff**

Jamie Bernstein, Executive Director  
Renée Castillo-De La Cruz, Staff Attorney  
Aimee Corbin, Staff Attorney  
Tiffany Edwards, Executive Assistant  
Chelsea Martinez, Program Specialist  
Dylan Moench, Legal Representation Director  
Patrick Passmore, Finance Manager  
Milbrey Raney, Assistant Director  
Willette Sedwick, Accountant  
Andrea Vicencio, Program Specialist

**CALL TO ORDER AND OPENING REMARKS**

Justice Debra Lehrmann called the meeting to order at 9:46 a.m. and welcomed everyone to the first meeting of 2024. Justice Lehrmann expressed gratitude to the Commissioners for the perspectives that each member brings as we work together to improve outcomes for children, youth, and families who experience the Texas child welfare system.

**Adoption of November 3, 2024 Meeting Minutes**

Justice Lehrmann directed members to the November 3, 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 questions or edits to the minutes. Hearing none, after a motion and a second the Commissioners voted to adopt the minutes for the November 3, 2024 Children’s Commission meeting.

**Committee and Collaborative Council Member Changes**

Justice Lehrmann announced that Ms. Jordan Watson rolled off the Systems Improvement Committee. Ms. Chantel Bedlington, current Commissioner and Supervisor of the Kinship Navigator Program with ACH Services in Fort Worth, will join the Systems Improvement Committee.

Justice Lehrmann shared that Mr. Bruce Kendrick took on an expanded role at Watermark Community Church and can no longer serve on the Collaborative Council. She thanked him for his years of service as a member on the council and added that the Commission will seek to identify another faith-based leader to join in the coming months.

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

Ms. Erica Bañuelos described a new effort called Operation PUSH (Placing Us in Safe Homes) that aims to encourage more timely adoptions. PUSH staff specialize in preparing children for adoption by working with relatives, Child Placing Agencies, courts, and attorneys. In the first quarter of this fiscal year, they completed 919 adoptions, which is 38% of their goal. Ms. Bañuelos clarified that adoptions may be delayed due to administrative restraints, such as a lengthy document-gathering process for kinship caregivers or home studies for non-kinship adoptions.

Ms. Sheila Craig expressed interest in seeing data broken down by race and ethnicity regarding the utilization of kinship care. She encouraged DFPS to work with HHSC to expedite services and benefits for kinship families who are ready to go through the adoption process. Ms. Bañuelos noted that DFPS kinship specialists work with caregivers to get licensed earlier in the process, which can enable Permanency Care Assistance more quickly, thereby speeding up the adoption process as soon as a child is eligible. Ms. Bañuelos shared that the department is working with kinship caregivers with lived experience across the state who give DFPS feedback to improve DFPS processes on placement with kin. Ms. Bañuelos reported that currently 41% of children in care are placed with relatives or kin and encouraged everyone to look up related Data Book information on the DFPS website for more details.

Ms. Bañuelos then referenced the one-page handout with data on Children Without Placement (CWOP). Ms. Bañuelos emphasized the department's efforts to get children not just into a placement, but into the "right placement." She expressed that judges, CASA, ad litem attorneys, and the DFPS placement staff are instrumental in identifying and securing placements. Regarding a question about how children who are without placement for less than two days are counted in the data, Ms. Audrey O'Neill responded that children who run away were not counted as children without placement status in the first 24 hours while placement is being sought for them.

Ms. Bañuelos shared that Refusal to Assume Parental Responsibility (RAPR) cases account for 49% of CWOP cases. She added that DFPS is working closely with psychiatric hospitals, service providers, and juvenile justice partners to identify other strategies to support children and families in these circumstances. Ms. O'Neill reported that it is very rare to see a child aged 10 and under in CWOP and that beginning in the fall of 2023, DFPS implemented a policy that the Associate Commissioner had to approve CWOP for a child in this age group, even if just for one day. She added that children ages 10-13 account for 10% of the CWOP population.

Ms. O'Neill announced that DFPS hired 30 dedicated staff to address CWOP. DFPS plans to post additional positions and provide a wide range of additional training for professionals. Also, DFPS hired a new Director of Special Projects to address the mental health needs of children without placement and children with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities. Ms. O'Neill shared that in addition to leased homes the department is prioritizing efforts to identify more structured placements than hotels.

Ms. Erica Bañuelos reported on DFPS' efforts to grow capacity with a focus on placements for older youth and youth with significant mental health needs. Ms. Bañuelos shared an update on several efforts to establish a continuum of placement options, including the Qualified Residential Treatment Program (QRTP) model. At the time of the meeting, there were 50 children placed in

three QRTPs in Goldthwaite, Abilene, and Lubbock. Ms. Bañuelos indicated that DFPS has not experienced any pushback from judges when the QRTP model is recommended for a child.

### **PRESENTATION ON TEXAS CHILD CENTERED CARE (T3C)**

Ms. Kaysie Taccetta, DFPS Project Manager, gave a presentation on the rollout of Texas Child Centered Care (T3C). She provided a brief history of the 36-year-old Texas service level system and noted that the 88<sup>th</sup> Legislature made historic investments into foster care and kinship care services. The goal is to design a comprehensive service array and link each child to optimal service packages. For more information, please reference Texas Child-Centered Care (T3C) [Presentation](#).

### **SPECIAL PRESENTATION ON SUPPORTING FATHERHOOD**

Mr. Kenneth Thompson, DFPS Fatherhood Program Specialist, presented information on the importance of engaging and supporting fathers. Notably, he highlighted that fathers positively impact their children by transmitting beliefs and value systems, purpose, behaviors, and emotions. Mr. Thompson underscored that a father could make a difference in their child's life at all ages, including identifying half of a family tree and many critical connections and supports for children. For more information, please reference Shifting the Paradigm: Engaging Fathers in Child Welfare [Presentation](#).

### **SPECIAL PRESENTATION FROM FOSTER CARE OMBUDSMAN**

Ms. Raven Sowell, Manager of the Health and Human Services Foster Care Ombudsman, gave a presentation about the role of the Ombudsman and population served. She shared that the Foster Care Ombudsman assists youth in foster care with inquiries and complaints about programs and services and gave examples of her work and the work of her office to support youth in care. She encouraged greater awareness about the Foster Care Ombudsman for children and youth in foster care. For more information, please reference Foster Care Ombudsman [Presentation](#).

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

Ms. Megan LaVoie reported that OCA is working on the legislatively-directed text reminder program and plans to launch the program in February. Ms. LaVoie also shared that OCA is conducting a workload study for court staff at both the district and county court levels to determine how much court staff is needed across the state, including clerks, bailiffs, staff attorneys, etc. The study is due to the Legislature in June 2025. Ms. LaVoie also announced that OCA was able to secure funds from the legislature to create a new data warehouse and will send out a request for proposals soon for a new data system since OCA's current data collection system is 20 years old.

