

2025 ANNUAL REPORT



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



2025 ANNUAL REPORT

Reporting Fiscal Year
October 1, 2024 - September 30, 2025

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Chair



Rebeca Huddle

Justice Rebeca Aizpuru Huddle
Deputy Chair

Message from **Leadership**

At the September 2025 Children's Commission meeting, DFPS presented data indicating a 38% decrease in the number of entries into foster care over the last five years. This trend reflects a significant paradigm shift for our State and has elevated Texas as a national model. The reduction of children in foster care is laudable and means that many families can remain safely together without intervention from DFPS. It also encourages the efficient use of court resources which are now allocated to those cases which truly require court oversight.

The cases currently coming into Texas courts are more challenging because these children and youth are in immediate danger to their physical health or safety. Courts rely on attorneys for parents, children, and the State to provide high quality legal representation to their clients and to ensure that the courts have access to the information needed to make decisions that are tailored to meet each child and each parent's needs. Additionally, courts must balance the fundamental right for parents to rear their children with a responsibility to maintain child safety.

Given the issues at stake, the Children's Commission offers tremendous support for the legal and judicial aspects of the child welfare system. This report highlights various projects and resources produced by the Children's Commission in Fiscal Year 2025. Key features include providing both fundamental and cutting edge training to judges at the annual Child Welfare Judges Conference, conducting regional trainings on reasonable efforts throughout the State, updating the Child Welfare Law Bench Book and Bench Cards, delivering a hands-on Trial Skills Training to equip attorneys for contested hearings, and launching a new podcast series.

These are just a few examples of Commission projects featured in this Annual Report. We look forward to a continued emphasis on improving how judges and lawyers handle child welfare cases so that children and families in Texas can experience positive outcomes in the areas of safety, permanency, and well-being.



A stylized, handwritten signature of Jamie Bernstein in white ink, set against a blue background.

Jamie Bernstein
Executive Director

Message from the Executive Director

Fiscal Year 2025 was another impactful year for the Children's Commission. Conducting trainings on reasonable efforts law, policy, and practice throughout Texas stands out as a highlight. Discussions focused on how the State could prevent removals, reunify families, and obtain permanency for children and youth who experience the child welfare system. These trainings provided regular opportunities to listen and learn alongside legal and child welfare professionals. Additionally, traveling to the regions strengthened partnerships and supported mutual learning about practical concerns as well as regional strengths and challenges. Commission staff returned from each of the regions inspired and energized to tailor our efforts to improve how courts handle child welfare cases based on local needs rather than a one size fits all approach.

One consistent theme throughout this experience is that the system is only as strong as the people who serve in it. Speaking with judges, attorneys, and stakeholders throughout the State reinforced that to ensure due process, high quality legal representation and a well-informed judiciary are essential. The Children's Commission will continue to provide training, scholarship opportunities, resources, and data driven innovation to judges and attorneys to support positive outcomes for children and families.

The accomplishments included in this report are made possible by the support of the Supreme Court of Texas and our relationships with stakeholders throughout our State. Although Fiscal Year 2025 has concluded, the commitment at the Children's Commission to engagement and collaboration remains steadfast and we carry that with us into the coming year. I look forward to continuing our work together.

The mission of the Children's Commission is to strengthen courts for children, youth, and families in the Texas child welfare system and thereby improve the safety, permanency, and well-being of children.

Collaboration



The Fiscal Year 2025 Children's Commission meetings were held on November 15, 2024 and February 7, May 9, and September 26, 2025.

The Children's Commission administers 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.

Children's Commission 2025

The four standing committees (Systems Improvement, Legal Practice & Process, Training, and Data) continued to meet on a quarterly basis in FY 2025. The ad hoc Executive Committee convened on August 29, 2025 to review grant applications.

The Children's Commission fosters connections with many collaborative partners, including, but not limited to, the Office of the Governor (OOG), the Office of the Attorney General (OAG), the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS), the Office of Court Administration (OCA), the Judicial Commission on Mental Health (JCMH), Casey Family Programs, the Child Protection Law (CPL) Section of the State Bar of Texas, Texas CASA, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD), the Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services (TACFS), the Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS), and the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

Children's Commission Meeting Special Presentations in Fiscal Year 2025

February 7, 2025:

- Foster Care & Higher Education by Mr. Tymothy Belseth, Spark Program Coordinator with the Texas Institute for Child & Family Wellbeing at the University of Texas at Austin, joined by three University of Texas – Austin students with lived experience in child welfare: Diamond, Sierra, and Rawan

May 9, 2025:

- Texas Child-Centered Care (T3C) System Presentation by Kaysie Taccetta, DFPS Federal Funds Division Manager

