

State Court Improvement Program Annual Self-Assessment Report

This self-assessment is intended as an opportunity for Court Improvement Programs (CIPs) to review progress on CIP projects, joint program planning and improvement efforts with the child welfare agency. Under “Project Title and Description” grantees must provide information that indicates that at least 30 percent of funds will be used to support data sharing and collaborations (see section 438(b)(1) of the Act) and a description of how a portion of the grant will be used for cross-training initiatives with the title IV-E/IV-B agency (section 438(b)(2) of the Act).

I. Joint Project with the Child Welfare Agency:

Project title:

State and Regional Outcomes Data

Provide a concise description of the joint project selected in your jurisdiction.

Texas Department of Family & Protective Services (DFPS) State and Regional Data Presentations are convened at the annual, statewide Child Welfare Judges Conference hosted by the Texas CIP (CIP or Children’s Commission) in partnership with the Texas Center for the Judiciary. Since 2016, this annual conference provides a unique opportunity for members of the judiciary to meet with DFPS/Single Source Continuum Contractor (SSCC) staff to review ongoing and emerging trends and discuss ways to improve outcomes for children and families together. While data, policy, and best practices regarding permanency are integrated throughout the conference curriculum, the state and regional data presentations and breakouts shine a spotlight on outcomes data.

The project includes an annual update from the DFPS Commissioner (often with accompanying members of the DFPS leadership team) as well as regional breakout sessions between judges and DFPS regional leadership teams as well as SSCC staff in areas with Community-Based Care, to discuss region-specific data and permanency outcomes. The DFPS Data Team collaborates with CIP staff to prepare for the yearly Regional Breakout discussions held during the annual judicial conference, and the Data Team also prepares regional data which is disseminated prior to the conference. The data are reviewed by DFPS Regional Directors and Regional Systems Improvement leads, who in turn facilitate the Regional Breakout Sessions and discuss these data with the attending judiciary.

Based on feedback received at the 2025 judicial conference and the rollout of Community-Based Care, the 2026 annual conference will also include breakouts by stages of Community-Based Care, where each breakout will feature a judge and an SSCC representative who will discuss expectations of SSCCs as well as successes and challenges at the current status of Community Based Care in their area. Taken together, the SSCC Breakouts and the Regional Breakouts continue to facilitate discussion across agency and SSCC leadership and staff with the judiciary focused on safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes at the statewide and local levels and how these topics intersect and impact each other, with an eye towards improving outcomes for children and families.

II. Additional Projects, Activities, and Training. For questions 1-13, provide a concise description of work completed or underway to date in the topical subcategories below where applicable.

1. Training Overall

Did you have any significant training efforts not related to a particular project (those are now integrated under 2 to 14 below)? If yes, please describe.

No, all trainings are tied to CIP projects.

On average, how many training events do you hold per year?

On average every year, the CIP produces two to three judicial trainings; one hands-on, attorney Trial Skills Training; and CIP-produced webinars for attorneys and judges on a monthly basis. Other trainings are developed as needed. Some of these trainings are developed internally with CIP staff but CIP also regularly partners with various agencies and organizations to deliver high-quality training programs.

Judicial Training:

- 2025 Child Welfare Judges Conference - CIP, in partnership with the Texas Center for the Judiciary (TCJ) hosted the 18th annual Child Welfare Judges Conference (CWJC) in person on October 27-29, 2025 for Texas judges who handle civil child welfare cases.
- 2026 Child Protection Court Convening - This conference is held in partnership with the Texas Office of Court Administration. This conference trains the subset of specialty courts known as the Child Protection Court judges together with their court coordinators. This year's offering was a two-day in person training on July 16-17, 2026.
- Consortium on Trauma Informed Practices - In August 2024, CIP launched an initiative called the Consortium on Trauma Informed Court Practices. The Consortium provides a statewide network for judges to have a forum for discussion, education, and training during bi-monthly virtual meetings. Training topics include: strategies for engaging parents (such as phased service plans and parent notebooks); creating a parent advocacy program; how judges can employ trauma informed techniques in the courtroom; how to establish a parent mentor program; and how to host a Reunification Day celebration.

