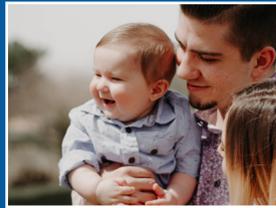




Children's Commission

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



Children's Commission Meeting Notebook

February 27, 2026

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

February 27, 2026

Meeting Notebook

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

State Bar of Texas
Austin, Texas

February 27, 2026
9:30 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.

Meeting Agenda

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

Upcoming Meeting Schedule:

- May 8, 2026 (virtual)
- September 18, 2026 (in person)
- November 6, 2026 (virtual)

INSERT - TAB 1

CHILDREN'S COMMISSION MEMBERS

Hon. Debra Lehrmann, <i>Chair</i>	Hon. Rosie Alvarado	Hon. Roy Ferguson	Hon. Aurora Martinez Jones	Vicki Spriggs
Hon. Rebeca Huddle, <i>Deputy Chair</i>	Erica Bañuelos	Hon. Angela Graves-Harrington	Daphny Milligan	Terese Stevenson
Hon. Eva Guzman, <i>Chair Emeritus</i>	Chantel Bedlington	Anne Heiligenstein	Hon. James Mosley	Hon. Thomas Stuckey
Hon. Harriet O'Neill, <i>Chair Emeritus</i>	Tymothy Belseth	Rep. Lacey Hull	Megan Ransom	Michelle Thompson-Janis
	Hon. Susan Brown	Dr. Julie Kaplow	Luanne Southern	Sen. Royce West
	Sheila Sturgis Craig	Brandon Logan	Hon. Ian Spechler	

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	Chantel Bedlington	Mary A. Alvarez	Hon. Mark Atkinson	Hon. David Barkley
Hon. Susan Brown	Dr. Gary Blau	Regina Anderson	Megan Barcak	Chelsea Cornelius
Hon. Rob Hofmann	Adrianna Cuéllar Rojas	Mark Briggs	Lilly Dealbert	Nathan Ezell
Hon. Piper McCraw	Anna Saldaña Ford	Marcus Crosby	Barbara Elias-Perciful	Dr. Monica Faulkner
Hon. Thomas Stuckey	Hon. Leigh Mathews Rodriguez	Cindy Dyar	Hon. Angela Graves-Harrington	Hon. Delia Gonzales
	Katherine McAnally	Hon. Charles Griffin	Margaret Halpin	Elizabeth Kromrei
<i>Staff:</i>	Gabriella McDonald	Michelle Latray	Judy Powell	Hon. Robin Sage
<i>Jamie Bernstein</i>	Emily Miller	Crystal Leff-Piñon	Kellie Price	Vicki Spriggs
<i>Patrick Passmore</i>	Hon. Robin Sage	Amanda Lockhart	Andrea Requesnes	Sub Uppaluri
	Hon. Ian Spechler	Daphny Milligan	Julliana Reyes	
	Sarah Worthington	Kenneth Thompson	Britny Rocha-Mendoza	<i>Staff:</i>
			Hon. Randy Shelton	<i>Brenda Kinsler</i>
	<i>Staff:</i>	<i>Staff:</i>	Diane Sumoski	<i>Jamie Bernstein</i>
	<i>Scott Cooley</i>	<i>Renée Castillo-De La Cruz</i>	Hon. Elizabeth Watkins	<i>OCA Advisory:</i>
	<i>Elizabeth Schmidt</i>	<i>Scott Cooley</i>		<i>Marcus Crosby</i>
	<i>Chelsea Martinez</i>	<i>Brenda Kinsler</i>	<i>Staff:</i>	<i>Alejandra Peña</i>
			<i>Milbrey Raney</i>	
			<i>Renée Castillo-De La Cruz</i>	
			<i>Andrea Vicencio</i>	

COLLABORATIVE COUNCIL MEMBERS

Erin Argue	Julia Hatcher	Kellie Pittman
Kristene Blackstone	Catherine Henning	Judy Powell
Andrew Brown	Kerrie Judice	Susan Ramirez
Sheryl Draker	Norman Ladd	Tanya Rollins
Barbara Elias-Perciful	Stephanie Madrigal	Johana Scot
Dr. Monica Faulkner	Gabriella McDonald	Denise Smith
Mike Foster	Dr. Jill McLeigh	Andrea Sparks
Fedora Galasso	Hollie Mims	Kenneth Thompson
Barbra Grimmer	Kate Murphy	Amanda Vasquez
		Sarah Worthington

STAFF AND JURISTS IN RESIDENCE

Jamie Bernstein, <i>Executive Director</i>	Brenda Kinsler, <i>Sr. Staff Attorney</i>
Milbrey Raney, <i>Assistant Director</i>	Chelsea Martinez, <i>Program Specialist</i>
Jessica Arguijo, <i>Communications Manager</i>	Patrick Passmore, <i>Finance Manager</i>
Renée Castillo-De La Cruz, <i>Sr. Staff Attorney</i>	Elizabeth Schmidt, <i>Juvenile Justice Staff Attorney</i>
Scott Cooley, <i>Sr. Staff Attorney</i>	Willette Sedwick, <i>Accountant</i>
Tiffany Edwards, <i>Program Specialist</i>	Andrea Vicencio, <i>Program Specialist</i>
	Hon. Rob Hofmann, <i>Sr. 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, November 14, 2025
9:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.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	✓	
Erica Bañuelos, Associate Commissioner for Child Protective Services, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, Austin	✓	
Chantel Bedlington, Kinship Navigator Program Supervisor, ACH Child and Family Services, Fort Worth	✓	
Tymothy Belseth, Program Coordinator, Texas Institute for Child and Family Wellbeing, University of Texas at Austin, Austin	✓	
Hon. Susan Brown, Presiding Judge, 11 th Administrative Judicial Region, Houston	✓	
Sheila Craig, Strategic Consultant, Austin	✓	
Hon. Roy Ferguson, Special/Private/Visiting Judge, Arbitrator, and Mediator for Family Law and Civil Cases, Alpine	✓	
Hon. Angela Graves-Harrington, Judge, 246 th Family District Court, Houston		✓
Anne Heiligenstein, Senior Director Strategic Consultant - Texas, Casey Family Programs, Austin	✓	
Rep. Lacey Hull, Texas House of Representatives, Katy	✓	
Dr. Julie Kaplow, Executive Director, Trauma and Grief Center, The Hackett Center for Mental Health, Houston		✓
Brandon Logan, Executive Director, One Accord for Kids, Midland	✓	
Hon. Aurora Martinez Jones, Judge, 126 th District Court, Austin	✓	
Daphny Milligan, Parent Representative, Waco	✓	
Hon. James Mosley, Judge, 316 th District Court, Stinnett	✓	
Megan Ransom, Chief Executive Officer, Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services, Austin	✓	
Luanne Southern, Chief Strategist for Behavioral Health, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, Austin	✓	
Hon. Ian Spechler, Administrative Law Judge, State Office of Administrative Hearings, Austin		✓
Vicki Spriggs, Chief Executive Officer, Texas CASA, Austin	✓	
Terese Stevenson, Vice President, Grants, The Rees-Jones Foundation, Dallas	✓	
Hon. Thomas Stuckey, Associate Judge, Centex Child Protection Court South, Seguin	✓	
Michelle Thompson-Janis, Director, Department of Social Services, Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas		✓
Hon. Royce West, Texas Senate, District 23, Dallas		✓
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		
Mary Alvarez, Assistant District Attorney, Hidalgo County District Attorney's Office		
Dr. Gary Blau, Executive Director Emeritus, The Hackett Center for Mental Health		
Cindy Dyar, Family Helpline Managing Attorney, Texas Legal Services Center		
Barbara Elias-Perciful, Director, Texas Lawyers for Children		
Liz Kromrei, CPS Director of Services, Department of Family and Protective Services		
Amanda Lockhart, Attorney, Palmos, Russ, McCullough & Russ		
Anna Saldaña Ford, Chief of Staff/General Counsel, SJRC Texas/Belong		
Crystal Leff-Piñon, Director of Family Protection Representation, Texas Indigent Defense Commission		
Gabriella McDonald, Deputy Director, Texas Appleseed		
Emily Miller, Attorney, Emily Miller Law Office		
Audrey O'Neill, Commissioner, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services		

