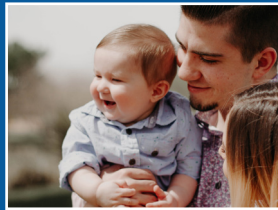




Children's Commission

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



Children's Commission Meeting Notebook

May 9, 2025

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

May 9, 2025

Meeting Notebook
Table of Contents

Meeting Agenda

Commission, Committee, and Collaborative Council Member List1

Minutes from February 7, 2025 Commission Meeting2

May 9, 2025 Report to Commission.....3

Financial Report.....4

Collaborative Council Materials.....5



Friday, May 9, 2025
9:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.

Meeting Agenda

9:30 Commencement and Opening Remarks

First Order of Business – Adopt Minutes from February 7, 2025

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 and Adjourn

Meeting Schedule: September 26, 2025 (in person)

November 14, 2025 (virtual)

INSERT - TAB 1

CHILDREN'S COMMISSION MEMBERS

Hon. Debra Lehrmann, <i>Chair</i>	Hon. Rosie Alvarado	Sheila Sturgis Craig	Rep. Lacey Hull	Vicki Spriggs
Hon. Rebeca Huddle, <i>Deputy Chair</i>	Erica Bañuelos	Hon. Roy Ferguson	Hon. Aurora Martinez Jones	Terese Stevenson
Hon. Eva Guzman, <i>Chair Emeritus</i>	Chantel Bedlington	Hon. Angela Graves-Harrington	Hon. James Mosley	Hon. Thomas Stuckey
Hon. Harriet O'Neill, <i>Chair Emeritus</i>	Corey Benbow	Hon. Bill Harris	Hon. Randy Shelton	Michelle Thompson-Janis
	Dr. Gary Blau	Anne Heiligenstein	Luanne Southern	Sen. Royce West
	Hon. Susan Brown			

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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

COLLABORATIVE COUNCIL MEMBERS

Erin Argue	Mike Foster	Gabriella McDonald	Tanya Rollins	Jamie Bernstein, <i>Executive Director</i>
Kristene Blackstone	Fedora Galasso	Dr. Jill McLeigh	Johana Scot	Milbrey Raney, <i>Assistant Director</i>
Andrew Brown	Barbra Grimmer	Hollie Mims	Andrea Sparks	Jessica Arguijo, <i>Communications Manager</i>
Dania Carter	Julia Hatcher	Kate Murphy	Kenneth Thompson	Renée Castillo-De La Cruz, <i>Staff Attorney</i>
Sarah Crockett	Kasey Jackson	Kellie Pittman	Amanda Vasquez	Tiffany Edwards, <i>Program Specialist</i>
De Shaun Ealoms	Kerrie Judice	Judy Powell	Sarah Worthington	Brenda Kinsler, <i>Staff Attorney</i>
Barbara Elias-Perciful	Norman Ladd	Susan Ramirez		Chelsea Martinez, <i>Program Specialist</i>
Dr. Monica Faulkner	Stephanie Madrigal			Patrick Passmore, <i>Finance Manager</i>

STAFF AND JURISTS IN RESIDENCE

				Andrea Vicencio, <i>Program Specialist</i>
				Hon. Rob Hofmann, <i>Senior Jurist in Residence</i>
				Hon. Piper McCraw, <i>Jurist in Residence</i>

INSERT - TAB 2

Supreme Court of Texas Children's Commission Meeting Minutes

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

ATTENDANCE

Commissioners	Attended	Did Not Attend
<i>Chair</i> , Hon. Debra Lehrmann, Senior Justice, Supreme Court of Texas, Austin		✓
<i>Deputy Chair</i> , Hon. Rebeca Huddle, Justice, Supreme Court of Texas, Austin	✓	
Hon. Rosie Alvarado, Judge, 438 th District Court, San Antonio	✓	
Karla Baker, Parent Liaison, Region 4, Parent Collaboration Group Representative, Chandler	✓	
Erica Bañuelos, Associate Commissioner for Child Protective Services, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, Austin	✓	
Chantel Bedlington, Supervisor of the Kinship Navigator Program, ACH Services, Fort Worth	✓	
Corey Benbow, Chief Executive Officer, The Tax Box, Austin		✓
Dr. Gary Blau, Senior Advisor for Children, Youth and Families; Office of the Assistant Secretary, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Houston		✓
Hon. Susan Brown, Presiding Judge, 11 th Administrative Judicial Region, Houston	✓	
Hon. Julie Countiss, Justice, First Court of Appeals, Houston		✓
Sheila Craig, Consultant and Director (ret.), Texas Health and Human Services Commission, Austin		✓
Hon. Roy Ferguson, Judge (ret., 394 th District Court), Alpine	✓	
Hon. Angela Graves-Harrington, Judge, 246 th Family District Court, Houston	✓	
Hon. Bill Harris, Chair, State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law Section, Paris	✓	
Anne Heiligenstein, Senior Director Strategic Consultant, Casey Family Programs, Austin	✓	
Hon. Aurora Martinez Jones, Judge, 126 th District Court, Austin		✓
Hon. James Mosley, Judge, 316 th District Court, Stinnett	✓	
Hon. Robbie Partida-Kipness, Justice, Fifth District Court of Appeals, Dallas		✓
Sasha Rasco, Associate Commissioner for Family Support Services, Texas Health and Human Services Commission, Austin		✓
Hon. Randy Shelton, Judge, 279 th Civil District Court, Beaumont	✓	
Luanne Southern, Chief Strategist for Behavioral Health, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, Austin	✓	
Vicki Spriggs, Chief Executive Officer, Texas CASA, Austin		✓
Terese Stevenson, Vice President, Grants, The Rees-Jones Foundation, Dallas		✓
Hon. Thomas Stuckey, Associate Judge, Centex Child Protection Court South, Seguin	✓	
Michelle Thompson-Janis, Director, Department of Social Services, Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas		✓
Jurists in Residence		
Hon. Rob Hofmann, Judge, 452 nd District Court, Senior Jurist in Residence, Mason		✓
Hon. Piper McCraw, Judge, 469 th District Court, Jurist in Residence, McKinney	✓	
Attending Committee Members & Guests		
Timothy Belseth, University of Texas - Austin, Spark Program Coordinator		
Larissa Cartwright, Chief External Relations Officer, Texas CASA		
Natalie Corvington, Senior Policy Analyst-Family Representation, Texas Indigent Defense Commission		
Sarah Crockett, Director of Public Policy, Texas CASA		
Tiffany Crouch-Bartlett, Attorney, Texas Lawyers for Children		
Cindy Dyar, Managing Attorney, Texas Legal Services Center		
Hon. Charles Griffin, Associate Judge, Gulf Coast Children's Court		
Emily Johnston, Staff Attorney, Texas RioGrande Legal Aid		
Ashley Landin, Cross-Programmatic Intern, Texas Appleseed		
Judy Powell, Communications Director, Parent Guidance Center		

Hon. Robin Sage, Judicial Engagement Team, Casey Family Programs
Marta Talbert, Associate Commissioner for CPI, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services
Briana Wadlock, Policy and Advocacy Specialist, TexProtects
Spark Program participants, University of Texas - Austin

Office of Court Administration Staff

Marcus Crosby, Children's Courts Program Manager
Megan LaVoie, Administrative Director
Jeffrey Tsunekawa, Director of Court Services

Attending Children's Commission Staff

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

CALL TO ORDER AND OPENING REMARKS

Justice Rebeca Huddle called the meeting to order at 9:40 a.m. and welcomed everyone to the first Children's Commission meeting of 2025. Justice Huddle expressed her gratitude for the perspective each member brings to the discussion as we work together to improve outcomes for children, youth, and families who experience the Texas child welfare system.