Attorney Training:

- Trial Skills Training - The Fall 2025 Trial Skills Training Contested Hearing Practices Course took place on September 4 and 10, 2025 on Zoom and in person on September 16-18, 2025. In addition to the core lectures, demonstrations, strategy sessions, and attorney skill practice sessions, lay and expert witness discussion panels were introduced to the training.
- Texas Family First and Reasonable Efforts - In FY2025, CIP partnered with DFPS to conduct an in person regional training series on Texas Family First and Reasonable Efforts throughout every region of the State. CIP collaborated with the State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law Section to provide additional free MCLE content at these monthly Reasonable Efforts regional trainings in areas where the Texas Family First

pilot is not yet available. This in person training series concluded on August 26, 2025. As rollout of Texas Family First continues, CIP, in partnership with DFPS, hosts virtual meetings to provide information about the pilot to attorneys and judges.

- DFPS Attorney Training - CIP provided funding to DFPS for its annual legal training. The October 2025 DFPS Attorney Training facilitated an opportunity for the department's regional attorneys to gather in person for training, to work on team building, and to share ideas. The CIP grant covers costs such as speaker fees, facility fees, and other expenses related to the meeting. The objective is to ensure agency attorneys have access to current case law, trial strategies, evidentiary issues, forensic developments, administrative law, ethics, and other relevant procedural and substantive issues.
- Webinars - In FY2026, CIP produced monthly webinars designed for judges, attorneys, and other child welfare stakeholders. All webinars are presented live and then archived on the Commission's training webpage along with accompanying materials. Topics covered include: Trial Skills for Child Welfare Cases (Jury Basics, Case Theme and Theory); Ties that Bind – Supporting Kinship Care; Building and Supporting Adoptive Families; Representing Deaf Clients in Child Welfare Cases; Representing Incarcerated Parents in Child Welfare Cases; and a 3-part series on the fundamentals of representing children, parents, and the state agency in child welfare cases.

Podcasts: The CIP's podcast series is designed to deliver additional training in an easy to access format. Episodes to date cover the following topics: introducing the mission and resources available through the Children's Commission; exploring the role and benefits of pre-petition advocacy for parents; focusing on the vital importance of and laws related to maintaining sibling connections; navigating the attorney-client relationship when representing DFPS; Mental Health First Aid on the Courtroom; Visitation Best Practices; and the role of the DFPS Clinical Coordinator.

Scholarships: In addition to developing and hosting the above events, the CIP provides scholarships to state and national conferences. Events include: (1) State Bar of Texas Family Law Section's Advanced Family Law One-Day Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop; (2) State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law Section's Advanced Child Protection Law CLE and 101 Courses; (3) National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges Juvenile Justice and Annual Conferences; (4) Biennial TDCAA Prosecuting Domestic Violence and Child Sex Assault Cases Conference as well as the "Fundamentals of Child Welfare Law" online course hosted by TDCAA, and (5) State Bar of Texas Appellate Law Section Civil Appellate Practice 101 CLE.

In 2025, CIP developed three new opportunities to provide assistance to support training: Legal Training Support and both a judicial and an attorney scholarship request opportunity. Legal Training Support is designed for a proposed community, county, or regional training which may include, but is not limited to, technical assistance and/or financial assistance with speaker, venue, or securing continuing legal credit.. The scholarships are for judges who handle civil child welfare cases in Texas or attorneys who practice civil child welfare law in Texas and who need financial support in order to attend recognized trainings related to child welfare. These opportunities are designed for trainings that are not already addressed by CIP scholarships, and the scholarship covers reimbursement for conference registration fees.