Julliana Reyes, Attorney, Bailey Reyes Trial Lawyers
Hon. Robin Sage, Judicial Engagement Team, Casey Family Programs
Sarah Worthington, Director, Texas Foster Youth Justice Project

Attending Collaborative Council Members

Erin Argue, Heart Galleries of Texas Post-Permanency Director, Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services
Barbra Grimmer, Child Welfare Policy Coordinator, Texas Council on Family Violence
Kerrie Judice, Director of Policy and Advocacy, TexProtects
Tanya Rollins, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (ret.)
Hollie Mims, Operations and Stakeholder Engagement Director, Department of Family & Protective Services

Office of Court Administration Staff

Marcus Crosby, Children’s Courts Program Manager
Jeffrey Tsunekawa, Director of Court Services

Attending Children’s Commission Staff

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

CALL TO ORDER AND OPENING REMARKS

Justice Debra Lehrmann called the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m. and welcomed everyone to the final Children’s Commission meeting of 2025. Justice Lehrmann expressed her gratitude to those in attendance for participating and for being an integral part of the work done on behalf of Texas children and families involved with the child welfare system.

Adoption of September 26, 2025, Meeting Minutes

Justice Lehrmann directed members to the September 26, 2025 Commission Meeting Minutes behind Tab 2 of the Meeting Notebook, distributed in advance of the meeting.

ACTION: Justice Lehrmann asked if there were any corrections to the minutes as written. Hearing none, after a motion and a second, the Commissioners voted to adopt the minutes for the September 26, 2025 Children’s Commission meeting.

Commission, Committee, and Staff Member Changes

Justice Lehrmann noted that Dr. Gary Blau’s term as a Commissioner recently ended. Dr. Blau expressed his appreciation for serving as a Commissioner and shared that he plans to stay involved with the commission. Justice Lehrmann welcomed the following new Commissioners for their initial three-year terms:

- Tymothen Belseth, a Young Adult Representative and Spark Program Coordinator at the University of Texas at Austin.

- Dr. Julie Kaplow, the Executive Director of the Trauma and Grief Center at The Hackett Center for Mental Health in Houston.
- Brandon Logan, the Executive Director of One Accord for Kids in Midland.
- Daphny Milligan, a Parent Representative from Waco.
- Megan Ransom, the Executive Director of the Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services in Austin.
- Hon. Ian Spechler, an Administrative Law Judge and Mediator at the State Office of Administrative Hearings statewide.

Justice Lehrmann also announced that Chantel Bedlington, Kinship Navigator Supervisor at ACH Child and Family Services, agreed to serve for a second term as Commissioner.

Justice Lehrmann reported Judge Rosie Alvarado will roll off the Systems Improvement Committee but will remain on the Data Committee. Janet VanderZanden will roll off the Legal Practice & Process Committee. Mary Alvarez, Hidalgo County Assistant District Attorney; Regina Anderson, DFPS Regional Attorney; Michelle Latray, Attorney at Law; and Amanda Lockhart, Attorney at Law will join the Legal Policy & Process Committee.

Justice Lehrmann shared that Tymothy Belseth, Denise Campbell, and Judge Tracey Scown will roll off the Training Committee. Megan Barcak, Grimes County Attorney; Lilly Dealbert, UT Austin Spark Program Participant; Tiffany Greco, Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services VP of Learning; Julliana Reyes, Attorney at Law; and Judge Randy Shelton, 279th District Court will join the Training Committee.

Regarding Collaborative Council member changes, Justice Lehrmann announced that Catherine Henning will replace Kasey Jackson as a representative of CACTX.

OFFICE OF COURT ADMINISTRATION (OCA) UPDATE

Mr. Jeffrey Tsunekawa made announcements on behalf of OCA. Mr. Tsunekawa reported that counties traditionally reported only aggregate court data, such as the number of cases filed or disposed of, rather than detailed case-level information. The new reporting requirements now call for the monthly submission of specific data on each case, including defendant names and charges. District and county clerks remain responsible for submitting this information to the State. Efforts are underway to align reporting practices so that the data accurately reflect courtroom activity.

In larger jurisdictions such as Harris County, advanced case management systems allow for some automation, though additional refinement is needed to ensure the accuracy of the data. Smaller counties face greater challenges due to limited resources, but OCA is working with them to expand automation and reduce the reporting burden. The overarching goal is to ensure that court data reporting is accurate, consistent, and efficient across all counties.

Judge Aurora Martinez Jones raised concerns about how case-level data for child welfare cases will be collected and reported. She noted challenges with existing case management systems, which are not designed to handle the complexities of family and juvenile cases. Examples included difficulties in accurately reporting custodial versus non-custodial arrangements, especially in situations involving grandparents or other non-parent conservators. She emphasized that there is no single case management system that adequately fits all case types.

Mr. Tsunekawa responded that child welfare cases are handled differently from other case types. The Judicial Council worked to identify recommended data points across all cases. Nonetheless, child welfare reporting remains limited to high-level information rather than detailed data. He acknowledged ongoing challenges and noted that more detailed reporting for child welfare cases will likely take several years to develop. Current efforts are focused on criminal and juvenile cases first, with plans to expand later to child welfare cases.

Ms. Sheila Craig asked whether race and ethnicity data are being collected under the new reporting requirements. Mr. Tsunekawa explained that these data points are not currently collected at the state level. He noted that such data may exist locally but is not part of the statewide reporting system at this time.

Judge Susan Brown clarified that OCA is collecting specific data measures in response to legislative mandates. The focus of this current reporting effort is on the types of cases being filed, the number of cases filed, and their dispositions. She explained that when she served on the district court bench, reporting was done by county, and the legislation intends to ensure that judges are actively working and that cases are processed timely. Judge Brown emphasized that this mandate is specifically designed to monitor whether cases are filed and disposed of efficiently.

Mr. Tsunekawa added that OCA is actively developing a new statewide case management system to support specialty courts. This initiative will include adult drug courts, family treatment courts, mental health courts, child protection courts, and child support courts. Many counties currently lack advanced systems for these case types, and some courts use outdated platforms. The goal of the new system is to provide a robust tool for collecting and tracking data and to enable more meaningful reporting of outcomes across these specialized areas.

TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY & PROTECTIVE SERVICES (DFPS) UPDATE

The full DFPS update and presentation can be found here: [November 14, 2025 CC Meeting](#). Key points are included below.

Ms. Liz Kromrei provided an update on the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) process. Regarding the upcoming Caregiver Notice Roundtable, Judge Martinez Jones commented on the importance of caregiver engagement, noting that one of the biggest challenges for judges is simply knowing when a caregiver is present in the courtroom. She suggested that if a caregiver notice process is developed, it should ensure that judges are aware of a caregiver's presence. Ms. Kromrei responded that this was valuable feedback and highlighted that Round 4 of the review process is focused on working with the courts.

Ms. Erica Bañuelos then announced the publication of new kinship rules on November 6, 2025, highlighting that these changes will significantly improve compensation and support for kinship caregivers. She noted that there were recent federal changes allowing child welfare agencies to establish separate standards for kinship caregivers. The rules reflect the requirements of Senate Bill 593 and a partnership between HHSC and DFPS. Ms. Bañuelos expressed that the rules represent a significant advancement in supporting kinship caregivers, not only financially but also through expanded services from child placing agencies.

Ms. Bañuelos outlined several key changes for the kin licensing standards: the minimum caregiver age changed from 21 to 18 for kinship homes; caregiver-to-child ratios expanded to allow up to six children regardless of age; and caregiver relationship documentation was simplified to avoid burdensome paperwork. Training requirements were also adjusted, allowing kinship caregivers to complete fewer hours before verification and providing extended timeframes afterward. Additional changes included removing education requirements such as a GED or high school diploma, eliminating TB testing, and permitting kinship home assessments in place of full foster home studies to expedite verification.

Ms. Bañuelos emphasized that the new standards reflect realistic family living environments, allowing flexibility in sleeping arrangements and reducing burdens such as medication logs for routine over-the-counter drugs. Pet vaccination requirements were also eased, focusing instead on safety risks rather than strict compliance. She noted that implementation will require coordinated planning, staff training, and regional updates to kinship plans to ensure caregivers move through the verification process more quickly and effectively.

Judge Thomas Stuckey raised a question about whether the new kinship standards would affect families if children were unable to return home, specifically asking if caregivers would need to meet different requirements should they move toward adoption. Ms. Bañuelos explained that the standards are designed to enhance permanency outcomes by streamlining the adoption process. If caregivers are verified early and parental rights are terminated, the caregiver can transition directly into adoption, avoiding delays caused by late verification. Verified caregivers also qualify for Permanency Care Assistance (PCA), providing financial support similar to foster parents, and ensuring kinship caregivers receive assistance upfront rather than at the end of the case.

DFPS Commissioner Audrey O'Neill added that the changes are significant because they remove income eligibility requirements for kinship caregivers, allowing all verified caregivers to access financial assistance regardless of income. She noted that under previous rules, assistance was limited to 12 months for unverified caregivers, but with verification there is no time limit. Commissioner O'Neill emphasized that this represents a major step forward for kinship families, reducing barriers and providing long-term support.

Ms. Anne Heiligenstein asked whether the legislature's review of licensing standards applied not only to kinship care but also to foster parents, noting that streamlining foster care standards could help improve child placements. Ms. Bañuelos confirmed that all minimum standards were required to be reviewed. Commissioner O'Neill further noted that foster home standards are currently under review, with public comment anticipated in December and new standards expected by late Spring.

Ms. Craig added that the changes are transformative for kinship families and provide a foundation for revising foster care standards as well. She reflected on the evolution of the kinship program since its inception and expressed excitement about the opportunities these changes create for families to foster and adopt. Justice Lehrmann echoed her appreciation, underscoring the importance of these reforms.

CHILDREN’S COMMISSION UPDATE

Ms. Bernstein reported on the release of the 2025 Bench Book. The updated bench book was distributed in print at the conference in October. It is also available online through the Children’s Commission website and the LawBox app. This edition incorporates statutory updates from the 89th Legislative Session and includes a new checklist on required court admonishments to assist judges.

Ms. Milbrey Raney then shared highlights from the 18th Annual Child Welfare Judges Conference, held in late October in partnership with the Texas Center for the Judiciary. The event brought together 84 judges from across the state, including appellate, general jurisdiction, associate, and child protection court judges. The conference featured 15 sessions over three days, beginning with a best practice series on statutory hearings, followed by legislative updates and contempt authority training. DFPS leadership provided a statewide update and regional breakouts allowed judges and regional staff to review data and discuss strategies to improve outcomes. Panels addressed service array, placement issues, and family reunification challenges, with impactful contributions from speakers with lived experience. A panel on kinship caregivers received especially positive feedback, with many judges committing to strengthening caregiver engagement during hearings. Ms. Raney noted that during the conference Texas CASA honored Judge Piper McCraw for her leadership.

Following the updates, Ms. Daphny Milligan asked how more family treatment courts could be established in counties such as Bell and McLennan. Judge Martinez Jones responded that expansion depends on judicial leadership and willingness to preside over specialty courts. She encouraged conversations with local judges and noted that the Texas Association of Specialty Courts provides resources and guidance for starting new family treatment courts. Judge Martinez Jones offered to assist colleagues interested in developing these courts, underscoring the importance of collaboration.

COLLABORATIVE COUNCIL MEMBER UPDATES

Ms. Barbara Elias-Perciful, Director of Texas Lawyers for Children, shared that the organization provides an online legal resource and communication center for judges and attorneys handling child welfare cases. She highlighted the current focus on child trauma training, noting a recent session on Dr. Bruce Perry’s neurosequential model. Dr. Perry’s team presented practical applications of his research, explaining how sequential activities can rewire a child’s brain and improve behavior, emphasizing that healing must occur before behavioral change is possible. She announced upcoming video replays on December 3 and 4, as well as a January 29 “Ask an Expert” session. Ms. Elias-Perciful encouraged registration through TexasLawyersforChildren.org, where judges and attorneys can access the training portal at any time.

Ms. Sarah Worthington, Director of the Texas Foster Youth Justice Project, announced the launch of a new website, www.texasfosteryouth.org. The site now hosts the Aging Out Guide and the Minors Living Without Their Parents Guide, offering user-friendly, easy to access resources for young people navigating the foster care system. Ms. Worthington emphasized that the redesigned site is easier to use and provides accessible guidance for youth and those supporting them.

NEW BUSINESS

Justice Lehrmann announced that the 2026 Commission Meeting schedule is as follows: February 27 (in person), May 8, (virtual), September 18 (in person), and November 6 (virtual).

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 10:36 a.m.

INSERT - TAB 3

REPORT TO THE COMMISSION

February 27, 2026

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 confers regularly with national organizations and other CIPs and submits an annual report to the Supreme Court of Texas and a CIP strategic plan to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). Children's Commission membership includes standing positions for leadership from the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), Texas Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), and the State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law Section as well as a Regional Presiding Judge. The Children's Commission staff also 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 Education Agency (TEA), the Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services (TACFS), and the Texas Foster Youth Justice Project (FYJP).

The Systems Improvement, Legal Practice & Process, Training, and Data Committees are standing committees that meet before every Children's Commission meeting and oversee related Commission projects and initiatives.