Additionally, Ms. LaVoie announced that the recently passed HB 2384 requires clerks to annually report by court the average case clearance rate, the average time a case is before a court from filing to disposition, and the court's active caseload. OCA is also working on HB 1182 that requires jurisdictions with a population of above one million to report 8 different elements of case level data. OCA will hold webinars over the next two months for judges and clerks to discuss the changes to come. Reports on both of these bills are due to the Legislature in January 2025.



Ms. LaVoie reported that the Judicial Council released over twenty charges in November 2023 and the four related committees will begin meeting this spring to examine them. She highlighted the following charges: studying how to use artificial intelligence in the courts, ways to improve court efficiency, and judicial profession shortages. Ms. LaVoie shared that OCA was charged with implementing the Business Courts and the 15<sup>th</sup> Court of Appeals legislation by September 1, 2024. She also updated that the Remote Court Interpreter Program has reported its highest numbers yet over the months of September to November 2023. On a related note, OCA received information from judges about the need for more available court reporters and is now exploring options to create a program similar to the Remote Court Interpreter Program for court reporters.

Ms. LaVoie shared that OCA is continuing its work with the Children's Commission on the Early Intervention Court Liaison project and will meet soon with the Commission, DFPS, and the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University to discuss the evaluation of that project. Lastly, OCA intends to collect more data from the Child Protection Case Management System and develop an easily searchable dashboard.

### **CHILDREN'S COMMISSION UPDATE**

Ms. Jamie Bernstein welcomed special guests Hon. Katrina Griffith, judge of the Harris County Child Protection Court, and Tiffany Roper, consultant with Casey Family Programs. Ms. Bernstein went on to announce that the Children's Commission 2024 Annual Report was released and is available on the Children's Commission website. She further directed Commissioners to the Report to the Commission behind Tab 3 of the Meeting Notebook which includes updates on all Children's Commission projects and initiatives. Commission staff further elaborated on a few recent projects and deliverables. Mr. Patrick Passmore guided Commissioners to Tab 4 for the current financial report and gave a brief report of the Commission's expenses.

### **COLLABORATIVE COUNCIL MEMBER UPDATES**

Ms. Barbra Grimmer, Public Policy Coordinator at Texas Council on Family Violence (TCFV), shared that there will be five, one-hour information sessions this year hosted by TCFV. The topic in February will be on defining abuse, March will focus on the best interest of the child, July on alternative dispute resolution, and September on modification and enforcement. She also announced that TCFV will hold two-day regional convenings in March in DFPS Regions 6 and 7 on the links between child welfare, housing, and domestic violence survivors and their children. The regional convening in Region 7 will be held on March 6-7, 2024, at TCEA and the Region 6 convening will occur on March 12-13, 2024, at the United Way.

Ms. Tiffany Crouch Bartlett, Attorney at Texas Lawyers for Children, shared that the Child Protection Law Section will present a webinar with world-renowned trauma expert, Dr. Bruce Perry. The date has not been announced yet. Ms. Bartlett also reported that Texas Lawyers for Children will hold a training on the overmedication of children with Dr. Rachael Keefe on February 20, 2024, at 3:00 p.m.

## **NEW BUSINESS**

Judge Hofmann announced that the next Children's Commission Meeting will be held virtually on May 17, 2024. The last two meetings of 2024 will be held on the following dates:

- Friday, September 13, 2024 (in person)
- Friday, November 15, 2024 (virtual)

## **ADJOURNMENT**

The meeting was adjourned at 1:45 p.m.

**INSERT - TAB 3**



# REPORT TO THE COMMISSION

## May 17, 2024

### 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 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 and CIP strategic plans to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and to the Supreme Court of Texas. Leadership from the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), Texas Court Appointed Special Advocates, and the State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law Section 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 partnering with other state and national level executives, partners, and organizations. The Children's Commission creates an environment and maintains the 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 monitor related Commission projects and initiatives.

**05/17/24 Update:** The February 2, 2024 Commission meeting was held in person as well as streamed and archived on the Commission's YouTube channel and website.

The Systems Improvement, Legal Practice & Process, Training, and Data Committees recently met on April 29, April 26, April 30, and April 19, 2024 respectively to discuss progress on FY2024 projects and to brainstorm projects for the coming fiscal year.

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 Judicial Commission on Mental Health, the Texas Juvenile Justice Department, the Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services (TACFS), the University of Texas School of Social Work, the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute, 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 about member areas of interest and priorities. The Children’s Commission also conducts a bi-weekly collaborative call with DFPS, the Office of Court Administration (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.

**05/17/24 Update:** Bi-weekly stakeholder calls, including updates and participation from agency staff and Collaborative Council members, continue to take place every other week.

**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, and training opportunities. 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 which includes X, formerly Twitter ([@TXChildrensComm](#)) and LinkedIn ([Texas Children’s Commission](#)).

**05/17/24 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 in the child welfare system. In 2023, OCA upgraded the content management system (CMS) Umbraco. The Children’s Commission continues to explore design functionality and work with OCA to schedule further testing and improvements. Additionally, OCA has offered to develop a tool and dashboard to analyze website traffic and resources commonly accessed. The Children’s Commission also created a LinkedIn business page, [Texas Children's Commission](#).

**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:** At the foundation of the Children’s Commission is a longstanding collaboration with the state child welfare agency, DFPS. The Children’s Commission engages in ongoing participation with ACF

and DFPS regarding the 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.

**05/17/24 Update:** Children’s Commission staff continue to participate in many Department initiatives including participation by the Executive Director and Senior Jurist in Residence on the Public-Private Partnership (PPP), the advisory body for the rollout of Community-Based Care in Texas. The most recent PPP meeting took place on February 1, 2024. The PPP will be restructured in 2024; the new advisory body will be referred to as the Partnerships for Children and Families Committee (PCFC). The Children’s Commission will hold a standing position on PCFC which will meet for the first time on May 31, 2024.

From April 22-26, 2024, ACF conducted the CFSR stakeholder interviews in Texas. Over twenty interviews were conducted, engaging over 260 parent advocates, young adults, caregivers, providers, judges, attorneys, CASA advocates, agency and Single Source Continuum Contractor (SSCC) leadership and staff, and Tribal representatives from throughout the state. The Children’s Commission will continue to actively participate in the CFSR process. This includes conducting case reads, providing a forum for collaboration with legal stakeholders, and encouraging judges and attorneys to participate in the development of the Program Improvement Plan.

**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.**

5. Strategy: Provide assistance to and collaborate with local jurisdictions, DFPS, and state and national partners and organizations.