Commission, Committee, and Staff Member Changes

Justice Huddle shared that Judge Leigh Mathews Rodriguez joined the Systems Improvement Committee.

Adoption of November 15, 2024 Meeting Minutes

Justice Huddle directed members to the November 15, 2024 Commission Meeting Minutes behind Tab 2 of the Meeting Notebook, distributed in advance of the meeting.

ACTION: Justice Huddle asked if there were any changes to the minutes as written. Hearing none, after a motion and a second the Commissioners voted to adopt the minutes for the November 15, 2024 Children's Commission meeting.

Presentation on Foster Care and Higher Education

Mr. Timothy Belseth, the Spark Program Coordinator with the Texas Institute for Child & Family Wellbeing at the University of Texas at Austin, was joined by three University of Texas – Austin students with lived experience in child welfare: Diamond, Sierra, and Rawan. Mr. Belseth and the three students spoke about how they and other students with experience in foster care navigate the higher education system and the importance of meaningful connections with peers, faculty, staff, and mentors, highlighting the benefits of their involvement with the campus support program.

The students discussed several issues related to accessing benefits and supports. For the tuition and fee waiver, they expressed concerns about the ease of access, a lack of clarity about who to contact, limited availability of information, and difficulties with the financial aid office. The students also highlighted challenges with the Education and Training Voucher (ETV), including being told they didn't qualify because they already had too much financial aid and not being told about this resource at all. Mr. Belseth shared that despite campuses having foster care liaisons as a resource for students with lived experience in foster care, the liaisons struggle with identifying all students that may need assistance. The presentation and discussion that followed centered around how professionals can better support success in higher education for students with experience in foster care.

CHILDREN'S COMMISSION UPDATE

Ms. Jamie Bernstein reported that the Children's Commission continues to participate in Round 4 of the federal Child & Family Services Review (CFSR). She announced that a final CFSR report was shared by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) on November 6, 2024 and that Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) had 90 days to respond with a Program Improvement Plan (PIP). An initial draft of the PIP was submitted by DFPS to ACF on February 3, 2025. Ms. Bernstein also announced that the Court Improvement Program (CIP) was reauthorized for five years with the total award amount increasing.

Ms. Aimee Corbin shared that the Children's Commission Reasonable Efforts regional CLE training continued with a presentation in El Paso in November, Midland in December, and Tyler in February, with increasing numbers of registrants and positive responses from attendees. The Child Protection Law Section (CPL) joint training with the Commission during these regional MCLEs has received a positive response, and the Commission looks forward to continued collaboration with CPL.

Ms. Corbin reported that in collaboration with Texas Education Agency (TEA) and DFPS, the Children's Commission held a one and a half day training in September 2024 in San Angelo on foster care and education-related topics. She shared that the highlight of the training was a panel of young adults in the Fostering Rams Success program at Angelo State University who shared their insights as students with experience in the child welfare system.

Ms. Bernstein highlighted the Commission's work with the Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services on Community-Based Care (CBC) regional trainings. Hon. Piper McCraw provided a presentation at the training in the Rio Grande Valley on December 6, 2024 which brought together judges and attorneys, as well as DFPS and SSCC representatives. A similar convening took place in Waco on January 14, 2025.

Ms. Renée Castillo-De La Cruz announced that with the assistance of the DFPS Representation Subcommittee, the Commission collaborated with TDCAA to develop child welfare related content for the 2025 Prosecuting Domestic Violence and Child Sex Assault Cases Conference scheduled for April 8-11, 2025, in Sugarland. In addition, the Children's Commission plans to provide a limited number of registration scholarships for prosecutors and DFPS attorneys to attend the conference.

Ms. Brenda Kinsler shared that the 2024 Child Welfare Board Certification Exam took place over a two-day period on September 30 and October 1, 2024. Twenty-six applicants sat for the exam and 9 obtained their certification by the Texas Board of Legal Specialization. The Children's Commission will continue to provide reimbursement for exam fees for attorneys who pass the exam and become certified.

Ms. Milbrey Raney announced that as a part of the Commission's goal to provide judicial training, the Commission will be offering a new Judicial Scholarship Request process. Like the other judicial scholarship opportunities, this will be available for judges who handle civil child welfare cases in Texas and need financial support to attend recognized regional, state, and national trainings on child welfare matters. The scholarship will take the form of a reimbursement scholarships for conference registration fees.

Ms. Castillo-De La Cruz shared that the Commission will offer Legal Training Support to provide judicial and/or attorney trainings related to child welfare matters in Texas. Support can take the form of financial and/or planning support as well as MCLE and/or Zoom assistance. Eligibility requirements and a link to the Legal Training Support application will be available on the Children's Commission website.

Ms. Castillo-De La Cruz announced that planning for the 2025 Trial Skills Training is currently underway. The Trial Skills Training faculty met to discuss proposed curriculum changes to the Contested Hearing Practices Pilot which include, in part, increasing the number of participants from 21 to 27 and adding additional virtual instruction time leading up to the in-person portion of the training to allow more time for simulated court hearing practice and feedback.

Mr. Patrick Passmore shared three changes to the budget. These are that the Commission will be carrying more funds forward than were originally announced in September 2024; that there was an increase in expenditures since September 2024; and that there was an increase to the Legal Practice and Process (LPP) budget due to additional funding.

TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY & PROTECTIVE SERVICES (DFPS) UPDATE

Ms. Marta Talbert gave a presentation on the DFPS strategies and initiatives around kinship placements. She reported that DFPS identified goals to increase kinship as the first option for placement. These include mandatory statewide training for DFPS staff to increase kinship connections and placements for children in DFPS care, setting up a family team meeting focused on identifying and locating kinship caregivers immediately, creating a kinship webpage for DFPS staff, identifying kinship placement at the outset of a case, and having a Mental Health Specialist reach out immediately to kinship caregivers with children who may need clinical help.

Ms. Erica Bañuelos reported that the number of children in foster care has decreased. To raise the percentage of children in kinship placements DFPS is identifying kinship connections for children who are not in a kinship placement, implementing placement disruption staffing to try to avoid placement breakdown, and facilitating immediate placements when a kinship caregiver has been identified. Disruption staffing will be scheduled by the kinship worker if the caregiver is overwhelmed in order to offer resources and services and there will be a monthly review of the disruption staffing plan by the kinship worker and supervisor. Ms. Bañuelos shared that the

Kinship Collaboration Group will implement a quarterly data review to analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the initiative plan.

Ms. Bañuelos reported that DFPS is also working toward reviewing the policy and process for kinship placements to allow for a more streamlined process for immediate kinship placement. A few ways in which DFPS is implementing changes include working in partnership with HHSC to prioritize safety requirements over administrative burdens, decreasing barriers for kinship caregivers, increasing Permanency Care Assistance (PCA), addressing recidivism, and increasing supports for kinship caregivers.

OFFICE OF COURT ADMINISTRATION (OCA) UPDATE

Ms. Megan LaVoie shared that to date in the 89th Legislative Session there were 2,373 House Bills filed, 113 Joint House Resolutions, 1,118 Senate Bills, and 47 Joint Senate Resolutions, with a total of 3,700 bills. OCA budget enhancements in the Legislative Appropriations Request were sent to the House Appropriations Committee with a hearing set for the week of Feb 24, 2025.