02/27/26 Update: The November 14, 2025 Children's Commission meeting was held online on Zoom and archived on the Commission's YouTube channel and website. The Systems Improvement, Legal Practice & Process, Training, and Data Committees convened on January 22, January 30, February 10, and January 13, 2026 respectively, to discuss new and ongoing projects.

Children's Commission staff met virtually with other CIPs from ACF Region 6 (Oklahoma, Louisiana, Arkansas, and New Mexico) in December and January. Texas CIP hosted a regional CIP meeting on February 24-25, 2026 in Austin. The Regional CIP meeting was the first time since 2020 that Texas CIP met in person with other court improvement programs. The agenda included a focus on legal representation, judicial practices, relationships with the state child welfare agency, permanency in rural areas, and involvement in the federal Child and Family Services Review process.

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 members 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, assess engagement, and identify areas in need of improvement.

02/27/26 Update: Bi-weekly stakeholder calls, including updates and participation from agency staff and Collaborative Council members, continue to take place every other week, with the most recent meeting on February 18, 2026. Information about upcoming training events, resources, and other announcements of interest are shared during each call.

Objective: Communicate Children’s Commission areas of focus through easily to access, 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 announcements for scholarship and training opportunities, reports and resources, as well as the CIP grant application and grant recipient information. Announcements such as the Resource Letter for Judges and Attorneys are also distributed through the Commission’s communication and social media platforms.

02/27/26 Update: The Commission website is routinely updated for content and to highlight newly released reports and resources produced by or in collaboration with the Children’s Commission. 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 plans to debut a restructured website featuring additional webpages highlighting materials available to parents and youth this spring.

The Children’s Commission continues to develop utilization of social media platforms, including 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), 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 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 or provide 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 addressed strengths in the Texas child welfare system as well as areas in need of improvement. Texas had 90 days from the issuance of the Final Report to submit a proposed PIP. To inform the development of the PIP, DFPS conducted breakout meetings on safety, permanency, and well-being with interested stakeholders from throughout the State on November 5-6, 2024; the Children’s Commission staff participated in each of these meetings. The Texas PIP was approved by the federal Administration for Children and Families in the summer of 2025. The approved PIP includes two strategies that directly involved the CIP: regular review of permanency data and caregiver notification of court hearings. The Data Committee will implement the permanency strategy, and the caregiver notification strategy began with a Roundtable Meeting in November 2025.

02/27/26 Update: Children’s Commission staff continue to actively participate in the CFSR process. This includes joining monthly PIP meetings with ACF and DFPS, hosting the Roundtable meeting in November 2025 and reviewing data related to permanency outcomes at the recent Data Committee meeting (see additional information below).

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.

5. Strategy: Emphasize the importance of engaging children, youth, and parents in case planning and court processes, and include individuals with lived experience in system improvement efforts.

Background: Hearing from youth and families with lived experience in foster care is critical to the Children’s Commission goals 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 these goals, the Children’s Commission created a lived experience participation policy so that participants are compensated for their time spent preparing and presenting.

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

02/27/26 Update: By invitation of TACFS, the Children’s Commission participated in a planning committee for a statewide gathering on best practices for engaging people with lived experience in shaping policies and practices and developing recommendations for how child and family serving organizations can best foster meaningful and impactful engagement. The TACFS “Authentic Engagement with Lived Experience: A Best Practices Lab” event took place on December 5, 2025. Commission staff attended and participated in the Best Practices Lab.

Additionally, Commission staff continue to invite, include, and be informed by speakers with lived experience in Commission trainings, meetings, and other offerings, including in the presentation on family reunification at the February 27, 2026 Commission Meeting.

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.

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

Background: The Jurist in Residence position was created to foster judicial leadership and promote greater expertise among judges hearing child welfare matters. The JIR develops relationships with retired and sitting judges, and acts as a consultant, trainer, and speaker to provide expert and seasoned judicial advice on matters affecting courts and legal system handling of child welfare cases and issues. JIR activities include continued emphasis on elevating judicial leaders with expertise and interests related to prevention of removal to foster care, child and family well-being, 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 committee meetings, advise Commission staff, and engage in discussions about Community-Based Care, prevention and early intervention, placement capacity, and other issues.

02/27/26 Update: Between September 26, 2025 and February 27, 2026, a few examples of JIR activities include:

- Continued work as Immediate Past President for the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) and attended multiple Executive and other Committee Meetings
- Facilitated the Caregiver Notice Roundtable Discussion, November 17, Austin
- Presented on Current Child Welfare Issues at Academy of Court Appointed Neutrals First Wednesday Forum, November 29, Virtual
- Participated in monthly National CASA Judicial Leadership Council
- Spoke as a panelist on the “2025 View from the Bench Webinar on Expecting and Parenting Youth,” December 12, Virtual
- Chaired the Children’s Commission Systems Improvement Committee Meeting, January 22, Virtual
- Chaired the Children’s Commission Training Committee Meeting, February 10, 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.

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

Background: The Children’s Commission initiated a Statewide Collaborative on Trauma-Informed Care (SCTIC) in 2017 to elevate trauma-informed policy and practices in the Texas child welfare system by developing statewide strategies 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*.

The Children’s Commission established the Consortium on Trauma Informed Court Practices in August 2024 to provide a statewide judicial forum for discussion and education about trauma-informed and trauma-responsive court practices. 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 Center for Child and Family Studies 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. The Consortium convenes for bi-monthly MCLE presentations. Commission staff provide meeting support; continuing legal education credit, TBLS credit, and family violence hour credit as appropriate; and related online resources. Resources related to trauma-informed and trauma-responsive practices are updated regularly on www.TraumaInformedTexas.com.

02/27/26 Update: The Consortium on Trauma Informed Court Practices convened on November 21, 2025, and January 13, 2026. On November 21, 2025, Ana M Gómez, MC, LPC presented “Using Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy to Support Healing and Resilience in Children, Youth, and Families Impacted by Trauma.” The session provided an overview of complex trauma in children experiencing the child welfare system; how EMDR therapy works; and its applications with children, adolescents, and parents within the child welfare system. Discussion centered around whether and how judges could consider ordering EMDR therapy for children, teens, and parents experiencing child welfare cases. On January 13, 2026, Honorable Aurora Martinez Jones, Judge of the 126th District Court, and Amanda Herron, CEO of Nurturing Change, presented on “Trust Based Relational Interventions (TBRI): What Judges Need to Know and How to Use it to Benefit Children, Youth, and Parents in Child Welfare Cases.” This session explored trauma’s impact on the brain and how parents and professionals can use TBRI to support children’s brain development, emotions, and behaviors. Discussion also centered on how judges can apply TBRI to conversations with children, youth, and parents in the courtroom and whether and when to order TBRI therapy in a service plan. Additionally, information on the 2nd Annual Child Protection Court of the Concho Valley TBRI Training, hosted by Hon. Elizabeth Watkins, Judge of the Child Protection Court of the Concho Valley, was added to the www.TraumaInformedTexas.com website with details regarding attendees, trainers, and inspiration for the event.

Additionally, Commission staff participate in the Cross Systems Trauma-Informed Care (CSTIC) Initiative Workgroup at the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC). Members are representatives from state agencies such as TJJD, TIDC, and the HHSC, who are working on implementing trauma-informed practices in their agencies. Commission staff attended the CSTIC Initiative Workgroup meeting on November 19, 2025 and provided an update.

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, address safety concerns while maintaining family preservation, and encourage timely reunification.