What is your best prediction for the number of attorneys, judges, or other legal system community members that will participate in training annually?

Between 125 – 200 judges (in person and virtual trainings)

Between 200 – 600 attorneys (in person and virtual trainings)

300+ judges and 3000+ attorneys and legal system community members receive regular educational communiques from the Commission, and access free CIP online training materials each fiscal year.

- 2. Data Projects.** Data projects include any work with administrative data sets (e.g., AFCARS, CCWIS), data dashboards, data reports, fostering court improvement data, case management systems, and data sharing efforts.

Do you have a data project/activity? ☒ Yes ☐ No

Project Title and Description - At least 30 percent of funds will be used to support data sharing and collaborations (<i>see attached Budget Narrative</i>)	Project Sub-category
<u>Data and Trends Analysis</u> - The Data Committee identifies and analyzes available data that could enhance courts' understanding of statewide trends in relevant benchmarks and whether the trends corollate with the changes made to the Texas Family Code or to DFPS policy.	Agency Data Sharing Efforts
<u>Data Presentations at Annual Conference</u> - On an annual basis, DFPS and CIP partner to offer statewide data as part of a DFPS leadership plenary presentation as well as providing data for the Regional Breakouts to members of the judiciary at the annual Child Welfare Judges Conference.	Fostering Court Improvement data projects
<u>Support for CPCMS</u> - CIP regularly collaborates with the Office of Court Administration (OCA) on the status of Child Protection Case Management System's functioning, problems, and enhancements. OCA will implement a new specialty courts case management system in the near future.	Case management systems
<u>Foster Care & Education Data Exchange</u> - CIP, DFPS, and the Texas Education Agency meet regularly to refine the annual data exchange related to the education outcomes of child and youth in foster care.	Education and Health Data Sharing

- 3. Legal Representation.** Legal representation projects include any efforts you have made to improve the quality of legal representation for parents, children and youth, the agency, or others. List projects here if you have any in addition to the required project.

Do you have (an additional) legal representation project/activity? ☒ Yes ☐ No

Project Title and Description	Project Sub-category
<u>Standards of Representation</u> - The Child Welfare Law Standards of Representation Committee (Standards Committee) is charged with drafting proposed standards to submit to the State Bar of Texas. The committee is currently developing standards for attorneys representing children.	Court Appointed Legal Representation
<u>Representation Toolkits</u> - The Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing Parents and Children in Child Welfare Cases, and the Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing DFPS in Child Welfare Cases are updated regularly to ensure they reflect current case law, statutory law, and best practices.	Parent/Child/State Agency Representation
<u>Attorney-Client Materials</u> - The following materials were developed to explain the attorney-client relationship: • “Your Lawyer Works for You” Video Series • “What Does a Parent’s Attorney Do?” Pamphlet • “What Does an Attorney for a Child in a CPS Case Do?” Pamphlet • “Sam and the Search for Spots” Coloring Book	Parent/Child Representation
<u>Pre-petition Legal Representation Survey</u> - In partnership with the Texas Indigent Defense Commission, the Children’s Commission Legal Representation Committee recently completed a survey to gather information about the availability, need, and capacity for pre-petition legal representation in Texas.	Preventative Representation

- 4. Hearing Quality.** Hearing quality projects include any efforts you have made to improve the quality of child welfare hearings, including court observation/assessment projects, process improvements, specialty/pilot court projects, projects related to court orders or title IV-E determinations, mediation, or appeals. List projects here if you have any in addition to the required project.