September 26, 2025:

- Family Protection Representation & Data Connections Presentation by Crystal Leff-Piñon, Director Family Protection Representation, Texas Indigent Defense Commission

Children's Commission Members Fiscal Year 2025*

Supreme Court of Texas

Chief Justice James D. Blacklock	Justice Brett Busby
Chief Justice Nathan L. Hecht	Justice Jane N. Bland
Justice Debra H. Lehrmann	Justice Rebeca Aizpuru Huddle
Justice Jeffrey S. Boyd	Justice Evan A. Young
Justice John P. Devine	Justice James P. Sullivan

Commissioners

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

Jurists in Residence

Hon. Rob Hofmann <i>Senior Jurist in Residence</i>	Hon. Piper McCraw <i>Jurist in Residence</i>
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Committee Members

Hon. Mark Atkinson	Elizabeth Kromrei
Tymothy Belseth	Hon. Leigh Matthews Rodriguez
Mark Briggs	Katherine McAnally
Sarah Bryant	Gabriella McDonald
Denise Campbell	Emily Miller
Chelsea Cornelius	Crystal Leff-Pinon
Sarah Crockett	Hollye Pickett
Marcus Crosby	Judy Powell
Adrianna Cuellar Rojas	Kellie Price
Teal De La Garza	Hon. Robin Sage
Cindy Dyar	Hon. Tracey Scown
Barbara Elias-Perciful	Hon. Ian Spechler
Nathan Ezell	Diane Sumoski
Dr. Monica Faulkner	Kenneth Thompson
Anna Saldana Ford	Sub Uppaluri
Hon. Delia Gonzales	Janet VanderZanden
Hon. Angela Graves-Harrington	Hon. Carlos Villalon
Hon. Charles Griffin	Hon. Elizabeth Watkins
Margaret Halpin	Sarah Worthington

All-Committee Webcast

On September 11, 2025, members of the four Children's Commission standing committees - Systems Improvement, Legal Practice & Process, Training, and Data – were invited to join the All-Committee webcast to review the proposed FY2026 Strategies and Budget, presented by Children's Commission staff. Committee members were then invited to provide feedback via survey. Subsequently, the FY2026 Strategies and Budget were presented to and approved by the Children's Commission on September 26, 2025.

**Please note that throughout this report, title and membership reflect member roles at the time of participation.*



Collaborative Council Update

The Collaborative Council is an advisory body comprised of child welfare stakeholders and subject matter experts from other child and family serving systems from across Texas, including advocates for children, youth, and families. (i.e., family violence, homelessness, and substance use). The Collaborative Council assists the Children’s Commission by informing commission members and staff of local, regional, and statewide issues that impact attorney and judicial practices in child welfare cases.

In FY2025, the Children’s Commission hosted biweekly calls with members of the Collaborative Council, DFPS, OCA, and various child welfare system stakeholders from across the state to exchange announcements and discuss emerging issues. At the annual Collaborative Council meeting held on September 26, 2025, members shared their priority areas of focus for the coming year.

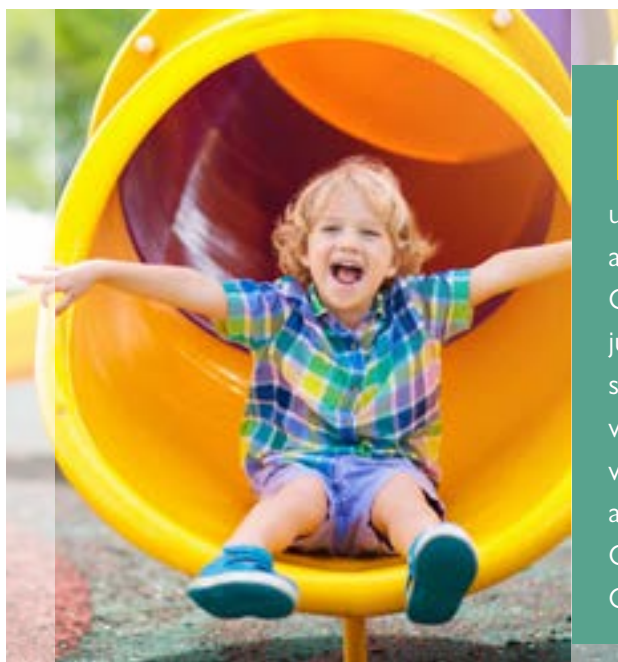
Collaborative Council Members

Erin Argue	Kerrie Judice
Kristene Blackstone	Bruce Kendrick
Andrew Brown	Norman Ladd
Dania Carter	Stephanie Madrigal
Irene Clements	Gabriella McDonald
Sarah Crockett	Dr. Jill McLeigh
Sheryl Draker	Hollie Mims
De Shaun Ealoms	Kate Murphy
Barbara Elias-Perciful	Kellie Pitman
Dr. Monica Faulkner	Judy Powell
Mike Foster	Susan Ramirez
Will Francis	Tanya Rollins
Fedora Galasso	Danielle Schafer
Dr. Linda Garcia	Johana Scot
Barbra Grimmer	Andrea Sparks
Julia Hatcher	Kenneth Thompson
Tina Hosaka	Ruth Thornton
Felix Herrera	Amanda Vasquez
Kasey Jackson	Sarah Worthington