Background: The Children’s Commission collaborates closely with DFPS on the implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA). 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 into 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.

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. TFF services are available in the following pilot areas: DFPS Regions 1, 2, 3W, 6A, 8A, and 8B.

02/27/26 Update: 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. The most recent Steering Committee meeting took place on February 18, 2026. Discussion centered on expansion into additional DFPS Region 3W counties and how to fill existing capacity throughout the State.

The February 27, 2026 Children’s Commission meeting will feature a panel presentation that includes a parent with lived experience, an attorney, and a social worker. The presentation will highlight the challenges and barriers as well as strengths to support successful and sustainable family reunification.

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

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

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

02/27/26 Update: The FC&Ed Committee last met on January 23, 2026, and discussed creating resources to support early childhood education, including screening for eligibility for Head Start and other programs. The next meeting will take place on July 14, 2026.

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 2026. This guide is designed to support Texas schools and child welfare professionals in addressing the educational needs of students in foster care.

The Higher Education Guide Workgroup is currently 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 experienced foster care as they navigate higher education. The workgroup continues to meet as needed. The next meeting will take place on February 26, 2026.

The FC&Ed Data Subcommittee last met on February 10, 2026 to discuss the annual data exchange between DFPS and TEA. The subcommittee meets monthly to discuss top priorities for the exchange and use of data on educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care.

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: Create resources that address the unique needs of sub-populations of children and youth who experience foster care, such as victims of child sexual abuse.

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. This year, the Children’s Commission, in partnership with the Office of the Governor, DFPS, Children’s Advocacy Centers of Texas (CACTX), and other stakeholders, is developing a resource highlighting the relevant laws aimed at protecting children who survive sexual abuse. The goal is to better support children and youth who are at high risk of being subjected to sexual abuse or commercial sexual exploitation.

02/27/26 Update: A workgroup charged with developing a resource to clarify the rights of children who experience sexual abuse is led by Hon. Selina Mireles, Associate Judge of the 4th & 5th Administrative Judicial Regions Child Protection Court. The resource is designed to help child survivors and their caregivers to identify and understand their legal rights. The resource will include information on Responding to Concerns of Child Sexual Abuse, Rights During an Investigation, In Court Proceedings, and Ongoing Safety and Protection. The workgroup met on October 9, November 6, and December 4, 2025 to review and refine the draft resource. The draft is currently being revised for readability with an anticipated release in Spring 2026.

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 facilitated, half-day program. 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, preparing a meeting agenda and related materials, supporting the moderator, and producing a written report within about 4 to 6 months following the Round Table event.

02/27/26 Update: During the CFSR, the federal Administration for Children and Families found that practices in Texas regarding notice of court hearings to caregivers vary widely across regions and counties. There is no

consistent tracking method for the notifications, and it is unclear who is responsible for giving notice. Additionally, many caregivers who participated in the CFSR did not know they had a right to be heard at the hearings.

A Caregiver Notice Roundtable Meeting occurred on November 17, 2025 in Austin. Invited participants included judges, attorneys, court liaisons, DFPS/SSCC staff, CASA advocates, and other subject matter experts from areas throughout the State. The agenda for the meeting included an overview of the law and policy considerations and discussions on identifying and addressing the barriers to consistent implementation as well as developing a uniform solution for notice to be provided to caregivers. Prior to the Roundtable meeting, Commission staff met with caregivers with lived experience on November 10, 2025 to provide a dedicated time for questions about the Roundtable and to go over goals for the meeting. A Roundtable Report will be presented at the February 27, 2026 Children's Commission meeting.

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. 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). Several initiatives at the Children's Commission aim to engage the legal and judicial communities in efforts to develop placement capacity statewide.

02/27/26 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 occurred on February 12, 2026. 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. Other agenda items included presentations on the Baby Moses Hotline and plans for a comprehensive case management system update.

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 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. Informed by input from the Juvenile Justice Committee, the Children's Commission requested an exceptional item to expand its work to include juvenile justice. The 89th Regular Legislature provided funding for additional capacity at the Children's Commission to support judges and attorneys handling juvenile justice matters.

02/27/26 Update: In December 2025, the Children’s Commission hired a Juvenile Justice Staff Attorney to develop this strategy further. The Juvenile Justice Committee previously indicated that a top priority is judicial education. To address the need for training that is tailored to judges hearing juvenile justice cases, the Commission will focus on developing and hosting a judicial juvenile justice conference in Summer 2026. To identify key topics and areas of focus, Commission staff met with TJJD staff on January 14, 2026. An expanded Juvenile Justice Committee also convened on February 6, 2026 to discuss conference logistics, the keynote address, and desired curriculum. The Juvenile Justice Committee will meet again on March 6, 2026.

Additionally, bench cards are in development to aid juvenile judges. The Children’s Commission is forming a multidisciplinary Juvenile Justice Advisory Council to review the materials created and to assist with identifying other priority projects.

GOAL III (LEGAL PRACTICE & PROCESS)

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

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

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

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

02/27/26 Update: The LRC met on January 16, 2026. For FY 2025, the LRC identified pre-petition legal representation programs as the priority area of focus, and the results of the related survey conducted last year will be presented at the February 27, 2026 Children’s Commission meeting.

The LRC also identified attorney recruitment and retention in child welfare law as the FY 2026 primary area of focus. The committee identified potential strategies to support targeted recruitment such as intersecting with other areas of law at CLE events to promote understanding and knowledge of child welfare cases; developing training events, especially in communities where there is low attorney availability and fewer CLE opportunities; and encouraging lawyers to participate in child welfare-related training events and finding ways to mitigate cost to attend.

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: Develop 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. Additionally, Texas has not 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.

02/27/26 Update: The Standards Committee is currently drafting standards for attorneys representing children. The committee most recently met in person on February 5-6, 2026 in San Antonio, Texas to continue drafting standards for Phase III (Preparatory) and Phase VII (Permanent Managing Conservatorship (PMC)). The committee meets next via Zoom on May 15, 2026.

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

16. Strategy: Support 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 attorneys who successfully pass the exam.

02/27/26 Update: The 2025 Child Welfare Law exam was held on October 6, 2025. Seven examinees sat for the exam, and three examinees successfully passed. The online application portal for the 2026 exam is scheduled to be open in mid to late February. 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 Workgroup, 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, the Children’s Commission partnered with the University of Texas and other stakeholders to produce the Parent Resource Guide, which is available in print and online on the Children’s Commission website as well as on many other stakeholder websites, in both English and Spanish.

02/27/26 Update: The Parent Resource Workgroup met on January 20, 2026, to review progress on current projects. In addition to releasing a Pre-Litigation Guide, updating the Parent Resource Guide (PRG), and completing a Parent Voice Video project, the workgroup has developed an outline for a webinar presentation focused on representing incarcerated parents in child welfare cases in collaboration with the Mediation Workgroup. The webinar is planned for April 2026. The Parent Resource Workgroup will meet on a bi-monthly schedule, with the next meeting occurring in March.

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 Investigations, the provision of Family-Based Safety Services (FBSS), Parental Child Safety Placements, Texas Family Code Chapter 34 non-parent agreements, termination of parental rights, custody, access, visitation, service plans, the court’s role in conducting hearings and oversight, right to legal counsel, non-offending parents, minor parents, incarcerated parents, survivors of family violence, intergenerational issues, and other situations.