Do you have a hearing quality project/activity? ☒ Yes ☐ No

Project Title and Description	Project Sub-category
<u>Reasonable Efforts</u> - CIP designed and implemented a regional training series on the Texas Family First pilot and Reasonable Efforts for the judicial and legal communities.	Process Improvements

<u>PMC Court Study</u> - CIP provided funding for a court observation and data analysis study, in partnership with the Center for Child and Family Studies, to gather insights about the impact of the Permanent Managing Conservatorship (PMC) Court Model.	Court Observation/Assessment
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- 5. Improving Timeliness of Hearings or Permanency Outcomes.** Timeliness and permanency projects include any activities or projects meant to improve the timeliness of case processing or achievement of timely permanency. This could include general timeliness, focus on continuances or appeals, working on improvement in specific outcomes such as around reunification, guardianship, adoption or a focus on APPLA and older youth.

Do you have a timeliness or permanency project/activity? ☒ Yes ☐ No

Project Title and Description	Project Sub-category
<u>Joint Agency Project</u> - <i>see above</i>	General/ASFA
<u>Child Protection Law Bench Book</u> – CIP 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.	General/ASFA

- 6. Engagement & Participation of Parties.** Engagement and participation of parties includes any efforts centered around youth, parent, foster family or caregiver, or relative engagement, limited English proficiency, or other efforts to increase presence and engagement at the hearing.

Do you have an engagement or participation of parties project/activity? ☒ Yes ☐ No

Project Title and Description	Project Sub-category
<u>Caregiver Notice</u> - The Caregiver Notice Workgroup's focus is on implementing solutions to improve caregiver notice and engagement, including developing a judicial bench card, stakeholder training, and an information sheet for caregivers to explain the opportunity to be heard and what to expect in court.	Caregiver Engagement

<u>Family Helpline</u> - CIP funds support the Family Helpline which provides easy, statewide access for parents and family members to basic information, education, and resources addressing parental rights as they relate to Child Protective 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.	Parent/Relative/Caregiver Engagement
<u>Parent Resource Guide</u> - The Parent Resource Guide is a handbook designed to help parents understand the Texas child welfare system, their roles and responsibilities when involved in a child welfare case, and the roles and responsibilities of others. Updates to the guide and development of a Pre-Litigation Parent Resource Guide are currently underway.	Parent Engagement
<u>Incarcerated Parents Poster</u> - The CIP Legal Representation Committee developed a poster as a resource highlighting the rights of incarcerated parents in a child welfare case. CIP coordinated with various state prisons and jails to display the poster.	Parent Engagement
<u>Father's Rights Pamphlet</u> - The pamphlet outlines father's rights in a child welfare case, including explaining what it means to be identified by the court as the legal father.	Parent Engagement
<u>Video Series: Understanding the Roles in a CPS Case Videos & Handouts</u> - Texas CASA partnered with the Children's Commission to develop new resources to explain the role of the professionals involved in a child welfare case. Five handouts and accompanying videos are available in both English and Spanish about the role of: the Judge; the Guardian ad Litem or CASA Volunteer; the Attorney ad Litem; the Parent's Attorney, and the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) Attorney.	Parent/Relative/Caregiver Engagement

7. **Well-Being.** Well-being projects include any efforts related to improving the well-being of children and youth. Projects could focus on education, early childhood development, health, trauma, social network support, cultural connections, or other well-being related topics.

Do you have any projects/activities focused on well-being? ☒ Yes ☐ No

Project Title and Description	Project Sub-category
<u>Consortium on Trauma Informed Court Practices</u> - <i>see above</i>	Trauma

<u>Foster Care & Education Committee</u> - The committee works to strengthen collaboration between the education, courts, and child welfare systems, developing cross-training opportunities, and encouraging data-driven decision making. Current projects include a Foster Care Summit and updates to the Foster Care & Student Success Guide and Guide for Higher Education Foster Care Liaisons.	Education
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- 8. ICWA/Tribal collaboration.** These projects could include any efforts to enhance state and tribal collaboration, state and tribal court agreements, data collection and analysis including of Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) practice.