**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.

In response to the growing numbers of children without placement (often referred to as CWOP or “child watch”), the Children’s Commission initiated a judicial workgroup to focus on this issue. Beginning in June 2021, the workgroup meets on a regular basis to provide a forum for judges from jurisdictions throughout the state to brainstorm effective approaches to identifying options for children without a licensed placement. The group is now referred to as the Judicial Child Welfare Forum to reflect the broad array of issues discussed and the meetings now occur on a bi-monthly basis.

**05/17/24 Update:**

The Judicial Child Welfare Forum recently convened on April 11 and May 9, 2024. The April meeting included an update from Erica Bañuelos, Associate Commissioner for Child Protective Services, regarding staff support and new services for children without placement, as well as a discussion of issues affecting youth who were about to turn 18 and Texas Family First cases.

## GOAL II (SYSTEMS IMPROVEMENT)

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

**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.**

6. 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, and improving 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 in bi-weekly stakeholder calls as well as multiple Children’s Commission meetings regarding Emergency Orders, proposed legislation and rules, Community-Based Care, prevention and early intervention, placement capacity, and other issues.

**05/17/24 Update:** Between February 2 and May 17, 2024, a few examples of JIR activities include:

- Continued work as President-Elect for the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) and attended multiple Executive and other Committee Meetings
- Attended the Children’s Commission Bench Book Committee Meeting, February 7, Virtual
- Attended the Children’s Commission Equity Workgroup Meetings, February 15 and April 18, Virtual
- Attended the Hill Country Annual Ad Litem Training, March 1, Kerrville
- Chaired the Children’s Commission’s Trial Skills Training Faculty Meeting, February 22, Virtual
- Presented at the 6th Annual Advanced Child Protection Law Course, April 5, Dallas
- Attended the NCJFCJ Annual “Days on the Hill” Event, March 4-8, Washington, DC
- Attended NCJFCJ Juvenile Justice Conference and attended Executive and Board Meetings, March 15-20, Cleveland, OH
- Attended the Harris County Pearls and Eagles Foster Youth Conference, April 6, Houston
- Attended the Children’s Commission Federal Child and Families Services Review Informational Meeting, April 12, Virtual



- Attended the Children’s Commission Federal Child and Families Services Reviews Stakeholder Interviews for the Judiciary, April 24, Virtual
- Chaired the Children’s Commission Systems Improvement Committee Meeting, April 29, Virtual
- Chaired the Children’s Commission Training Committee Meeting, April 30, Virtual
- Attended the Children’s Commission Legislation and Policy Resources Committee Meeting, May 6, Virtual
- Attended the National Judicial Network Peer-to-Peer Session on Victims of Human Trafficking, May 7, Virtual
- Attended the West Texas Foster Care Consortium, May 13, San Angelo
- Participated in calls with Executive Director, leadership, and Commission 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.**

7. 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.

On June 24, 2022, the Children’s Commission and the Texas Judicial Commission on Mental Health (JCMH) held the first joint commission Round Table Discussion on Current Issues in Children’s Mental Health. Leadership from both commissions participated in the discussion, including Supreme Court of Texas Justice Debra Lehrmann, Chair of the Children’s Commission; Texas Court of Criminal Appeals Judge Barbara Hervey, Co-Chair of the Judicial Commission on Mental Health; and Supreme Court of Texas Justice Rebeca Huddle, Deputy Chair of the Children’s Commission and Deputy Liaison to the Judicial Commission on Mental Health. A report from the Round Table Discussion was released on September 30, 2022 which outlined recommendations set forth in the June 2022 Round Table.

**05/17/24 Update:** The Children’s Commission has begun the next phase of the work related to trauma informed care and children’s mental health. In the summer of 2024, a new initiative called the Consortium on Trauma Informed Court Practices will launch to provide a statewide network for judges and other professionals to have a forum for discussion. Chaired by Hon. Carlos Villalon Jr., Associate Judge of the Child Protection Court of the Rio Grande Valley West, the Consortium will further expand the reach of the SCTIC by sharing and expanding the work of the four Trauma Informed Court Pilot judges and their court teams. (TACFS issued a [report](#) on the work of these four courts, which was done in collaboration with the Children’s Commission.) These four judges will serve as mentors to other judges who will be invited to attend a bi-monthly virtual forum to receive education and training on trauma informed court practices.

After a series covering the fundamentals of promising court practices, participants will be invited to form their own court teams. Commission staff will provide meeting support, continuing legal education credit, and a related resource library.

The Children’s Commission also participates 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 meets regularly in order to develop a shared understanding of the landscape of behavioral health governance, funding, and the service array, with the goal of submitting a plan to the Legislative Budget Board and the Office of the Governor on December 1, 2024.

**Objective: Support efforts to address equity in the Texas child welfare system so that children, youth, and families receive services and supports that meet their individual needs.**

8. Strategy: Identify and promote data-driven, cross-disciplinary opportunities to address disproportionality and disparities among children, youth, and families involved in child welfare cases.

**Background:** The Children’s Commission is committed to the goal of reducing racial and ethnic disproportionality and disparities in the child welfare system through development and deployment of judicial and attorney resources aimed at increasing awareness, sharing data and information, as well as disseminating best practices for dealing with disproportionality and disparities systemically and locally.

**05/17/24 Update:** The Equity Workgroup last met on February 15 and April 18, 2024 to share updates on local, regional, and state efforts to address disproportionality and disparities in the child welfare system. Updates included information from the DFPS Disproportionality Team, the Casey Family Programs Race Equity Collaborative, the Travis County Race Equity Collaborative, and additional member announcements. The workgroup will meet next on June 20.

**Objective: Improve and expand engagement of youth in court hearings and related decision-making so that children and youth are involved in decisions being made about their lives.**

9. 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 goal of the Children’s Commission to improve 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.

**05/17/24 Update:** Commission staff continue to participate in a Supervised Independent Living (SIL) Workgroup led by DFPS. The purpose of the group is to review the current SIL policy and review the functionality and benefits for young adults aging out of care. Input from young adults with lived experience will be incorporated into the workgroup.

Commission staff are working with the Office of the Governor and other statewide partners, including DFPS and the Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS), to create a guide for survivors of sexual abuse; youth with lived experience will be consulted.

On April 1, 2024, Commission staff met with the Commissioner Representing Labor from the Texas Workforce Commission, the DFPS Commissioner, partners from 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 incorporate and consult with youth who have lived experience into future planning.

**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.**

10. 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 substance abuse 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.

During 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 site 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 Community-Based Care Regions: 1, 2, 3W, and 8B, with plans for expansions into 6A and 8A.