02/27/26 Update: The Family Helpline completed 815 substantive calls during the six-month period from August 1, 2025, through January 31, 2026. Calls originated from 113 Texas counties; with an additional 23 calls from out of state. The five counties generating the highest call volume, in descending order, remain Harris, Dallas, Bexar, Travis, and Tarrant.

The most frequently discussed issue continues to be Child Protective Investigations (CPI), with 506 callers seeking information or assistance on this topic. Other commonly discussed issues included Safety Plans or Parental Child Safety Placements (216 callers), Family-Based Safety Services (196), Temporary Managing Conservatorship (187), substance use and abuse (185), conservatorship matters generally (174), reporting abuse and neglect (165), modification of conservatorship (110), and Court-Ordered Services / Motions to Participate (86), recognizing that many callers raised more than one issue during a single call.

Helpline attorneys spent much of the past quarter preparing multiple training sessions to educate numerous Legal Aid attorneys from across the state on child welfare law and policy at a weeklong conference this month. These sessions include data and substantive examples from what Helpline callers are experiencing during investigations and Family-Based Safety Services cases.

Helpline staff are also preparing a free, six-part webinar series for kinship caregivers, which will be on the third Wednesday of the month beginning in March. These webinars will cover common legal challenges kinship caregivers face, and caregivers will learn about their legal options and where to find support and resources in Texas.

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

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

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

02/27/26 Update: Tribal/state collaborative calls hosted by DFPS reconvened on January 15, 2026. The tribes have experienced some staffing changes, and the group determined it would be most beneficial to focus on scheduling at least one site visit between DFPS, other interested stakeholders, and each tribe. The collaborative also set out a goal to schedule a small in-person convening to meet and to discuss future plans, including an in-person ICWA Summit.

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.

02/27/26 Update: The 2026 Child Welfare Law Bench Book will be updated based on recommendations from the Bench Book Advisory Committee and feedback from the judiciary. The updated version will be shared in print at the October 2026 Child Welfare Judges Conference. An online version will be available shortly thereafter.

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, each committee meets 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 distributing the tool kits to ensure they are readily available to practitioners.

02/27/26 Update: Commission staff are currently working on updates to both the Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing Parents and Children and the Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing DFPS. Edits will focus on legislative changes from the 89th Regular Legislative Session. The updated versions are projected to be available in early April 2026. The 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, the Commission will distribute printed copies of the tool kits at child welfare training events.

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, family, and caregiver engagement in the court process, including through the use of technology.

Background: All parties involved in child welfare cases continue to struggle with securing consistent and timely notice of scheduled court 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.

02/27/26 Update: The number of users of the Notice and Engagement system continues to increase. 115 new users signed up to date in FY2026 (from October 1, 2025, to present) through the Notice and Engagement system to receive hearing notifications, bringing the total number of users to 2,688. Hearing notifications have

been sent for 7,437 hearings so far this fiscal year. A Resource Letter on the Child Protection Court Hearing Notification Service was distributed by the Commission on December 9, 2025.

23. Strategy: Identify and encourage legal and judicial practices that support narrowly tailored service planning for children and families.

Background: This new strategy is designed to facilitate a focus on educating judges and enhancing attorney best practices early in a child welfare case. A narrowly tailored service plan is essential to the success of parents' efforts to address the safety concerns that led to the removal of their children from the home. By addressing issues specific to each parent in the unique circumstances of the case, narrowly tailored plans can also increase parental engagement, increase the probability of compliance, reduce fatigue and financial burden, improve targeted skills, and avoid "box-checking" of service plan requirements. Increased legal and judicial understanding of the importance of specific plans will serve to facilitate positive permanency and support family reunification

02/27/26 Update: Commission staff began to compile a list of potential members for a committee whose members will address the issue of supporting narrowly tailored service planning. Invitations to serve as committee members will be issued in early March 2026.

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

24. Strategy: Establish an understanding regarding the availability and usefulness of mediation services 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. Though the use of mediation to resolve child welfare cases prior to trial has become widely accepted, the Children's Commission is exploring whether mediation is being underutilized in child welfare cases because mediation often occurs too late in the case timeline for the benefits of increased compliance to be realized.

02/27/26 Update: The Mediation Workgroup meets on an *ad hoc* basis. No meetings occurred during this reporting period; however, the Commission anticipates convening the workgroup in April 2026.

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

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

Background: The Legislation and Policy Resource Committee (LPRC) convenes on an *ad hoc* basis and will continue to act as a resource on the impact of legislative changes as well as changes in DFPS policy and court rules that impact the child welfare system. The purpose of the committee is to provide a forum to discuss judicial considerations on changes to child welfare law, policy, and rule.

02/27/26 Update: The committee did not meet and there are no updates during this reporting period.

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 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.

02/27/26 Update: In partnership with the Texas Center for the Judiciary, the Children’s Commission hosted the 18th Annual Child Welfare Judges Conference on October 27-29, 2025. Designed for judges who devote a minimum of 15% of their docket to hearing civil child welfare cases, 84 judges from across the state who handle child welfare cases attended the conference, including Child Protection Court judges; district, county court-at-law, and associate judges; general jurisdiction judges; and an appellate judge.

This year’s curriculum included traditional topics such as a Legislative Update and an OCA Update as well as a best practices series covering all of the statutory hearings; a panel on kinship caregivers; and panels about supporting parents through challenges related to substance use, family violence, housing, and employment. The curriculum provided 16.25 hours of Continuing Judicial Education, 8 hours of Family Violence credits, and 1.75 ethics hours. In all, 15 presentations were offered, including a national keynote speaker.

Additionally, the Children’s Commission partnered with DFPS staff to provide county level data at the conference for 13 concurrent regional breakouts (see Strategy 37 for additional information). Commission staff met regularly with TCJ staff and with DFPS staff to plan for the Regional Breakouts and related data preparation and dissemination.

Following the conference’s successful conclusion, Commission staff conducted extensive internal and external debriefs in order to incorporate audience feedback and facilitate continuous quality improvement. Commission staff met with TCJ staff on December 17, 2025 and with DFPS staff, including the DFPS Data Team, on January 23, 2026. Commission staff also reviewed post-event surveys from TCJ and the Commission regarding conference content and logistics. Feedback from the judges was largely positive, with helpful suggestions about how to further improve the conference in 2026. Judges shared that they found the contributions from the speakers with lived experience particularly impactful. For example, many judges shared their intention to improve their engagement with kinship caregivers during hearings.

Taken together, this collective feedback served to inform the 2026 Child Welfare Judges Conference Curriculum Committee, which convened on January 29, 2026 to review and discuss initial training ideas for this fall's conference. Commission staff will design the conference agenda based on committee members' final recommendations on the proposed curriculum. Once finalized by TCJ, an announcement about the conference dates and venue will be circulated by the Commission and by TCJ.

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

Background: Child Protection Courts were created to specialize in 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 hear child welfare cases exclusively and their jurisdiction covers 60% of all Texas counties.