Do you have any projects/activities focused on ICWA or tribal collaboration? ☒ Yes ☐ No

Project Title and Description	Project Sub-category
<u>Participation in DFPS Tribal/State Collaborative</u> - Participation includes regular meetings with the Tribal liaison from DFPS State Office and Tribal partners, including building connections with ICWA Tribal liaisons from Tribes based outside Texas.	Tribal Collaboration
<u>Presentations on ICWA to attorneys and court coordinators</u> - CIP staff present at various conferences and events on the law and policy regarding the Indian Child Welfare Act, including to CASA and other child welfare professionals.	Training

- 9. Preventing Sex Trafficking.** These projects could include work around domestic child sex trafficking, a focus on runaway youth and youth experiencing homelessness, collaboration with other agencies around this topic, data collection and analysis, data sharing, or other efforts to fully implement these sections of the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act into practice.

Do you have any projects/activities focused on preventing sex trafficking/runaways? ☒ Yes ☐ No

Project Title and Description	Project Sub-category
<u>Know Your Rights: Children</u> – CIP created a working group of various state agencies and organizations to develop a guide for children who have experienced sexual abuse and exploitation, similar to a resource developed for adult survivors by the Office of Governor. The purpose of the guide is to empower caregivers by providing an overview of the child's rights, which professionals are involved, and how to access resources.	Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

10. Normalcy/Reasonable and Prudent Parent. These projects could include any work around normalcy or the reasonable and prudent parent standard or practices, collaboration with other agencies around this topic, data collection and analysis, data sharing, or other efforts to fully implement these sections of the Preventing Sex and Strengthening Families Act into practice.

Do you have any projects/activities focused on normalcy/reasonable prudent parenting? ☒ Yes ☐ No

Project Title and Description	Project Sub-category
<u>Normalcy Guide and Video</u> - A guide and video were developed by Texas CASA and funded by CIP to explain normalcy and encourage a child welfare system that fosters normalcy for all children and youth who experience foster care.	Reasonable & Prudent Parent

11. Prevention. Prevention projects include work around preventing child maltreatment including primary prevention (preventing maltreatment from occurring in the first place), secondary, and tertiary prevention.

Do you have any projects/activities focused on prevention? ☒ Yes ☐ No

Project Title and Description	Project Sub-category
<u>Support for Texas Family First Pilot</u> - CIP 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. As TFF implementation rolls out throughout the State, CIP staff also host meetings with judges and attorneys to ensure they are familiar with the legal framework and available evidence-based services.	Secondary or tertiary prevention

12. Safety. Safety projects are those that focus on decision-making around safety including decision-making practices in substantiation, removal, family time/visitation, and decisions about safety in out of home placements.

Do you have any projects/activities focused on safety? ☐ Yes ☒ No

13. Continuity Planning. Continuity planning includes prevention and recovery planning for threats such as public health crises, natural disasters, or cyber-attacks. Please describe efforts around technology support for remote hearings or legal representation, developing guidance or protocols, coordinating with other agencies, or otherwise ensuring approaches are in place to ensure needed services are able to continue through any major disruptions.

Project Title and Description	Project Sub-category
<u>Partnership with OCA and DFPS</u> - CIP works closely with OCA and DFPS to strengthen collaboration between the courts and child welfare systems to respond and adapt to various types of threats including natural disasters and health emergencies. Remote hearings are widely available pursuant to parameters laid out in State law.	Coordination w/ others

14. Other. Please list any projects you have that do not fit in any of the categories above.

Do you have any other projects/activities? ☒ Yes ☐ No

Project Title and Description	Project Sub-category
<u>Service Planning Workgroup</u> - New in 2026, this CIP workgroup aims to identify best practices in developing narrowly tailored service plans to increase parental engagement, reduce fatigue and financial burden, improve targeted skills, and avoid “box-checking” of service plan requirements.	Hearing Quality and Permanency

Paperwork Reduction Act

Under the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (P.L. 104-13), an agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Control Number. The OMB control number for this collection is 0970-0307 and it expires 01/31/2029. The estimated time to complete the Self-Assessment is 40 hours.