Children's Commission External Presentations

During the fiscal year, Children's Commission staff presented at various events throughout Texas including the following:

- Why Reasonable Efforts Matter presentation on October 24, 2024 at CASA Annual Conference, Galveston
- Possible Legal Outcomes for Child Welfare SAPCR Cases presentation on November 24, 2024 at Texas CASA STAR Monthly Training, virtual
- Panel presentation on child welfare on December 5, 2024 and April 24, 2025 at Children's Rights Clinic at University of Texas School of Law, Austin
- Strengthening Pathways to Success for Texas Students with Experience in Foster Care panel presentation on December 12, 2024 at Higher EDge Conference, Austin
- Dual Status Youth presentation on February 18, 2025 at Juvenile Law Conference, in Allen
- Reasonable Efforts presentation on February 25, 2025 at CASA of Central Texas, virtual
- Child Welfare: A Systems View presentation on March 7, 2025 at Advanced Child Protection Law CLE, Georgetown
- Understanding the Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction and Enforcement Act (UCCJEA) presentation on April 10, 2025 at TDCAA Prosecuting Domestic Violence & Child Sex Assault Course, Sugarland
- Welcome Remarks on June 26, 2025 at 309th District Family Court Reunification Celebration, Houston
- Legislative Update: Child Welfare presentation on August 6, 2025 at State Bar of Texas 2025 Advanced Family Law Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop, San Antonio
- Standing/Intervention in CPS Cases after the 89th Regular Legislative Session presentation on September 5, 2025 at Travis County Office of Child Representation Meeting, Virtual



Website and Social Media

The Children's 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 is currently restructuring the website to include additional webpages to highlight materials available to parents and youth. For social media, the Children's Commission utilizes a LinkedIn business page (Texas Children's Commission) and X, formerly Twitter (@TXChildrensComm).

Systems Improvement



The Systems Improvement Committee met on October 14, 2024, and on January 8 and April 17, 2025.

The Systems Improvement Committee focuses on executing innovative projects aimed at ensuring 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.



Consortium on Trauma-Informed Court Practices and Cross Systems Trauma Informed Care Initiative Workgroup

The Children's Commission initiated 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 meets bi-monthly. Commission staff provide meeting support, continuing legal education credit, TBLS credit, and family violence hour credit as appropriate, as well as related online resources. Additionally, resources related to best practices on trauma-informed and trauma-responsive courts are updated regularly on www.TraumaInformedTexas.com.

In FY2025, the Consortium on Trauma Informed Court Practices' presentations covered the following topics:

- On October 29, 2024, Hon. Linda Dunson, Judge of the 309th Family District Court, Harris County, presented "Strategies for Courtroom Accessibility";
- On January 10, 2025, Hon. Angela Graves-Harrington, Judge of the 246th District Court, Harris County, presented "Strategies for High-Quality Legal Representation and Community Resources";
- On March 20, 2025, Hon. Andrea James, Judge of the 2nd Region Child Protection Court Number 2 in Bryan, Texas, presented "Strategies for Phased Service Plans and Creating a Family-Supportive Courtroom Culture";
- On May 15, Hon. Cheryl Vaughan, Associate Judge of the 8th Region North Child Protection Court, in Gainesville, Texas, presented "Strategies for Parent Notebooks and for a Family-Supportive Courtroom";
- On July 30, Hon. Carlos Villalon, Jr., Associate Judge of the Child Protection Court of the Rio Grande Valley West, presented an "Ask the Expert" session on his nine years presiding over a trauma-informed court and how his court team's philosophy, practice, and projects evolved over time; and
- On September 12, Ms. Adrienne James, Family Court Manager (ret.), provided a training on "Using Parent Advocates to Support Reunification in Child Welfare Cases."

Together, these approaches supported parents, moved families towards reunification more quickly, and encouraged unsupervised visitation and permanency.

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 and provided updates at the CSTIC Initiative Workgroup meetings on May 21, July 16, and September 17, 2024, and March 19, 2025.