02/27/26 Update: This year the Commission will offer an in-person training for the Child Protection Court judges and their court coordinators, known as the Child Protection Court Convening, on July 15-17, 2026. The CPC Convening Curriculum Committee met on Monday, February 9, 2026 and provided input on proposed training topics, speakers, and format. In partnership with the Children's Courts Program Manager at OCA, Commission staff will initiate conference planning based on the committee's feedback. The anticipated curriculum includes several joint sessions for the CPC judges and coordinators on topics which are germane to both audiences, as well as separate training tracks for each group. Commission staff will plan the approved joint sessions as well as the judicial curriculum, and OCA will design training tailored for the court coordinators. A moderated discussion of current issues is planned for each group. The curriculum will provide Continuing Judicial Education, TBLS, family violence, and ethics hours. Anticipated speakers include members of the judiciary, TIDC staff, and OCA staff. Commission staff opened registration for the Convening on February 12, 2026.

Objective: Provide high-quality 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 are recruited and trained at each event. Extensive internal and external Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) process and outcome evaluation is involved with each event.

02/27/26 Update: The Fall 2026 Trial Skills Training will focus on Contested Hearing Practices and will consist of two half days of virtual instruction and 2.5 days of in-person instruction in September 2026 in Central Texas. The Commission plans to announce the application for the training in mid to late March. The new course schedule, which was adopted during the 2025 iteration of TST, allows for up to 27 attorneys to participate in the training. The Trial Skills Training Faculty will convene in March 2026 to finalize plans for the Fall 2026 course offering and discuss an advanced course offering for 2027.

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’s podcast entitled Children’s Commission Conversations provides readily available education on child welfare matters, including law, policy, and practice. Podcast episodes feature informal discussions with experts on key topics in child welfare. Each episode provides education and practical insights to inform and support judges, attorneys, and others who serve Texas children, youth, and families involved in the child welfare system.

02/27/26 Update: On November 19, 2025, the Commission hosted a webinar entitled “Building and Supporting Adoptive Families.” This webinar focused on two programs to support adoption: Wendy’s wonderful Kids and Heart Galleries of Texas. On January 20, 2026, the Commission hosted a webinar entitled “Commercial Sexual Exploitation Identification Tool (CSE-IT).” This webinar offered an overview of the CSE-IT as a method of screening and identifying children and youth who may be at risk of commercial sexual exploitation. On February 20, 2026, the Commission hosted a webinar entitled “Trial Skills for Child Welfare Cases: Developing a Successful Case Theme and Theory.” This webinar provided tips on how to build a case theme and theory.

The Commission’s podcast episodes are posted on the Commission’s website and are available on Spotify and Apple. Recent episodes released on October 9, 2025 explore how judges and attorneys can use Mental Health First Aid to create safer, more supportive courtrooms, and how effective visitation planning can support family reunification and positive permanency in child welfare cases. For a complete list of episodes, visit the [Conversations webpage](#). An episode on the importance of engaging fathers in child welfare cases was taped on February 19, 2026.

30. Strategy: Partner with statewide 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 TDCOA to provide training for attorneys representing DFPS.

02/27/26 Update:

The State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law (CPL) Section will host their annual 101 and Advanced Child Protection Law Course offerings on April 8-10, 2026, in Georgetown, Texas. This year, a “101” child welfare appellate course will be offered concurrently with the traditional “101” course for child welfare practitioners on April 8. The Advanced Course will begin on April 9. The Children’s Commission will provide registration scholarships for all three course offerings.

Additionally, Commission staff participate on the CPL Section CLE Committee which began planning for the Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop at the Advanced Family Law Conference on August 12, 2026, in San Antonio.

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 relays pertinent child welfare related information and reaches over 3,500 attorneys, judges, court staff, and stakeholders. All letters are available on the Children’s Commission website.

02/27/26 Update: Several examples of Jurist in Residence (JIR) Letters and Judicial and Attorney Resource Letters (JARLs) issued between September 26, 2025 and February 27, 2026, include:

- 1/23/2026: January is Human Trafficking Prevention Month
- 1/8/2026: Upcoming Webinar - Trial Skills for Child Welfare Cases: Developing a Successful Case Theme and Theory
- 12/16/2025: Child Welfare Law Training and Resources
- 12/11/2025: Upcoming Webinar: Commercial Sexual Exploitation Identification Tool (CSE-IT) Training Overview
- 12/9/2025: Child Protection Court Hearing Notification Service
- 11/25/2025: Now Available: Building and Supporting Adoptive Families Webinar

- 11/20/25: 2025 Texas Child Welfare Bench Book Now Available
- 11/18/2025: Texas Foster Youth to Independence Program
- 11/4/2025: Reminder: Upcoming Webinar; TIDC Survey Extension
- 10/30/2025: Domestic Violence Awareness Month
- 10/24/2025: Jurist in Residence Letter: Judicial Scholarship Opportunity: 2026 NCJFCJ Juvenile Justice Conference
- 10/24/2025: Upcoming Webinar: Building and Supporting Adoptive Families
- 10/9/2025: ICYMI, Recent Webinar; New Podcast Episodes
- 10/7/2025: Upcoming TIDC Reporting Deadlines
- 10/1/2025: Reminder: Pre-petition Legal Representation Survey

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 (NCJFCJ) Juvenile Justice Conference and Annual Conference. For all scholarships, the Children’s Commission determines scholarship criteria and deploys an application process that includes pre- and post-conference evaluations to identify or confirm the knowledge gained and new practices that scholarship recipients plan to implement and/or change. The surveys also inquire about additional topics of interest to help inform planning for future conferences. All attorney applicants for Commission scholarships must currently represent DFPS or take appointments on a child welfare docket, be in good standing with the State Bar of Texas and with their primary judge, and commit to completing a post-event survey from the Commission.

02/27/26 Update:

National Conference on Juvenile Justice: The NCJFCJ 2026 National Conference on Juvenile Justice will be held on March 15-18, 2026, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The Commission awarded 3 scholarships to qualified judges.

The Advanced Child Protection Law Conference: The State Bar of Texas CPL Section will host its 8th Annual Advanced Child Protection Law Course on April 8-10. The CPL Section will include 3 hours of “101” content, which includes one hour of ethics credit on the morning of April 8, 2026. New this year, the CPL Section will include 3 hours of “Appeals 101” content on the morning of April 8, 2026. This will be followed by the Advanced Course, which will provide an additional 10.5 hours of MCLE, with 1.25 hours of ethics. There are separate registrations for the two courses. The Commission will provide registration scholarships for qualified attorneys to attend the live “101” and Advanced courses or to watch any scheduled webcast replays.

National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges Training: The NCJFCJ 89th Annual Conference will take place on July 19-22, 2026, in Nashville, Tennessee. The Commission plans to award reimbursement scholarships to qualified judges.

Attorney Scholarship Request: The attorney scholarship provides funds for reimbursement to attorneys for conference registration fees to attend recognized local, regional, and state trainings related to the practice of child welfare law, outside of the trainings that are already addressed by current Commission scholarships.

Judicial Scholarship Request: The 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 commission continues to provide this opportunity for qualified judges.

Objective: Support local, county, and regional child welfare leaders and organizations to enhance knowledge and share expertise throughout their jurisdiction.

33. Strategy: Provide training and technical assistance to increase training opportunities to local attorneys, judges, and advocates who serve children and families in child welfare cases.