Ms. LaVoie mentioned legislation from the 88th Legislative Session which allowed TIDC to increase representation to families and related TIDC efforts in the current session. While counties can access Title IV-E funds, TIDC and OCA have asked the legislature for \$47.5 million in funding from the state to create more resources for family representation. TIDC has asked for an addition \$9 million to fund a CPS representation program that will use internships or fellowships for attorney loan repayment in communities with chronic public defense and CPS representation shortages.

Ms. LaVoie reported that there was a budget approval for OCA regional data coordinators who would help clerks in each administrative judicial region to improve data collection across the state. OCA has also asked for funding for additional court reporters. She shared that there are currently 6,377 open cases in Children's Courts which is a decrease of 279 cases from this time last year. Ms. LaVoie announced that Hon. Katrina Griffith, Judge of the Harris County Child Protection Court, was named by the Office of the Governor to the DFPS Advisory Council to serve a term until February 2029. Ms. LaVoie also shared that Hon. Jamie Rawlinson, Judge of the Coastal Bend Children's Court, and Ms. Aimee Corbin will give a presentation at the upcoming National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges Juvenile Justice Conference in March 2025 on the benefits of early intervention court liaisons. Ms. LaVoie also updated that Hon. Melissa McClenahan, Judge of the Child Protection Court of Central Texas, will retire at the end of February 2025 and the search of her replacement is underway.

Ms. LaVoie shared that OCA's free text reminder program opened to all case types and that OCA has thirty new counties interested in bringing this program to their courts. Ms. LaVoie reported that updated reports regarding workload analysis in the courts from January is now available on OCA's website. From this report, OCA developed a tool to help identify where new courts are needed in the state and counties can identify new staffing needs for their courts.

COMMISSIONER ROUNDTABLE

Commissioners attending the meeting shared updates and insights from their jurisdictions. Updates and discussion included the benefits of local collaboration on child welfare matters, the rollout of Community-Based Care, developments in the 89th Legislative Session, collaboration with DFPS on the Child's Plan of Service, supporting kinship caregivers, court security, the success of the Texas Family First pilot, services and resources for parents and families, and pending Reunification Day celebrations.

COLLABORATIVE COUNCIL MEMBER UPDATES

Ms. Emily Johnston, Staff Attorney with the Texas Foster Youth Justice Project, announced that the project published the ninth addition of its Aging Out Guide and that the guide is available on their website. She also shared that the project received funding from the Moody Foundation to update their website to make it more accessible.

Ms. Cindy Dyar with the Texas Legal Services Center Family Helpline announced that the Helpline has Kincare Legal Assistance Project which serves families across the state. She also shared that the Family Helpline recently launched the Family Help Link, which is an online referral program for families. Information about the Family Help Link can be found on Texas Law Help's website.

Ms. Tiffany Crouch Bartlett with Texas Lawyers for Children shared that there is a new tool available on their website that allows judges to speak with mental health professionals to support a trauma-informed approach. She also announced that Texas Lawyers for Children's trauma training received approval for Continuing Judicial Education hours.

NEW BUSINESS

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

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 1:40 p.m.

INSERT - TAB 3

REPORT TO THE COMMISSION

May 9, 2025

GOAL I (COLLABORATION)

Administer the Court Improvement Program (CIP) funds to assess current and future needs of the courts, provide a forum for meaningful collaboration, encourage continuous quality improvement, and promote best child welfare and court practices to improve the child welfare system.

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

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

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

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

05/09/25 Update: The February 7, 2025 Children's Commission meeting was held in Austin and archived on the Commission's YouTube channel and website.

The Systems Improvement, Legal Practice & Process, Training, and Data Committees convened on April 17, April 25, April 17, and April 15, 2025 respectively, to discuss new and ongoing projects.

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

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

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

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

05/09/25 Update: Bi-weekly stakeholder calls, including updates and participation from agency staff and Collaborative Council members, continue to take place every other week. The annual Collaborative Council meeting will take place in September 2025 in conjunction with the Children's Commission meeting and center around member priorities areas of focus for the coming fiscal year.

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

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

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

05/09/25 Update: The Commission website is routinely updated for content and to highlight newly released reports and resources. While the website is designed for judges and attorneys, materials are often accessed by additional stakeholders such as parents and youth involved with the child welfare system. The Commission is currently expanding the website to include additional webpages to highlight materials available to parents and youth. OCA completed an upgrade to a newer version of the Content Management System (CMS) Umbraco to provide the most current version. The Children's Commission continues to develop design functionality and work with OCA to schedule further testing and improvements. The Children's Commission continues to develop utilization of social media platforms, expanding the LinkedIn business page, [Texas Children's Commission](#), and X, formerly Twitter ([@TXChildrensComm](#)).

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

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

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

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

Texas is currently undergoing Round 4 of the federal Child and Family Services Review, with increased emphasis on legal and judicial involvement in this round. On November 5, 2024, ACF presented a Final Report which addresses strengths in the Texas child welfare system as well as areas in need of improvement. Texas has 90 days from the issuance of the Final Report to submit a proposed Program Improvement Plan. To inform the development of the Program Improvement Plan, DFPS conducted breakout meetings on safety, permanency, and wellbeing with interested stakeholders from throughout the State on November 5-6, 2024; the Children's Commission staff participated in each of these meetings.

05/09/25 Update: The Children's Commission will continue to actively participate in the CFSR process. This includes conducting case reads as needed, providing a forum for collaboration with legal stakeholders, and encouraging judges and attorneys to participate in the development of the PIP. It is anticipated that there will be legal and judicial involvement in the PIP strategies as well as implementation. The most recent version of the proposed Texas PIP was submitted to ACF in March 2025, the next submission will be completed in May 2025.

GOAL II (SYSTEMS IMPROVEMENT)

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

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

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

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

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

05/09/25 Update: Between February 7 and May 9, 2025, a few examples of JIR activities include:

- Continued work as President for the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) and attended multiple Executive and other Committee Meetings
- Attended monthly Judicial Child Welfare Forum Meetings, February-May, Virtual
- Attended annual NCJFCJ Juvenile Justice Conference, March 16-19, Boston
- Chaired the Children's Commission Systems Improvement Committee Meeting, April 17, Virtual
- Chaired the Children's Commission Training Committee Meeting, April 17, Virtual
- Participated in calls with Commission leadership and staff regarding various issues

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

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

Background: The Children's Commission initiated a Statewide Collaborative on Trauma-Informed Care (SCTIC) in 2017 to elevate trauma-informed policy and practices in the Texas child welfare system by creating a statewide strategy to support system reform, organizational leadership, cross-systems collaboration, and community-led

efforts with data-informed initiatives. Based on the work of the SCTIC, the Children's Commission published a final report in February 2019 entitled [Building a Trauma-Informed Child Welfare System: A Blueprint](#). Efforts to implement the recommendations and priorities included in the report continue through training and a recent trauma informed courts initiative.

The Children's Commission initiated the Consortium on Trauma Informed Court Practices in August 2024 to provide a statewide network for judges to have a forum for discussion and education about trauma-informed and trauma-responsive court practices. Chaired by Hon. Carlos Villalon Jr., Associate Judge of the Child Protection Court of the Rio Grande Valley West, the Consortium further broadens the reach of the SCTIC by sharing and expanding the work of the four Trauma Informed Court Pilot judges and their court teams. (The Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services issued a [report](#) on the work of these four courts, which was done in collaboration with the Children's Commission.) These four judges serve as mentors to participating judges in a bi-monthly virtual meetings. Commission staff provides meeting support; continuing legal education credit, TBLS credit, and family violence hour credit as appropriate; and related online resources. Additionally, resources related to best practices on trauma-informed and trauma-responsive courts are updated regularly on the SCTIC-related webpage, www.TraumaInformedTexas.com.