**05/17/24 Update:** The Children’s Commission staff participate in PEI’s Prevention Framework Workgroup which has a goal of developing a prevention framework to guide communities throughout Texas.

For the Early Intervention Court Liaison pilot, the Commission contracted with Texas A&M University to conduct a formal evaluation of the pilot program. As of May 2024, Texas A&M completed their interviews and began drafting the final report. OCA and PEI agreed to renew the early intervention pilot grant for 2024-2026.

On November 16, 2023, Hon. Jamie Rawlinson, Judge of the Coastal Bend Children's Court, Liaisons Barbara Bischoff and Rachel Faz, and Commission staff presented at the Annual Partners in Prevention Conference. The presentation "Prevention and Strengthening the Community from the Bench: Texas' Early Intervention Court Liaison" provided details on the current successes and challenges of the pilot program. The audience received an overview of prevention work from the bench which enables families to reunify sooner or avoid removals altogether.

Children's Commission staff meet on a monthly basis with DFPS staff from Investigations, Family-Based Safety Services, Prevention and Early Intervention, Data and Evaluation, Legal, and Finance departments on the Texas Family First Pilot Implementation Steering Committee. During meetings, DFPS provides updates on steps taken to identify the target population served and implement the pilot.

In 2024, DFPS awarded a grant to the Commission to conduct statewide regional trainings on the Texas Family First Pilot. The training content will cover the TFF pilot including defining the eligible population, providing details on the current progress, and clarifying many questions related to referrals, referral sources, and time limitations. The next training will occur on June 3, 2024 in the DFPS 3W Region (Fort Worth and surrounding areas).

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

11. 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.

**05/17/24 Update:** Planning for the next Foster Care & Education Summit is underway with an expansion to a two-day training to be held on September 26-27, 2024 at Angelo State University.

On May 6, 2024, the FC&Ed Committee discussed the future planning and projects, including updating the higher education guide, data and information sharing, and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) tools.

The Data and Information Sharing Workgroup will focus on the momentum and recommendations created through the Foster Care & Student Success Texas Data and Trends Report of 2018. The workgroup plans to review current data shared between DFPS and TEA and work towards an annual report. TEA has completed their data exchange and DFPS is currently reviewing the process.

The Every Student Succeeds Act 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.

**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.**

12. Strategy: Partner with national, state, and local leaders to better support children, youth, and families with specialized needs such as addressing sexual abuse, physical abuse, or runaway issues.

**Background:** The Children’s Commission partners with many key stakeholders with a goal of raising awareness on specialized 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 needs that impact children and youth involved with the child welfare system.

**05/17/24 Update:** In February 2021, Commission staff joined a monthly TEA School-Aged Human Trafficking Prevention and Awareness Statewide Implementation Workgroup which focuses on prevention and awareness of human trafficking within Texas schools. This workgroup last met on March 2, 2024.

In April of 2024, Commission staff attended an ACF Region VI Human Trafficking Conference. This was a virtual two-day conference with presentations on labor trafficking and survivor-focused sessions.

On March 28, 2024, the Commission along with the Officer of the Governor, DFPS, and other stakeholders had their third meeting to develop a resource aimed at the rights of children who are sexual abuse survivors. The workgroup is led by Hon. Selina Mireles, Judge of the 4th & 5th Administrative Judicial Regions Cluster 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.

**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.**

13. 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 usually 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.

**05/17/24 Update:** There were no updates during this reporting period.

14. Strategy: Engage stakeholders in the legal system in statewide efforts to develop and expand placement capacity, including the rollout of Community Based Care, kinship care, and the Qualified Residential Treatment Program model.

**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, Community-Based Care (CBC) is the new foster care model in Texas. In this model, most Child Protective Services duties will transfer to a local service network led by an SSCC.

SB 1930 by Senator Kolkhorst passed during the 88th Regular Legislative Session and contains the recommendations from the Children’s Commission SB 1575 Workgroup created by the 87th Legislature regarding procedures for placing a child in a Residential Treatment Center or Qualified Residential Treatment Program (QRTP). The bill is effective September 1, 2023.

**05/17/24 Update:** On April 19, 2024, the Children’s Commission participated in the inaugural Community Based Care Region 7 Judicial Workgroup meeting. The workgroup plans to develop trainings for the legal stakeholders as part of a larger effort to prepare the community for the transition to CBC. On May 3, 2024, the Children’s Commission partnered with the Texas Family Care Network to discuss the transition to Stage II of Community Based Care with judges in DFPS Region 5. A follow up meeting is planned with attorneys practicing child welfare law in the region.

**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.**

15. 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 will create a juvenile justice committee to study broader issues related to children and youth involved with the Texas juvenile justice system.

**05/17/24 Update:** The Children’s Commission Juvenile Justice Committee last met on February 22, 2024. The primary focus of the meeting was a data discussion led by the Texas Juvenile Justice Department. At the next meeting on June 7, the committee will start to prioritize areas of focus.

## 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.**

16. 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.

**05/17/24 Update:** The LRC last met on May 3, 2024, to discuss the status of several committee projects.

The LRC has focused on attorney outreach and recruitment. Commission staff partnered with the Texas Indigent Defense Commission (TIDC) to develop attorney recruitment days at law schools across Texas including Baylor University School of Law, South Texas College of Law, Texas Tech University School of Law, and University of Houston Law Center. TIDC held recruitment events at Texas Tech University School of Law on March 26, 2024, and at Baylor University School of Law on April 3, 2024. The events included panels of local judges, attorneys, and law school alumni discussing the importance of high-quality representation, the need for attorneys in local communities, and how law students can choose child welfare law as a career path.

The Appellate Representation Workgroup’s webinar entitled “Navigating the Transition from Trial to Appellate Counsel” was hosted by the Children’s Commission on February 23, 2024. Additional webinars focused on appellate issues include “Filing for Mandamus” on May 7, 2024, and a pending webinar in the Commission’s Trial Skills for Child Welfare Cases series entitled “Preserving the Record for Appeal” on November 22, 2024.

The Children’s Commission is also offering registration reimbursement scholarships to attorneys to attend two training opportunities hosted by the Civil Appellate Section of the State Bar of Texas: the Handling Your First (or Next) Civil Appeal Webcast Replay on May 22, 2024 and the Civil Appellate Practice 101: 2024 event on September 4, 2024.

The committee also discussed the status of several new project ideas generated at the last committee meeting. Commission staff met on May 10, 2024 with Melissa Garcia, Director of Texas High School Mock Trial & Law Related Education, to discuss a child welfare law fact pattern for mock trials. Commission staff also reported on progress in supporting the creation of law school child welfare law courses and enhancing access to resource materials for attorneys.