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, state, 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, county, and regional jurisdictions will help the Commission to expand its capacity to meet requests for training support, provide tailored trainings to attorneys and judges in their own 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 the Legal Training Support opportunity. Applications for Legal Training Support are accepted on a rolling basis, must relate to safety, permanency, or well-being for children and families involved with the child welfare system, and must identify a judicial sponsor.

02/27/26 Update: Commission staff assisted the North Texas Child Protection Court with applying for MCLE credit for a “Intersection of Child Trafficking and Child Welfare” webinar which was held on January 21, 2026. Additionally, Commission staff provided planning, funding, and MCLE application assistance for the Grimes County Child Welfare Course, which was held in Navasota, TX, on February 26, 2026.

GOAL V (DATA)

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

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

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

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

02/27/26 Update: During the January 13, 2026 Data Committee meeting, the committee reviewed and discussed survey questions and responses collected through the 2025 Child Welfare Judges Conference registration process. The committee examined how judges reported conducting permanency hearings, including the frequency and factors that influence scheduling decisions, and discussed how this information could inform future Commission projects and resources focused on timely permanency.

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

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

02/27/26 Update: Discussion at the January 13, 2026 meeting focused on the availability and use of existing data sources, including judicial perspectives gathered through the Child Welfare Judges Conference survey data, and considered how current data systems capture information related to case progression, permanency goal changes, and time to exit. The committee also discussed the feasibility of examining whether goal-change timing corresponds with permanency timelines, as well as the limitations of structured data in reflecting court-specific actions without case-level review. The committee will build on these discussions in its ongoing data work.

Objective: Equip courts with relevant and actionable data to strengthen the administration of child welfare cases.

36. Strategy: Analyze data collected during the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) to develop targeted strategies aimed at improving permanency outcomes for children.

Background: The Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) includes permanency measures that examine whether permanency goals remain appropriate to a child’s circumstances over time and whether children achieve permanency within expected timeframes. CFSR findings have identified recurring themes related to delays in achieving permanency, including delays in changing permanency goals when circumstances warrant and systemic factors that contribute to children remaining in foster care longer than necessary. Reviewing CFSR

permanency data allows the Children’s Commission and the Data Committee to better understand factors affecting timeliness to permanency and to consider data-informed approaches that may support courts in addressing delays and promoting appropriate permanency outcomes for children in foster care.

02/27/26 Update: At the meeting on January 13, 2026, the committee discussed the CFSR permanency-related findings and considered how those findings align with themes emerging from the Child Welfare Judges Conferences’ judicial survey responses. Conversation focused on the continued appropriateness of permanency goals over time, factors associated with delays in achieving permanency, and how CFSR data, in combination with other information, may inform the development of resources to support courts. The committee will build on these insights as it considers practical tools and guidance to promote timely and appropriate permanency outcomes.

37. Strategy: Partner with DFPS to provide 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.

02/27/26 Update: The October 2025 Child Welfare Judges Conference Regional Breakouts incorporated feedback from previous conferences in order to increase gains in knowledge and facilitate higher-level discussion and problem-solving. Jurisdictional data gathered by DFPS was shared with judicial attendees prior to the CWJC so that they could prepare for their Regional Breakout discussion. These discussions with Investigations, DFPS, and SSCC staff on regional data outcomes facilitate a greater understanding of safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes at the regional and local levels as well as possible ways to continue to facilitate improved outcomes in these areas.

The 2025 Child Welfare Judges Conference included 13 concurrent Regional Breakout Sessions. Through successful coordination between DFPS, TCJ, and Commission staff, regional and county data was provided to the judges to facilitate discussion. Feedback from the judges in post-event surveys from both TCJ and the Commission indicated that many of these sessions were fruitful and also identified opportunities for continued improvement. The 2026 Child Welfare Judges Conference Curriculum Committee met on January 29, 2026 and discussed several ways in which these breakouts might be designed to be even more productive going forward.

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.**

38. Strategy: Partner with OCA to support the maintenance, enhancements, data collection, impact, and usability of a case management system.

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.

02/27/26 Update: During the 89th Legislative Session, the Legislature passed HB 500, which provided funding for OCA to provide a case management system for the statutory specialty courts. After careful consideration, OCA decided to take this opportunity to also modernize and upgrade both the CPCMS and the Child Support Case Management System.

The project is currently in the planning phase. A project manager was assigned, and subject matter experts were identified to support the development of requirements for the new system. These experts include Child Protection and Child Support associate judges and coordinators, as well as Children's Commission and OCA staff. Meetings are scheduled for late February to begin developing the requirements for the new systems.

As a result of these decisions and the retirement of the CPCMS programmer last September, there are no new updates to the current CPCMS system.

INSERT - TAB 4

**Children's Commission
Fiscal Year 2026 Financial Report**

FISCAL YEAR 2026 FEDERAL/STATE REVENUE

Fiscal Year 2025 Carry Forward	\$	1,430,019
(+) Fiscal Year 2026 Federal Distribution	\$	2,738,517
(+) Fiscal Year 2026 State Appropriation	\$	368,787
(+) Casey Family Programs	\$	10,000
Funds Available for FY 2026	\$	4,547,323

FISCAL YEAR 2026 EXPENDITURES

	Budget	Expenses To-date	Anticipated Expenditures
Operating	\$ 1,556,818	\$ 551,966	\$ 1,004,852
Commission Projects	\$ 577,200	\$ 17,286	\$ 559,914
<i>Systems Improvement</i>	\$ 157,000	\$ 8,703	\$ 148,297
<i>Legal Practice and Process</i>	\$ 74,700	\$ 7,819	\$ 66,881
<i>Training</i>	\$ 292,500	\$ 764	\$ 291,736
<i>Juvenile Justice</i>	\$ 53,000	\$ -	\$ 53,000
Scholarships	\$ 67,500	\$ 885	\$ 68,315
<i>Appellate Law Section Boot Camp</i>	\$ 7,500	\$ 885	\$ 6,615
<i>Child Protection Law Section</i>	\$ 12,500	\$ -	\$ 12,500
<i>General Attorney Scholarship</i>	\$ 5,000	\$ -	\$ 5,000
<i>General Judicial Scholarship</i>	\$ 5,000	\$ -	\$ 5,000
<i>NCJFCJ - Judicial Scholarship</i>	\$ 30,000	\$ -	\$ 30,000
<i>State Bar CAN CLE</i>	\$ 7,500	\$ -	\$ 7,500
Grants	\$ 546,322	\$ 171,135	\$ 375,187
<i>DFPS Regional Attorney Training Support</i>	\$ 12,000	\$ -	\$ 12,000
<i>TACFS - Data</i>	\$ 83,364	\$ -	\$ 83,364
<i>Texas Center for the Judiciary (TCJ)</i>	\$ 239,996	\$ 129,451	\$ 110,545
<i>Texas Indigent Defense Commission</i>	\$ 130,962	\$ -	\$ 130,962
<i>TLSC Family Helpline</i>	\$ 80,000	\$ 41,684	\$ 38,316
	\$ 2,747,840	\$ 741,272	\$ 2,008,268

CURRENT FINANCIAL STATUS

Funds Available for FY 2026	\$	4,547,323
(-) Fiscal Year 2026 Expenditures to Date	\$	(741,272)
(-) FY2026 Anticipated Expenditures	\$	(2,008,268)
Estimated Carry Forward FY 2027	\$	1,797,783