05/09/25 Update: The Consortium on Trauma Informed Court Practices' most recent Minimum Continuing Legal Education (MCLE) presentation was given on March 20, 2025 by Hon. Andrea James, Judge of the 2nd Region Child Protection Court Number 2 in Bryan, Texas. Judge James discussed how she and her court team sustain a phased service plan model for parents in child welfare cases which supports parents' success, includes timeframes for completion, and allows for service provider and related professionals' input. Also, the presentation and discussion addressed how to create a family-supportive courtroom culture which effectively engages parents, communicates the court's expectations, and takes a teamwork approach with parents, all with the goal of supporting families.

Commission staff participates in the Cross Systems Trauma-Informed Care (CSTIC) Initiative Workgroup. Led by Holly Fulmer, Trauma-informed Policy and Training Specialist at HHSC, members are representatives from state agencies such as TJJD, the Texas Indigent Defense Commission (TIDC), and the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), who are working on implementing trauma-informed practices in their agencies. Commission staff recently attended the CSTIC Initiative Workgroup meeting on March 19, 2025.

The Children's Commission participated in the HHSC Children's Mental Health Strategic Plan Subcommittee and in the related Governance and Youth and Family Voice Workgroups. The Subcommittee submitted the Children's Behavioral Strategic Plan to the Office of the Governor and the Legislative Budget Board on December 1, 2024. This strategic plan focuses on the mental and behavioral health needs of Texas children and shares a blueprint for understanding and meeting these needs with a long-term strategy. The fundamental principle is a continuum of children's behavioral health care. The two most specific parts of the report related to the Commission are a high-level summary of the child welfare system and the recommendation under Behavioral Health Outpatient Care to fund the Commission to expand implementation of state and local dual status initiatives. The report has recommendations for services and funding spanning FY2025-29.

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

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

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

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

05/09/25 Update: In July 2024, Commission staff met with the Commissioner Representing Labor from the Texas Workforce Commission, the DFPS Commissioner, Casey Family Programs, and TACFS leadership to discuss ways of strengthening training and employment opportunities for young adults aging out of foster care. Ideas circulated on how to include individuals with lived experience for future planning. The workgroup continued this discussion most recently on April 4, 2025.

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

At the February 7, 2025 Children’s Commission meeting, three young adults currently attending the University of Texas at Austin spoke about their experiences utilizing the tuition and fee waiver and navigating their higher education journey. Mr. Tymothy Belseth facilitated the panel discussion. Mr. Belseth is the foster care liaison at University of Texas at Austin and runs the University of Texas’ Spark Program, which is a campus support program for students with experience in foster care. The young adults shared their struggles and successes with their college experiences to date and suggested ways other young adults with experience in foster care can be supported by professionals in the university setting.

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

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

Background: The Children’s Commission collaborates closely with DFPS on the implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), as required by the federal Administration for Children and Families. FFPSA restructures federal child welfare funding, particularly Title IV-E and Title IV-B of the Social Security Act, which Texas uses to pay for services for children in foster care and their families. FFPSA seeks to reduce entry in foster care, to limit the use of congregate care, and to increase access to behavioral and mental health services.

The Children's Commission collaborates with Casey Family Programs, DFPS, and other state and national workgroups on best practices for implementation of all FFPSA provisions, including the development of IV-E prevention programs and court involvement in encouraging a prevention approach.

In 2021, DFPS' Prevention Early Intervention (PEI) division (which now operates as Family Support Services at HHSC) proposed creating a new position for an Early Intervention Court Liaison (EICL) in three jurisdictions. PEI partnered with the Children's Commission and OCA to identify Texas communities that would benefit from the Court Liaison position. This position acts as a special assistant to the court, serves to identify and connect family support programs to the local Child Protection Courts and community, and offers a judicial perspective within community stakeholder meetings. The pilot sites for the court liaison positions are Galveston, Bell, and Lubbock Counties. The Commission contracted with Texas A&M University to conduct a formal evaluation of the pilot program.

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

05/09/25 Update: OCA and DFPS agreed to renew the EICL pilot grant for 2024-2026. Easter Seals, a provider organization in the Rio Grande Valley, partnered with the Child Protection Court of Rio Grande Valley West and obtained a position similar to the EICL. In March 2025, Hon. Jamie Rawlinson, judge of the Coastal Bend Children's Court, and Commission staff presented at the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges' annual Juvenile Justice Conference on "Prevention and Strengthening the Community from the Bench: Texas' Approach to Prevention Through an Early Intervention Court Liaison." The session provided attendees with examples of how the EICLs brought courts and community resources together and shared ways that judges can support prevention efforts.

Children's Commission staff meet monthly with DFPS staff from Investigations, Family-Based Safety Services, 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 implement the pilot. In October 2024, TFF expanded into Harris County. TFF services became available starting in March 2025 in Bexar County, with the three Children's Court judges hearing TFF cases.

In 2024, DFPS entered into a contract with the Commission to conduct regional trainings on the Texas Family First Pilot and Reasonable Efforts (see Strategy 24 for more information). The TFF training content covers 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. Trainings were conducted in DFPS Region 3W (Fort Worth), Region 1 (Lubbock), and Region 2 (Abilene). Since TFF expanded into Harris County and Bexar County, additional trainings will take place in those counties in August 2025.

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

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

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

05/09/25 Update: A two-day Foster Care & Education Summit was held on September 26-27, 2024 at Angelo State University in San Angelo. This training provided approximately 200 professionals who work with school-aged students with guidance on the educational needs and requirements for students in foster care. The next Foster Care & Education Summit is tentatively scheduled for December 2025 in the Denton area.

The FC&Ed Committee last met on January 28, 2025, and discussed updating the higher education guide, improving data and information sharing, and continuing to develop tools to support implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act. The next meeting will take place in summer 2025.

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

On March 24, 2025, the Higher Education Guide Workgroup convened its initial meeting to discuss updating the Texas Higher Education Foster Care Liaison Information & Reference Guide. This guide was last published in 2017 and is utilized by higher education professionals to support young adults who have experienced foster care as they navigate higher education. The workgroup will meet on a monthly basis. The most recent meeting was April 28, 2025.

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

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

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

05/09/25 Update: On March 5, 2025, Commission staff attended the quarterly Human Trafficking Prevention Task Force meeting led by the Office of the Attorney General. This meeting includes participants from multiple agencies from across the state including the Department of Public Safety, Department of Licensing and Regulation, Texas Alcohol and Beverage Commission, DFPS, and the Office of the Governor, along with local

county agencies who work to prevent and end trafficking.

On April 16, 2025, the Children's Commission along with the Office of the Governor, DFPS, and other stakeholders had their third meeting to develop a resource highlighting the relevant laws aimed at protecting children who survive sexual abuse. The workgroup is led by Hon. Selina Mireles, Judge of the 4th & 5th Administrative Judicial Regions Child Protection Court, and the goal is to provide an easy-to-use guide that child survivors and their caregivers can use to identify and understand their legal rights. Youth with lived experience will be consulted on the resource.

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

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

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

05/09/25 Update: This is an ad hoc strategy and there are no updates during this reporting period.