The Texas Indigent Defense Commission announced the beginning of its mentorship program for new child welfare attorneys, the agreement between TIDC and DFPS to collaborate on Title IV-E reimbursement, and the launch of regular community of practice meetings for child welfare attorneys.

The committee chose supporting pre-petition representation of parents and children as its top priority for FY2025 and will meet again on August 2, 2024 to discuss how the committee can best support pre-petition efforts.

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

17. 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 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.

**05/17/24 Update:** The Committee held its most recent in-person meeting on February 29-March 1, 2024, to review the final sections of Phase 1, which covers the attorney-client relationship. The Committee then began the draft of Phase 2, which covers the investigative stage of a case. The next meeting of the Standards of Representation Committee will be a virtual meeting on June 7, 2024 and the next in-person meeting will be held on September 26-27, 2024.

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

18. 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:** On February 14, 2017, the Supreme Court of Texas officially recognized Child Welfare Law as the 20th area of certified legal specialization. Children’s Commission staff serve as the chair of 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.

**05/17/24 Update:** Applications for the 2024 Child Welfare Board Certification Exam closed on April 22, 2024. Applicants will be notified this summer of their eligibility to take the fall exam. The exam will be scheduled over a two-day period on September 30 and October 1, 2024. 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.

**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.**

19. 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.

**05/17/24 Update:** The Parent Resource Workgroup has two subgroups that meet regularly to discuss priority projects identified by the larger workgroup. The Pre-Litigation Guide Subgroup last met on March 25, 2024, to continue work on completing the guide. The subgroup plans to have a final in person convening in the next few months. The Parent Materials Subgroup hosted two focus group meetings in February with parents with lived experience aimed at identifying the most relevant topics to include in its parent voice video project. The Parent Materials Subgroup convened in early April to review the focus group input and has identified four to five topics to highlight in the pending parent voice videos. The next Parent Resource Workgroup meeting will occur in June.

20. 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:** Since 2017, the Children’s Commission has partnered with Access to Justice 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), which 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, 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 similar situations.

**05/17/24 Update:** The Family Helpline completed a total of 777 calls from October 1, 2023, through March 31, 2024, assisting 750 adults and impacting 1,300 children in a total of 101 different Texas counties. Most calls received by the Family Helpline during this period were related to Child Protective Investigations (35% of the total calls). The second highest volume of calls received were related to questions about a closed Child Protective Investigations (CPI) or CPS case and the implications for the caller’s family (27%). The third highest number of calls received involved questions about TMC cases (15%).

During the first half of this fiscal year, TLSC was awarded several grants to expand services related to child welfare. Not all grants affect the Family Helpline directly, but they present an opportunity to explore options for expanding or modifying the Family Helpline's services in the future. The basis of the grants was to address gaps in legal services that were identified by Family Helpline data over the past six years, including the need for an expansion in services for kinship caregivers and the creation of an online portal for families in Texas to receive automatic personalized referrals to legal aid organizations and self-help resources relevant to their legal issue, location, and income.

In addition to responding to hotline calls, Family Helpline staff continue to provide information in a variety of ways including writing articles and creating video content for the TexasLawHelp.org website and presenting at conferences.

**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.**

21. 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 importance. The Commission also works with national ICWA and leading organizations on understanding and implementation of the 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.

**05/17/24 Update:** Commission staff meet with DFPS and Tribal ICWA liaisons on a monthly basis to discuss emerging issues regarding application of ICWA and related issues. The Commission also participates in ICWA Constituency Group calls organized by the Capacity Building Center for Courts.

On March 20, 2024, and April 17, 2024, Commission staff participated in the tribal/state collaborative calls hosted by DFPS. Additionally, Commission staff attended a presentation hosted at Texas Christian University on April 1, 2024 entitled "Becoming Effective Native American Allies: A Conversation with the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe."

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

22. 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.

**05/17/24 Update:** The 2023 edition of the [Texas Child Welfare Law Bench Book](#) (Bench Book) is now available online and includes updates from the 88th Regular Legislative Session. The 2023 edition is organized by the following sections: Statutory, Legal Essentials, Federal, Health, Well-being, Safety, System Issues, and Family Connections. A new Bench Card on Reasonable Efforts is included.

23. 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.

**05/17/24 Update:** 500 copies of the newly-revised 2024 Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing Parents and Children in Child Welfare Cases were published and many of those printed copies were distributed to attendees at the Advanced Child Protection Course in Dallas that was hosted by the Child Protection Law Section of the State Bar of Texas on April 4-5, 2024. Printed copies will be distributed at other events over the remainder of the year including the Advanced Family Law CLE Child Welfare Track; Special Education, Child Welfare, and Juvenile Justice System course; and the Texas Association of Family Defense Attorneys Annual Family Defense CLE. The Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing Parents and Children in Child Welfare Cases is also available at no cost on the Children’s Commission website as an online as a searchable pdf and in an interactive format provided by LawBox, which is available through the LawBox app for mobile and other electronic devices.

Commission staff are in the final stages of editing the 2024 Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing DFPS and will coordinate with a printer to set a distribution timeline. The Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing DFPS will be made available online for download and print and through the LawBox app by the end of May.

**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.**

24. 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 results in many parties not being able to attend 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.

**05/17/24 Update:** The number of Notice and Engagement system users continues to increase. Ninety-four new users signed up to date in FY2024 (from October 1, 2023 to present) through the Notice and Engagement system to receive hearing notifications, bringing the total number of users to 2,322. Hearing notifications were sent for 4,522 hearings with a total of 14,020 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.**

25. 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' sense 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 interested in 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.

**05/17/24 Update:** The Mediation Workgroup last met on April 22, 2024 to discuss current projects and potential projects for the 2025 fiscal year. The workgroup set a goal to complete eight mediation checklists with the intention of providing a QR code to the finalized resources available for download from the Children's Commission's website at the annual Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop in San Antonio on August 7, 2024. Additionally, the workgroup developed an outline for the one-hour Introduction to Mediation in Child Welfare Cases webinar that the Children's Commission will host in August. Plans for FY2025 include creating additional webinar content on topics such as nonparty participation in child welfare mediations and considerations for mediations involving incarcerated parents.

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

26. Strategy: Collaborate with and provide support for specialty courts, dockets, and programs.

**Background:** The Children's Commission partners with or supports individual court efforts seeking to adopt specialized practices or programs.

**05/17/24 Update:** This strategy is developed on an ad hoc basis and there were no updates during this reporting period.

27. 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.

**05/17/24 Update:** The Legislation and Policy Resource Committee (LPRC) held its first meeting on February 22, 2024. The members discussed the purpose and scope of the committee, legislation tracking, serving as a resource, and the process of submitting legislative proposals to the Texas Judicial Council. The LPRC also met on May 6, 2024 with a focus on identifying areas of focus and structure for the group moving forward.



## 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.**

28. 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. During each fiscal year, TCJ plans two annual Child Welfare Judges Conferences (CWJC) in partnership with the Children’s Commission and hosts 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, determining the budget and number of attendees, participating in planning meetings, vetting judicial scholarship applicants, surveying participants, and evaluating the process and event both internally and externally for future planning. In FY2023, the Children’s Commission provided partial funding for two breakout sessions on child welfare issues at TCJ’s Annual Judicial Education Conference. In FY2024, the Children’s Commission provided partial funding for three breakout sessions on child welfare issues at TCJ’s Annual Family Justice Conference.

**05/17/24 Update:** The 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Child Welfare Judges Conference will be convened on October 21-23, 2024. This year’s training will feature a three-hour pre-conference hosted by the Office of Court Administration for the Child Protection Court judges and court coordinators, which will be followed by a full conference that is open to judges who devote a minimum of 15% of their docket to hearing civil child welfare cases. The full conference will feature a keynote address designed to inform and inspire judges who serve children, youth, and families experiencing the child welfare system. Panel presentations that follow will address topics such as How to Attract and Keep High Quality Legal Representation; Fatherhood; Dealing with Death, Grief, and Loss on the Bench; Housing Options, Challenges, and Solutions; Child Support; and Judicial Leadership and Innovation. Speakers will include members of the judiciary, DFPS leadership, OCA leadership, SSCC leadership, and youth and parents with lived experience in the child welfare system. Following panels on DFPS Leadership and Statewide Data Updates as well as information from SSCCs and the Office of Community Based Care Transition, Regional Breakouts will be convened. During these breakout sessions, judges will meet by DFPS Region with CPS Regional Directors, CPI Regional Directors, Regional Systems Improvement Specialists, and SSCC representatives as applicable, to examine and discuss regional data with an eye towards improving outcomes for children and families.

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).

28. 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 in managing child

abuse and neglect dockets. Like the 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 one Harris County Child Protection Court; combined, these courts hear child welfare cases in 148 Texas counties.

**05/17/24 Update:** Commission staff have begun the planning process for the summer 2025 biennial Child Protection Court Convening by evaluating potential event venues and communicating with OCA about partnering to plan and host this training.

**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.**

29. Strategy: Expand knowledge of and encourage high-quality hearings 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 and explains that 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 effects all child welfare statutory hearings and adds a third prong to findings in termination of parental rights final hearings (with just a few statutorily-defined exceptions). Providing training which will 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.

**05/17/24 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.

The Commission in partnership with DFPS will offer a free training event for members of the legal and child welfare community in DFPS Region 3W on June 3, 2024. The training will include a discussion of the TFF pilot program, including defining the eligible population, details on current pilot progress, and clarifying questions related to referrals, referral sources, and time limitations. Fictional scenarios will be offered to facilitate hand-on practice with making legal arguments related to reasonable efforts. This will be the second in a series of statewide regional trainings that the Commission will host in partnership with DFPS through FY2025.

30. 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. Developed and initially spearheaded by Justice Michael Massengale (ret.), the TST is now directed by JIR Judge Piper McCraw. Trial Skills Training is held once or twice a year and offers up to 20 MCLE (Minimum Continuing Legal Education) hours, including ethics hours. Eleven 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 CPS 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 the CPS context and includes lectures and demonstrations from trained faculty comprised of seasoned attorneys and judges, 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 CQI process and outcome evaluation is involved with each event.

**05/17/24 Update:** The application period for the Trial Skills Training Contested Hearing Practices Pilot closed on April 16, 2024, and applicants were notified of their participant selection status on May 10th. The Fall 2024 Trial Skills Training Contested Hearing Practices Pilot will take place over the course of three days in September. Five new lectures focused on contested hearings practice will replace previous lectures focused on preparing for jury trials. The first day of instruction will occur over Zoom on September 18, 2024, and will be followed by two days of in person instruction at the Embassy Suites Dallas Market Center in Dallas, Texas on September 25-26, 2024. This hybrid training schedule was adopted for our TST course in 2022 and has received positive feedback from our participants and faculty members.

31. 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.

**05/17/24 Update:** The Commission held a webinar entitled “Navigating the Transition from Trial to Appellate Counsel” on February 9, 2024. The webinar featured a panel discussion of the obligations and duties of a trial attorney post-judgement and how to provide a smooth and successful handoff from trial to appellate counsel.

The Commission presented a webinar entitled “Trial Skills for Child Welfare Cases: Making and Responding to Objections” on March 12, 2024. The webinar focused on the importance of making proper objections under the Texas Rules of Evidence, strategies for when and how to object, how to respond to an objection, what to do when the court rules adversely to your position regarding an objection, and included tips on preserving the record for appeal.

On April 24, 2024, the Commission hosted a webinar entitled “Representing Older Youth in Care.” This webinar featured a discussion of how to address the unique interest of older youth in foster care, such as navigating issues with identification documents, connecting youth to benefits and educational opportunities, and supporting youth with disabilities.

On May 7, 2024, the Commission hosted a webinar entitled “Mandamus in Child Welfare Cases.” Justice Julie Countiss of the First Court of Appeals and William B. “Bill” Connolly of Connolly, Schneider, and

Shireman discussed what orders in child welfare cases are subject to mandamus review, the process for a mandamus petition, and precedent resulting from mandamus review.

32. 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. From 2012 through 2019, the Children’s Commission partnered with TexasBarCLE to produce courses on child welfare law and related issues to provide training for attorneys who represented children, parents, and the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services in child welfare proceedings. 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. This course can be found in TexasBarCLE’s Child Welfare Practice Area in their Online Classroom. For these courses, TexasBarCLE provides discounts to court-appointed attorneys and a scholarship opportunity to other attorneys.

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 their annual spring Advanced Training and their annual summer Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop. Additionally, the Children’s Commission partners with DFPS and TDCAA to provide high-quality training for attorneys representing DFPS.

**05/17/24 Update:**

State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law Section: As a part of the Commission’s collaboration with the State Bar’s Child Protection Law (CPL) Section, a Commission staff member participates in the CPL CLE Committee and provides feedback on the Section’s training efforts, including the 6th Annual Advanced Child Protection Law Course which took place on April 4-5, 2024 in Dallas, and the annual Advanced Family Law Conference Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop which is held each August in San Antonio.

Curriculum planning for the Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop has concluded and planning for the 2025 Advanced Child Protection Law Course will begin in the next few months.