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

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

05/09/25 Update: Children's Commission staff serve on the Partners for Children and Families Committee (PCFC), the advisory body for the rollout of Community-Based Care in Texas. The most recent PCFC meeting is scheduled for May 8, 2025. The committee oversees multiple workgroups with a focus on the following topics: intake and investigations, Community-Based Care, placement, services and supports, foster care and kinship policy, and contracts.

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

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

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

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

05/09/25 Update: On February 18, 2025, Commission staff presented at the annual Juvenile Law Conference on a session entitled “Serving Dual Status Youth.” The audience included attorneys who practice in juvenile court, juvenile probation officers, state agency staff, and juvenile court judges who practice throughout the State.

GOAL III (LEGAL PRACTICE & PROCESS)

Assist trial and appellate courts, judges, and legal advocates to ensure that children, youth, and families involved with child welfare experience a legal system in which they have access to justice and their rights are protected.

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

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

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

05/09/25 Update: The LRC last met on April 11, 2025. This year, the LRC identified pre-petition legal representation programs as the priority area of focus. To inform the committee about existing programs and community needs, the committee members decided to formulate a statewide survey. The committee reviewed the survey draft at the April 2025 meeting and discussed legislative bills pertaining to legal representation.

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

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

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

The Children's Commission Child Welfare Law Standards of Representation Committee (Standards Committee) is charged with drafting proposed standards to submit to the State Bar of Texas. Hon. Roy Ferguson, retired Judge of the 394th District Court, is the Committee Chair; Hon. Debra Lehrmann, Senior Justice 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 jurisdictions across Texas.

05/09/25 Update: The Standards Committee is currently drafting standards for attorneys representing children. The committee most recently met in person on February 20-21, 2025, to continue drafting standards for Phase 3 (Preparatory), Phase 4 (Conciliatory and Alternative Dispute Resolution), and Phase V (Adversarial). The committee next meets via Zoom on June 27, 2025.

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

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

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

05/09/25 Update: The 2025 application filing deadline for the Child Welfare Law exam was on April 22, 2025. 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.

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

Background: The Children's Commission supports a Parent Resource Group which is comprised of parent mentors, parent advocates, parents' attorneys, DFPS staff, and other interested stakeholders. Prior to establishing the Texas Legal Services Center Family Helpline (see Strategy 18 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.

05/09/25 Update: The Parent Resource Workgroup met on April 4, 2025, to review current projects and prioritize items for FY2026. The workgroup identified updating the Parent Resource Guide (PRG) as a priority project for the next fiscal year. With the release of the Pre-Litigation Guide planned for online publication by September, edits to the PRG will reflect legislative updates and address issues related to filed legal cases. Additionally, workgroup members will focus the remainder of this fiscal year on the Parent Voice Video project. These videos will be designed to address four to five topics identified by parents with lived experience. The workgroup anticipates that this project will also be completed in FY2026.

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

Background: In 2017, the Children's Commission partnered with the Texas Access to Justice Commission and the Children's Justice Act to fund the Texas Legal Services Center (TLSC) to establish the Family Helpline for Strong Families and Safe Children (Family Helpline). The Family Helpline provides easy, statewide access for parents and family members to basic information, education, and resources addressing- parental rights as they relate to Child Protective Services (CPS) Investigations, the provision of Family-Based Safety Services (FBSS), Parental Child Safety Placements, Texas Family Code Chapter 34 non-parent agreements, termination of

parental rights, custody, access, visitation, service plans, the court's role in conducting hearings and oversight, right to legal counsel, non-offending parents, minor parents, incarcerated parents, survivors of family violence, intergenerational issues, and other situations.

05/09/25 Update: The Family Helpline is preparing its interim report, which will cover data on calls between October 1, 2024, and March 31, 2025. During those six months, Helpline staff answered 735 substantive calls concerning child welfare cases in 117 counties. Child Protective Investigations remains the number one most discussed topic and was addressed in more than 400 of the Helpline's calls during this six-month period. During this reporting period, 71% of callers identified themselves as parents, 21% were grandparents and other relatives, about 4% were children, and approximately 4% were callers who were unrelated to the child they were calling about. A more in-depth analysis of the Helpline's calls during those six months is scheduled for release on May 1, 2025.

Additionally, the Family Helpline conducted a massive, targeted outreach effort in March 2025 and mailed rack cards for distribution and display to almost 500 recipients, including all local DFPS offices, all CASA offices, all Child Advocacy Centers, all HHS Family Resource Centers, Supervised Independent Living (SIL) contractors, all SSCCs, and various DFPS state offices including OCA, the Foster Care Ombudsman, and Statewide Intake. Outreach materials also included rack and wallet cards for the [Family Help Link](#), which launched in January. The Family Help Link is a free online intake and referral system (available 24/7) for anyone in Texas facing legal issues that impact the health and stability of children. The Family Help Link enables families and young people to easily access legal information, referrals, counsel, and representation. The current referral partners for the Family Help Link include Disability Rights Texas, Legal Aid of Northwest Texas, Texas Advocacy Project, and Texas RioGrande Legal Aid's Foster Youth Project.

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

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

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

05/09/25 Update: On February 20, March 20, and April 17, 2025, Commission staff participated in tribal/state collaborative calls hosted by DFPS. The group continues to discuss plans for an in-person ICWA Summit in November 2026.

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

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

Background: The Children's Commission maintains the Texas Child Welfare Law Bench Book (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.

05/09/25 Update: An updated 2024 edition of the Bench Book is available on the Children's Commission website. The 2024 edition is organized by the following sections: Statutory, Legal Essentials, Federal, Health, Well-being, Safety, System Issues, and Family Connections. The related Bench Cards provide high-level legal and topical information through at-a-glance, easy-to-use checklists that outline relevant laws at the various stages of a child welfare case. The Bench Book and Bench Cards were distributed at the October Child Welfare Judges Conference and mailed to other judges upon request and subject to availability. Bench Cards were also distributed on April 7, 2025 at Texas Center for the Judiciary's Regional Conference.

The Bench Book Committee met on May 2, 2025 to discuss recommended changes. The 2025 Child Welfare Law Bench Book updates will focus on incorporating legislative changes throughout.

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

Background: The Children's Commission's Tool Kit Committee is responsible for updating the Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing Parents and Children in Child Welfare Cases, and the DFPS Representation Subcommittee is responsible for updating the Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing DFPS in Child Welfare Cases. At the conclusion of each legislative session, the committees meet to 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 easily accessible to practitioners.

05/09/25 Update: A total of 162 printed copies of the 2024 Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing DFPS were distributed to attorneys representing DFPS during the State Bar of Texas' Child Protection Law Section's 101 and Advanced Course held on March 6-7, 2025 and the 2025 TDCAA Conference held on April 8-11, 2025 in Sugarland.

The Commission plans to update both the Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing Parents and Children and the Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing DFPS at the conclusion of the 89th Legislative Session and release updated versions in March 2026. The updated Tool Kits will be made available on the Children's Commission webpage as free, downloadable PDFs for print and as interactive resources through LawBox. Additionally, printed copies of the tool kits will be made available for distribution.

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

22. Strategy: Support increased child and family engagement through the use of technology, including the use of the Office of Court Administration (OCA) Notice and Engagement tool.

Background: All parties involved in child welfare cases continue to struggle with securing consistent and timely notice of scheduled hearings from DFPS. This issue also impacts caregivers and may result in an inability to attend and participate in scheduled court hearings. The Notice and Engagement tool involves using non-confidential case data to provide email notice to users about upcoming hearings. OCA will market the Notice and Engagement tool and periodically re-issue announcements, survey users on the usefulness and effectiveness of the system, and monitor the system login and search information. Notices will be monitored to evaluate whether

the correct hearing data are populating according to search criteria. Reports/data are produced by OCA and provided to the Children's Commission.