Special Education, Child Welfare, and Juvenile Justice System Course: In collaboration with the State Bar’s Child Protection Law Section, Juvenile Law Section, and Disability Issues Section, the Children’s Commission Executive Director is serving as Course Director for the 2024 Special Education, Child Welfare, and the Juvenile Justice System Course. The course is scheduled for Friday, June 14, 2024, in Austin. Topic highlights include trends in special education, child welfare, and juvenile justice systems, assisting kinship caregivers with school-related issues, and attorney duties for children placed in congregate facilities.

**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.**

33. 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.

**05/17/24 Update:** Several examples of Jurist in Residence (JIR) Letters and Judicial and Attorney Resource Letters (JARLs) issued between February 2024 and May 2024 include:

- 2/9/2024: New Video Series for Child Welfare Attorney Outreach
- 2/9/2024: Attorney Scholarship to TexasBarCLE's 101 and Advanced Child Protection Law Course
- 2/14/2024: February is Youth Leadership Month
- 3/12/2024, Jurist in Residence Letter: Save the Date: 2024 Child Welfare Judges Conference
- 3/26/2024: Trial Skills Training Opportunity: Fall 2024 Contested Hearing Practices Pilot
- 3/28/2024: Upcoming Children's Commission Webinar: Representing Older Youth in Care
- 4/3/2024: Attorney Scholarships to TexasBarCLE's Handling Youth First (or Next) Civil Appeal Webcast Replay
- 4/10/2024: Trial Skills Contested Hearing Practices Deadline; Upcoming Webinar - Representing Older Youth in Care
- 4/11/2024: April is Child Abuse Prevention Month
- 4/12/2024: New Online Report on Trauma-Informed Courts Project
- 4/18/2024: Now Available: 2024 Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing Parents and Children in Child Welfare Cases
- 4/23/2024: Upcoming Webinar: Mandamus in Child Welfare Cases

34. 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 biennial ABA Parent Attorney Conference and Children and the Law Conference; (2) the TexasBarCLE Annual Advanced Child Protection Law Course; (3) the TexasBarCLE Advanced Family Law Child Abuse and Neglect One-Day Workshop; (4) the National Association of Counsel for Children Annual Conference; and (5) the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges 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. Judges with applicants from their jurisdiction are notified by the Children's Commission and asked to confirm that the applicant currently represents DFPS or takes appointments on their child welfare docket.

**05/17/24 Update:**

National Conference on Juvenile Justice: The NCJFCJ 2024 National Conference on Juvenile Justice was held on March 17-20, 2024, in Cleveland, Ohio. The Commission awarded two scholarships to qualified judges.

The Advanced Child Protection Law Conference: The State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law (CPL) Section hosted its 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Advanced Child Protection Law Course on April 4-5, 2024. The CPL Section included 101 content which was followed by the Advanced Course. The Commission awarded 45 registration scholarships for qualified attorneys to attend the live "101" and Advanced courses or to watch any scheduled webcast replays.

American Bar Association (ABA) Parent Attorney Conference and Children and the Law Conference: The ABA Access to Justice for Children and Families Conference and National Parent Representation Conference was held April 9-12, 2024, in Tyson's Corner, Virginia. The Commission awarded 8 reimbursement scholarships to qualified attorneys.

Handling Your First (or Next) Civil Appeal Webcast Replay: The Handling Your First (or Next) Civil Appeal Webcast Replay will be held on May 22, 2024. The Commission awarded 7 registration scholarships to qualified attorneys.

National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges Training: The NCJFCJ 87<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference will be held on July 21-24, 2024, in Phoenix Arizona. The Commission awarded 15 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 7, 2024, in San Antonio, Texas. The Commission plans to award registration scholarships to qualified attorneys.

National Association of Counsel for Children Annual Conference: The 47<sup>th</sup> Annual NACC Conference will be held on August 12-14, 2024, in Salt Lake City, Utah. The Commission plans to award reimbursement scholarships to qualified judges and attorneys.

Civil Appellate Practice 101: 2024: The Civil Appellate Practice 101: 2024 will be held on September 4, 2024, in Austin, Texas. The Commission plans to award reimbursement scholarships to qualified attorneys.

## 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.

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 corollate with the changes made to the Family Code or to DFPS policy.

**05/17/24 Update:** The Data Committee held its most recent meeting on April 19, 2024. Committee members discussed the status of ideas for new data projects generated at the last committee meeting. A project idea to use CPCMS to track permanency outcomes by hearing type was put on hold to ensure data integrity. A project idea regarding placements in the juvenile justice system was clarified and a data request was sent to DFPS. The idea of identifying barriers to permanency in twelve months will be addressed by adding queries to the 2024 CWJC pre-conference survey. The Data Committee will meet again in August 2024 to finalize priority projects for FY2025.

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 and their DFPS regional directors and 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. Beginning in 2023, Regional Directors from Child Protective Investigations joined the Regional Breakouts.

**05/17/24 Update:** Planning for the October 2024 Child Welfare Judges Conference Regional Breakouts is underway. This year's sessions will incorporate feedback from the 2023 Leadership and Statewide Data Presentation in order to increase gains in knowledge and facilitate higher-level discussion and problem-solving. As in 2023, the statewide data presentation will be combined with the DFPS leadership panel presentation so that the processes which lead to data outcomes can be presented by both the DFPS leadership and data team staff as an ensemble to promote greater understanding of the intersection of



law, policy, practice, and data. Key topics expected to be covered include prevention, investigations, removals, capacity, and family preservation, along with accompanying data on safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes at the statewide level. Following this session, a panel of SSCC representatives and the Office of Community Based Care Transition will present on data, policy, and practice as Community Based Care continues to roll out across the state. Immediately thereafter, Regional Breakouts will be convened for judges to convene by DFPS Region with CPS Regional Directors, CPI Regional Directors, Regional Systems Improvement Specialists, and SSCC representatives as applicable, to examine and discuss regional data with an eye towards improving outcomes for children and families. Judicial and agency feedback following these sessions at the 2023 conference was very positive and focused on the helpful aspects of examining and discussing regional data within the statewide data context. Participants reported that communication between judges, agency staff, and SSCC staff improved in their respective jurisdictions.

**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.

**05/17/24 Update:** Updates to the CPCMS system were last released on April 18, 2024 and the CPCMS Advisory Council last met on May 3, 2024 to discuss planned updates and enhancements for CPCMS. The Council discussed a Child Protection Court quality improvement survey for CPCMS. CPCMS enhancements that were discussed include: default settings and data integrity; identifying Texas Family First cases on dockets; displaying primary, secondary, and rescheduled hearing types on calendar view; indicators for incarcerated parents; additional hearing types; and automatic calculation of dismissal dates for Tex. Fam. Code Chapter 264 filings. The next meeting of the Advisory Council will be in the fourth quarter of FY2024.