05/09/25 Update: The number of Notice and Engagement system users continues to increase. 117 new users have signed up to date in FY2025 (from October 1, 2024 to present) through the Notice and Engagement system to receive hearing notifications, bringing the total number of users to 2,497. Hearing notifications were sent for 3,981 hearings, with a total of 13,559 notifications sent this fiscal year.

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

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

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

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

05/09/25 Update: In collaboration with the Mediation Workgroup, the Commission hosted a webinar entitled "Non-Party Participation in Child Welfare Mediations" on March 28, 2025. Workgroup members Mark Briggs and Electra Watson discussed considerations for including non-parties in child welfare mediations, ethical issues that mediators and attorneys must be aware of, and how to ensure that agreements including non-party participants are enforceable.

The Mediation Workgroup last met on April 28, 2025, to review progress on current projects and identified a webinar, in partnership with the Parent Resource Workgroup, on considerations for incarcerated parents as a priority project for next fiscal year.

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

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

Background: Reasonable Efforts findings are required by federal and state law in child welfare hearings. Neither federal nor Texas law defines reasonable efforts. To do so would be a direct contradiction of the intent of the law which requires determinations to be made on a case-by-case basis. In Texas, the child welfare agency must make reasonable efforts to maintain the family unit, to prevent or eliminate the need for removal, to return the child home, to safely reunify the child and parent, and to finalize permanency. Additionally, the child welfare agency must document all reasonable efforts made. During the 88th Regular Legislative Session, new reasonable

efforts legislation was passed which effected all child welfare statutory hearings and added a third prong to findings in termination of parental rights final hearings (with just a few statutorily defined exceptions). Providing training to expand knowledge of and encourage high-quality hearings regarding Reasonable Efforts determinations is critical for judges, attorneys, DFPS, other child welfare advocates, and stakeholders in order to implement the new laws and facilitate best outcomes.

05/09/25 Update: The Children's Commission, in partnership with DFPS, continues to offer Texas Family First and Reasonable Efforts training events at no cost for members of the legal and child welfare community. Commission staff traveled to DFPS Region 4 (Tyler) in February, Region 5 (Beaumont) in March, and Region 11 (Laredo) in April 2025. Fictional scenarios facilitated hands-on practice with making legal arguments related to reasonable efforts. Commission staff were joined by the Child Protection Law Section of the State Bar at the February and April convenings. The Section presented additional free child welfare MCLE content on topics such as the duties and responsibilities of parent and child ad litem and permanency hearings. The Children's Commission will host additional regional trainings in partnership with DFPS and the Child Protection Law Section. The next training is planned for DFPS Region 3E in May 2025. In August 2025, the trainings will conclude in Harris County and Bexar County.

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

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

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

05/09/25 Update: The Legislation and Policy Resource Committee (LPRC) last met on May 8, 2025 and continues to meet bi-weekly to discuss child welfare legislation making its way through the legislative process. Upon conclusion of the Legislative Session, a comprehensive 89th Legislative Session Report will be completed and made available. The Legislative Session Update webinar is scheduled for July 29, 2025.

GOAL IV (TRAINING)

Oversee and develop judicial and legal training efforts at all levels of practice that identify and promote best practices to improve outcomes and establish and maintain a well-informed judiciary and bar.

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

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

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

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 MCLE and ethics hours.

05/09/25 Update: The 18th Annual Child Welfare Judges Conference will be held on October 27-29, 2025. The planning process began with a Curriculum Committee meeting on February 24, 2025, and continued via ongoing correspondence with committee members who advised on topics of interest and potential speakers. Commission staff is in the process of inviting speakers and securing conference logistics. Designed for judges who devote a minimum of 15% of their docket to hearing civil child welfare cases, this conference attracts judges from across the state who handle child welfare cases, including Child Protection Court judges; district, county court-at-law, and associate judges; and appellate judges.

The Children’s Commission will continue to partner with DFPS staff to provide county level data at the conference (see Strategy 36 for additional information). Commission staff met with TCJ staff regarding the conference agenda and related planning on April 15, 2025.

The curriculum is expected to provide approximately 13-15 hours of Continuing Judicial Education, a minimum of 4 hours of Family Violence Credits, and ethics hours. Speakers will include members of the judiciary, DFPS leadership, OCA leadership, SSCC leadership, and persons with lived experience in the child welfare system.

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

Background: Child Protection Courts were created to specialize the management of child welfare dockets. Like child support court associate judges, these associate judges are appointed by their regional presiding judges and are OCA employees. 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 CPCs to conduct hearings and manage cases. There are currently 30 CPCs and 1 Harris County Child Protection Court; these courts exclusively hear child welfare cases in 148 Texas counties.

05/09/25 Update: Commission staff are coordinating with the Children's Courts Program Manager at OCA regarding the logistics and curriculum for this year's Child Protection Court Convening. This year's training will be a full day of virtual presentations on July 18, 2025.

The CPC Convening Curriculum Committee met on February 24, 2025 and continued to advise Commission staff through ongoing correspondence on topics of interest and potential speakers. The agenda is complete, and Commission staff are in the process of confirming speakers and setting up speaker preparation meetings. A registration announcement for the July 18, 2025, virtual training was shared with the CPC judges and court coordinators. This year's conference will include 5 plenary presentations for the judges and court coordinators, as well as two breakout sessions for each audience, one of which will be a moderated discussion of current issues. Panel presentations will include legislative updates, data and reporting requirements, best practices for courtroom management, issues specific to rural jurisdictions, and a moderated discussion with regional presiding judges. The curriculum will provide Continuing Judicial Education, TBLS, and ethics hours. Speakers will include members of the judiciary, TIDC staff, and OCA staff.

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

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

Background: Trial Skills Training (TST) is a hands-on training designed to improve the litigation skills of child welfare law attorneys in order to raise the caliber of legal services to children and families in child protection cases. The TST is directed by Hon. Piper McCraw, Children's Commission Jurist in Residence. Trial Skills Training is held once a year and offers up to 20 MCLE (Minimum Continuing Legal Education) hours, including ethics hours. Since its inception in October 2013, the Children's Commission has hosted numerous TSTs with a focus on jury trial preparation presented by a volunteer faculty comprised of highly experienced judges and attorneys from across the state. In September 2024, the first iteration of the Trial Skills Contested Hearing Practices Course was held, which shifted the focus of the training to improving contested hearing practice skills. Each TST program has a competitive application process and is limited to no more than 27 attorneys. It includes a fictional child welfare case fact pattern with a complete case file covering all Texas-specific statutory hearings building up to final trial. TST provides parent, child, and attorneys representing DFPS numerous litigation exercises in child welfare law and includes lectures and demonstrations from trained faculty comprised of seasoned attorneys and judges which are followed by personal critiques and coaching. Caseworkers, Pediatric Fellows and/or Pediatric Nurse Practitioners, and Parent Therapists serve as live witnesses. Materials are updated and new faculty is recruited and trained with each event. Extensive internal and external continuous quality improvement (CQI) process and outcome evaluation is involved with each event.

05/09/25 Update: The Commission is currently accepting and reviewing applications for the Fall 2025 Trial Skills Training Contested Hearing Practices Course. This year's training will include 2 half days of virtual instruction on September 4 and 10, 2025, and 2.5 days of in-person instruction on September 16-18, 2025, in Round Rock, Texas. The course is designed to provide child welfare attorneys at all skill levels and experience with the tools to improve their litigation skills. Up to 27 attorneys who wish to improve their courtroom skills will be selected to participate in this year's course. The deadline for applications is midnight on May 2, 2025.

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

Background: The Commission develops and hosts regular webinars to address current and emerging issues as well as gaps in training in order to educate child welfare attorneys, judges, and stakeholders across the state. These webinars focus on topics most relevant to the legal and judicial communities which may also be relevant to child welfare partners, parents, youth and young adults, and family members of those experiencing the child welfare system. All of the Commission's web-based content is archived and is available on the On-Demand Training and MCLE webpage. Additionally, the Commission has initiated a new training method in the form of a podcast entitled Children's Commission Conversations in order to provide easily accessible education on child welfare matters, including law, policy, and practice.

05/09/25 Update:

The Commission hosted a webinar entitled "Utilizing Court Interpreters in Child Welfare Cases" on February 25, 2025. The webinar covered legal requirements, logistics, client communication, and courtroom dynamics for court interpreters throughout a child welfare case.

On March 28, 2025, the Commission hosted a webinar entitled "Non-Party Participation in Child Welfare Mediations." The panel discussed considerations for including non-parties in child welfare mediations, including ethical issues that mediators and attorneys must be aware of and ensuring that agreements which include non-party participants are enforceable.

On April 29, 2025, the Commission hosted a webinar entitled "Utilizing Day Care to Support Children and Families." The webinar explored how daycare services can support biological, kinship, and foster families and encourage child safety in various stages of a child welfare case, including prevention efforts. It also addressed policies and procedures as they relate to day care and funding, the role and duties of the DFPS day care coordinators, and practice tips for judges and lawyers.

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

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

Background: In partnership with the CLE branch of the State Bar of Texas, TexasBarCLE, the Children's Commission produced MCLE courses on child welfare and related issues to provide training for court-appointed attorneys and attorneys representing DFPS in child welfare cases. From 2012 through 2019, the Children's Commission partnered with TexasBarCLE to produce numerous MCLE trainings; these live broadcasts are archived in the TexasBarCLE's Child Welfare [Practice Area](#) in their Online Classroom. Both the live and archived recordings of these child welfare-related webinars are available at a reduced rate to attorneys representing children and parents, and there are scholarships available through the State Bar for attorneys who represent DFPS and need financial assistance to access this training. The Commission also worked with TexasBarCLE in 2022 to produce "Building Better Youth Outcomes: The Importance of Being Trauma Informed." Some or all of the content of these webcasts and archived webinars may be considered in some jurisdictions to satisfy the educational requirements for court-appointed attorneys under Texas Family Code §§ 107.004 and 107.0131.

At this time, the Commission's partnership with TexasBarCLE involves participation in the State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law (CPL) Section's Curriculum Committee and supporting that Section through scholarships to the annual spring Advanced Child Protection Law Course, which was expanded to include a half-day "101" course, as well as the annual summer Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop during the Advanced Family Law

Course. Additionally, the Children's Commission partners with DFPS and TDCAA to provide training for attorneys representing DFPS.

05/09/25 Update:

State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law Section: Commission staff attended the Annual CPL 101 and Advanced Child Protection Law Courses on March 6-7, 2025 at the Sheraton Austin Georgetown Hotel & Conference Center. Commission staff co-presented with Crystal Leff-Piñon of the Texas Indigent Defense Commission on a session entitled "Child Welfare: A Systems View."

Additionally, the CPL Section continues to collaborate with the Commission to provide additional free MCLE content at the regional Reasonable Efforts trainings. Most recently, CPL members recently joined Commission staff in DFPS Region 11 (Laredo) in April and will be in Region 3E (Dallas) in May (see Strategy 24 for more information).

Texas District and County Attorneys Association (TDCAA) Prosecuting Crimes Against Children Course: In collaboration with TDCAA, the Children's Commission provided 12 one-hour sessions of child welfare related content during the 2025 Prosecuting Domestic Violence & Child Sex Assault Cases Conference held on April 8-11, 2025, in Sugarland. This is the third TDCAA conference where TDCAA invited the Children's Commission to assist by providing a tailored training track for prosecutors representing DFPS throughout the state. Commission staff will work with TDCAA at the conclusion of the 89th Legislative Session to identify any additional need for child welfare law related content for attorneys representing DFPS.

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

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

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

05/09/25 Update: Several examples of Jurist in Residence (JIR) Letters and Judicial and Attorney Resource Letters (JARLs) issued between February 7 and April 22, 2025, include:

- 4/29/2025: Fall 2025 Trial Skills Training Contested Hearing Practices Course Application Deadline
- 4/10/2025: Child Abuse Prevention Month
- 4/08/2025: Fall 2025 Trial Skills Training
- 4/04/2025: March and April Webinars
- 3/06/2025: ICYMI and Upcoming Webinar Reminder
- 2/27/2025: New Legal Training Opportunity
- 2/21/2025: Reminder, Upcoming Webinar: Court Interpreters; CBC 101
- 2/18/2025: Scholarships to 2025 TDCAA Conference
- 2/13/2025: Jurist in Residence Letter: Save the Date: 2025 CWJC; New Scholarship Offering

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

Background: The Children’s Commission administers various judicial and attorney scholarship opportunities throughout the fiscal year, including but not limited to: (1) the TexasBarCLE Annual Advanced Child Protection Law Course; (2) the TexasBarCLE Advanced Family Law Child Abuse and Neglect One-Day Workshop; and (3) the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges Juvenile Justice Conference and Annual Conference. For all scholarships, the Children’s Commission determines scholarship criteria and deploys an application process that includes pre- and post-conference evaluations to identify or confirm the knowledge gained and new practices that scholarship recipients plan to implement and/or change. The surveys also inquire about additional topics of interest to help inform planning for future conferences. All attorney applicants for Commission scholarships must currently represent DFPS or take appointments on a child welfare docket, be in good standing with the State Bar of Texas and with their primary judge, and commit to completing a post-event survey from the Commission.

05/09/25 Update:

The Advanced Child Protection Law Conference: The State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law (CPL) Section hosted its 7th Annual Advanced Child Protection Law Course on April 6-7, 2025. The CPL Section included 3 hours of “101” content, which includes one hour of ethics credit on the morning of April 6, 2025. This was followed by the Advanced Course, which provided an additional 10.5 hours of MCLE, with 1.25 hours of ethics. There are separate registrations for the two courses. The Commission awarded 40 registration scholarships for qualified attorneys to attend the live “101” and Advanced Courses or to watch any scheduled webcast replays.

National Conference on Juvenile Justice: The NCJFCJ 2025 National Conference on Juvenile Justice was held on March 16-19, 2025, in Boston, Massachusetts. The Commission awarded 3 scholarships to qualified judges.

Texas District and County Attorney Association Training: The 2025 Prosecuting Crimes Against Children Conference was held on April 8-11, 2025 in Sugarland, Texas. The Commission awarded 17 scholarships to qualified attorneys.

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

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

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

Judicial Scholarship Request: This new judicial scholarship provides funds for reimbursement of conference registration for judges who need financial assistance to attend conferences which are not already covered by existing scholarship opportunities. The application is very similar to the Commission’s judicial scholarship application. The Commission announced this scholarship opportunity on February 13, 2025 and the description and application are on the Commission’s website. On April 17, 2025, Training Committee members and Commission staff discussed ways to disseminate information about this new scholarship opportunity.