OCA and DFPS staff identified security and technical issues that are significant obstacles to finalizing the proposed Data Use Agreement (DUA) between OCA and DFPS. The DUA would authorize sharing of a sample data set to test the data matching criteria that will determine whether the systems can be integrated. The next meeting of the workgroup will be May 20, 2024 to discuss the status of the DUA and to identify any other enhancements to integration that could be done while the DUA is pending.

**INSERT - TAB 4**





**Children's Commission  
Financial Report**

**FISCAL YEAR 2024 BUDGET**

Fiscal Year 2023 CIP Carry Forward	\$	1,178,688
(+) Fiscal Year 2024 CIP Distribution	\$	1,833,528
(+) Fiscal Year 2024 COLA Payment	\$	55,200
<b>Fiscal Year 2024 Funds Available</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>3,067,416</b>

**FISCAL YEAR 2024 EXPENDITURES**

	<b>Budget</b>	<b>Expenses To-date</b>	<b>Anticipated Expenditures</b>
<b>Operating</b>	<b>\$ 1,381,933</b>	<b>\$ 511,650</b>	<b>\$ 870,283</b>
<b>Commission Projects</b>	<b>\$ 161,000</b>	<b>\$ 19,261</b>	<b>\$ 141,739</b>
<i>Systems Improvement</i>	\$ 30,000	\$ -	\$ 30,000
<i>Legal Practice and Process</i>	\$ 74,800	\$ 18,442	\$ 56,358
<i>Training</i>	\$ 56,200	\$ 818	\$ 55,382
<b>Scholarships</b>	<b>\$ 97,500</b>	<b>\$ 13,750</b>	<b>\$ 83,750</b>
<i>ABA Parent Representation Conference</i>	\$ 15,000	\$ 8,989	\$ 6,011
<i>Appellate Law Section Boot Camp</i>	\$ 7,500	\$ -	\$ 7,500
<i>Child Protection Law Section</i>	\$ 15,000	\$ -	\$ 15,000
<i>NACC -Annual Conference</i>	\$ 10,000	\$ -	\$ 10,000
<i>NCJFCJ - Judicial Scholarship</i>	\$ 35,000	\$ 3,861	\$ 31,139
<i>State Bar CAN CLE</i>	\$ 7,500	\$ -	\$ 7,500
<i>TBLS - CWL Specialization Exam Fee Waiver</i>	\$ 5,000	\$ 900	\$ 4,100
<i>TDCAA - Conference</i>	\$ 2,500	\$ -	\$ 2,500
<b>Grants</b>	<b>\$ 622,048</b>	<b>\$ 324,540</b>	<b>\$ 297,507</b>
<i>FY22 NCE: Baylor - Parent Advocacy Program Evaluation</i>	\$ 4,699	\$ 4,699	\$ -
<i>DFPS - Regional Attorney Training</i>	\$ 12,000	\$ -	\$ 12,000
<i>OCA - Data Analyst, Technology, Visiting Judge</i>	\$ 223,007	\$ 97,877	\$ 125,130
<i>TCJ - Judicial Training</i>	\$ 259,641	\$ 165,312	\$ 94,329
<i>TFYJP – Hotline Data Collection</i>	\$ 10,200	\$ 10,200	\$ -
<i>TLSC - Family Helpline</i>	\$ 112,500	\$ 46,452	\$ 66,048
	<b>\$ 2,262,481</b>	<b>\$ 869,201</b>	<b>\$ 1,393,280</b>

**CURRENT FINANCIAL STATUS**

Fund Balance	\$	2,198,216
(-) FY2024 Expenditures	\$	1,393,280
<b>Estimated Carry Forward FY 2025</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>804,936</b>

**FISCAL YEAR 2023-2025 OTHER INCOME**

	<b>Contract Amount</b>	<b>Contract Revenue</b>
(+) 2023-2024 Casey Family Programs Contract	\$ 40,000	\$ 30,000
(+) 2024-2025 DFPS Training Contract	\$ 1,009,809	\$ -
<b>Fiscal Year 2023-2025 Other Income</b>	<b>\$ 1,049,809</b>	<b>\$ 30,000</b>



**INSERT - TAB 5**



Children's Commission Meeting  
Collaborative Council Announcements  
May 17, 2024

- Texas Legal Services Center, Kincare Legal Assistance Project
- Texas Lawyers for Children, Advanced Trauma and Mental Health Training



**TEXAS**  
**LEGAL**  
**SERVICES**  
**CENTER**

—  
**FREE LEGAL HELP**  
**for Relatives and Close Family**  
**Friends Caring for Children**

*The Kinicare Legal Assistance Project serves Texas caretakers who have a child of a relative or friend living with them because the parent(s) can't care for them.*

**HOW TO GET HELP**

Call 512.477.6000 x216  
and leave a message, or

Email [kinicare@tlsc.org](mailto:kinicare@tlsc.org)

**ELGIBILITY**

You must be a Texas resident caring for a child who is not your child.

You may or may not be involved with CPS.

Your household income must be at or below 125% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines.

We provide free legal advice and representation for issues such as:

Obtaining kinship benefits through Child Protective Services

—  
Accessing government benefits

—  
Navigating Social Security issues

—  
Obtaining identification documents for children in their care

—  
Limited assistance in suits for obtaining legal conservatorship/custody

—  
Assisting with education and access issues for the children in their care

—  
Providing information on tax effects relating to a child in their care





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**Texas**  
**Lawyers for**  
**Children**

# Advanced Trauma & Mental Health Training

In addition to TLC's **15-hour Legal Professional Trauma Training Program**, TLC has **added the following** training opportunities **AND MORE** to our Trauma Training Portal --

## **EMDR: A Game Changer for Traumatized Children**

Presented by Deborah Korn, Psy.D., Ana Gomez, MC, LPC, and Michael Baldwin  
This webinar explores EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) - an evidence-based trauma therapy - and the incredible impact it can have in the healing of children in foster care. Learn from two nationally-recognized EMDR specialists, Deborah Korn, Psy.D., and Ana Gomez, MC, LPC. Michael Baldwin also shares his lived experiences of overcoming trauma with the help of EMDR.

*To view the full training, watch by September 28th.*

## **Navigating Intricacies in Healing Child Complex Trauma from a Clinical Perspective**

Presented by Ana M Gómez, MC, LPC

A highly engaging and informative presentation about how trauma affects children and the importance of addressing trauma through effective, evidence-based trauma-informed treatments and therapies that bring healing for abused and neglected children.

**REGISTER AT [TRAUMATRaining.TexasLawyersforChildren.org](https://traumatraining.texaslawyersforchildren.org)**  
**and navigate to the "Additional CLE/CJE" tab.**

Questions? Email [Kristen@TexasLawyersforChildren.org](mailto:Kristen@TexasLawyersforChildren.org) for more information.