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

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

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

Providing assistance to local jurisdictions will help the Commission to expand its capacity to meet requests for training support, bring trainings to jurisdictions, and increase opportunities for attorneys in child welfare cases to qualify for and/or remain on court appointment lists. To address these needs, the Children’s Commission created a new Legal Training Support opportunity.

05/09/25 Update: The Commission announced the availability of Legal Training Support on February 27, 2025 and added the description and application to its website. Applications for Legal Training Support must relate to safety, permanency, or well-being for the child and family and fit into one or more of the Children’s Commission’s goals: Collaboration, Systems Improvement, Legal Practice & Process, Training, and/or Data. Applicants can request help with planning their training content, financial support for a venue or speaker fees, Zoom or MCLE assistance, or other support in order to provide training. Applicants must have a judicial sponsor, and their application must include a budget if financial support is requested. On April 17, 2025, Training Committee members and Commission staff discussed ways to disseminate information about this available support.

GOAL V (DATA)

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

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

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

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

05/09/25 Update: At the Data Committee meeting on April 15, 2025, discussion centered around the federal CFSR Final Report and the February 2025 data profile specific to measuring permanency outcomes and the time to permanency. Committee members discussed key data elements to track as well as available and critical data sources to optimize the analysis of the impact of any PIP-related strategies. This feedback will be used to develop the implementation plan for a pilot when the PIP is approved.

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

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

05/09/25 Update: The Children’s Commission and TIDC presentation at the Child Protection Law Advanced Course in March included a review of statewide trends in child welfare data as well as legal representation.

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 statewide data as part of a DFPS leadership plenary presentation as well as to provide data for the Regional Breakouts to members of the judiciary at the annual Child Welfare Judges Conference, which is hosted by the Commission in partnership with Texas Center for the Judiciary. The Regional Breakout sessions provide the opportunity for judges to meet with Regional Directors from Child Protective Investigations and Child Protective Services, as well as regional Systems Improvement Specialists to discuss region-specific data elements and permanency outcomes. 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 in CBC catchment areas, beginning in 2020.

05/09/25 Update: The October 2025 Child Welfare Judges Conference Regional Breakouts will incorporate feedback from previous conferences in order to increase gains in knowledge and facilitate higher-level discussion and problem-solving. Statewide data will be shared in the DFPS leadership panel presentation which immediately precedes the Regional Breakouts so that the processes which lead to data outcomes can be presented for a greater understanding of the intersection of law, policy, practice, and data. Key topics will be covered along with accompanying data on safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes at the statewide level.

Judicial and agency feedback following these sessions at the 2024 conference was largely positive and focused on the helpful aspects of examining data and improving communication. To prepare for the 2025 Regional Breakout Sessions, Commission staff met with DFPS staff regarding regional and county data compilation and sharing on April 3, 2025.

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.

05/09/25 Update: Recent updates to the CPCMS system were released on February 26, 2025. Along with security and maintenance updates, several new features were added. These features include a new “Incarcerated Type” field, ticklers displayed on the hearing page, and updates for tracking substance abuse tests. New placement options were added to help track when kinship placements become licensed foster homes, and for those children in Supervised Independent Living. A substance use test option was added to track when courts order nail testing, and a new tickler message was added to notify courts of open cases that have not had a hearing in 180 days. The next CPCMS release is planned for the third quarter of FY2025.

The CPCMS Advisory Council last met on March 21, 2025 to discuss and review new enhancement requests. The council reviewed and approved a request for adding a drop-down feature that would allow for tracking as to whether an adoption was granted to a relative, fictive kin, or non-relative. Additionally, approval was granted for the addition of “Reinstatement of Parental Rights” to the list of final orders that the court renders. Likewise, approval was granted to the addition “Reinstatement of Parental Rights” as a hearing type. Finally, the Advisory Council approved the request to alphabetize the parties on the summary screen to match a recent CPCMS update that made this change to the dockets and hearings screens.

INSERT - TAB 4

**Children's Commission
Financial Report
May 2025**

FISCAL YEAR 2025 FEDERAL/STATE REVENUE

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

FISCAL YEAR 2025 OTHER REVENUE

	<u>Contract Amount</u>	<u>Contract Payments</u>
(+) 2024 Casey Family Programs Contract	\$ 10,000	\$ 5,000
(+) FY2025 DFPS Training Contract	\$ 787,458	\$ 163,469
Fiscal Year 2025 Other Income	\$ 797,458	\$ 168,469

FISCAL YEAR 2025 BUDGET

	<u>Budget</u>	<u>Expenses To-date</u>	<u>Anticipated Expenditures</u>
Operating	\$ 1,541,810	\$ 625,194	\$ 916,616
Commission Projects	\$ 188,800	\$ 31,791	\$ 157,009
<i>Systems Improvement</i>	40,000	2,572	\$ 37,428
<i>Legal Practice and Process</i>	76,400	27,676	\$ 48,724
<i>Training</i>	72,400	1,542	\$ 70,858
Scholarships	\$ 82,000	\$ 13,380	\$ 68,620
<i>Appellate Law Section Boot Camp</i>	7,500	825	\$ 6,675
<i>Child Protection Law Section</i>	10,000	9,075	\$ 925
<i>General Judicial Scholarship</i>	5,000	-	\$ 5,000
<i>NACC - Annual Conference</i>	10,000	-	\$ 10,000
<i>NCJFCJ - Judicial Scholarship</i>	30,000	1,980	\$ 28,020
<i>State Bar CAN CLE</i>	7,500	-	\$ 7,500
<i>TBLS - CWL Specialization Exam Fee Waiver</i>	2,000	1,500	\$ 500
<i>TDCAA - Conference</i>	10,000	-	\$ 10,000
Grants	\$ 481,240	\$ 261,745	\$ 219,496
<i>DFPS Regional Attorney Training Support</i>	12,500	-	\$ 12,500
<i>OCA - CIP Technology Project</i>	128,279	22,226	\$ 106,053
<i>OCA - CPC Visiting Judge</i>	13,000	1,933	\$ 11,067
<i>Texas Center for the Judiciary (TCJ)</i>	232,460	184,246	\$ 48,214
<i>TLSC Family Helpline</i>	95,001	53,340	\$ 41,662
Total Proposed Expenditures	\$ 2,293,850	\$ 932,109	\$ 1,361,741

FISCAL YEAR 2025 ENDING BALANCE

Funds Available for FY 2025	\$	3,183,841
(-) FY 2025 Anticipated Expenditures	\$	(2,293,850)
(+) FY 2025 Contract Payments	\$	168,469
(-) Other Contract Expenses	\$	(90,486)
Estimated FY 2025 Carry Forward	\$	967,974

INSERT - TAB 5

Children's Commission Meeting
Collaborative Council Announcements
May 9, 2025

- Texas Lawyers for Children

From Dialogue to Direct Action:

How a Trauma-Informed Judiciary Can Lead System-Wide Change for Children!



Join other **Texas judges** for an open **dialogue** about how **trauma training** has **impacted your practice as a judge**. Share with others who have been trained what is happening in your jurisdiction. We would love to hear about what is working, what barriers you are facing, and other ideas for transforming the system into one that is trauma-informed. Don't miss this opportunity to add your voice and collaborate to create positive change for children statewide!

Facilitated by



Texas
Lawyers for
Children



THURSDAY
JUNE 5, 2025



4:30 P.M.

Register today at
<https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/4QLnOEvKQ0OAMIOgJqYY4w>