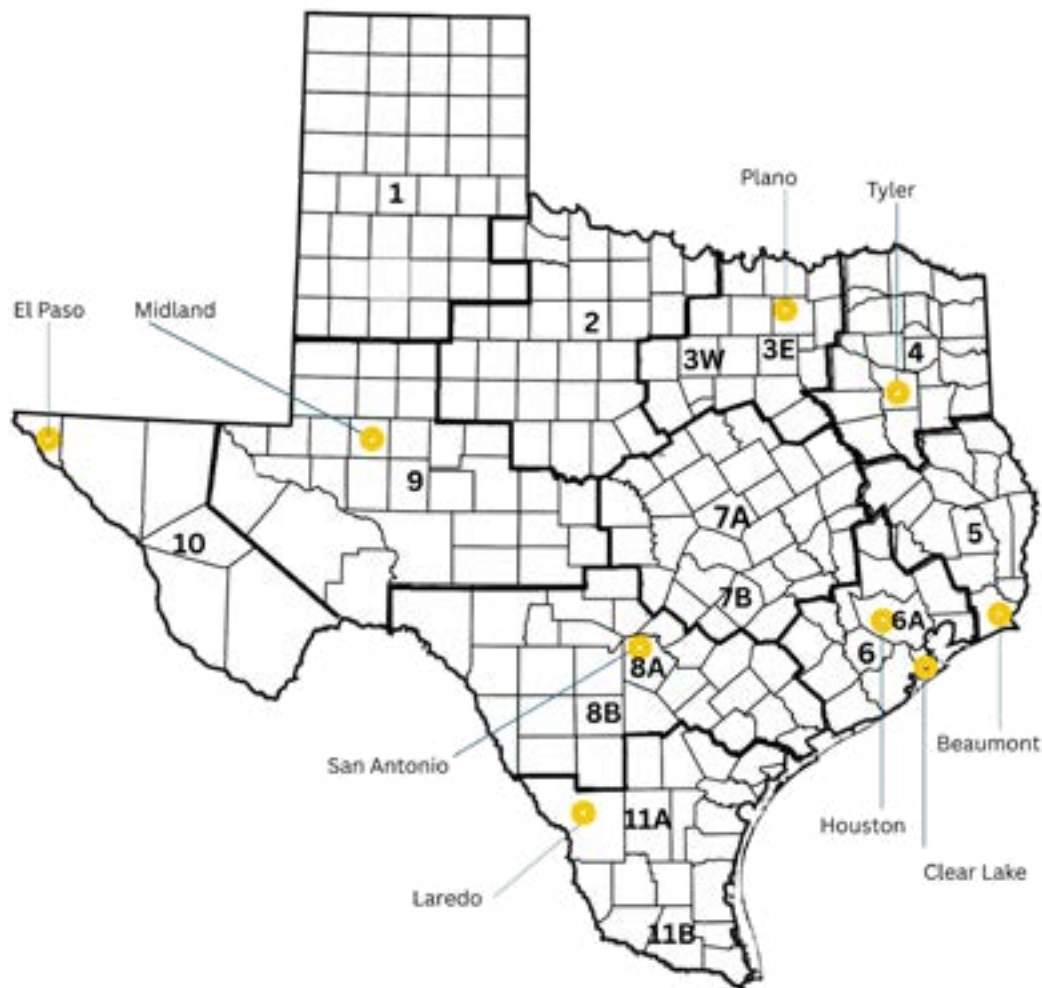


Texas Family First and Reasonable Efforts

In 2024, DFPS entered into a contract with the Commission to conduct regional trainings on the Texas Family First (TFF) Pilot and Reasonable Efforts. The TFF training covered the pilot, including defining the eligible population, providing details on the current progress, and clarifying many questions related to referrals, referral sources, and time limitations. Training also covered reasonable efforts laws that impact removal, termination, and permanency. Each of the trainings concluded with simulated court hearings designed to engage participants in practice learned objectives.

Training was conducted in DFPS Region 6B (Clear Lake) on October 8, 2024. The Commission was joined by DFPS and TFF provider DePelchin to present on the evidence-based modalities being employed by DePelchin to assist families in the region’s pilot. In October 2024, TFF expanded into Harris County (Region 6A), and in February 2025, TFF expanded to Bexar County (Region 8A). The Commission was joined by DFPS and TFF provider DePelchin on August 15, 2025, to present on the pilot in Region 6A (Houston). On August 26, 2025, the Commission, DFPS, and TFF provider SJRC Texas Belong presented in Region 8A (San Antonio).

In areas where TFF is not yet available, the Commission continued training with a focus on the state and federal reasonable efforts law, including documenting reasonable efforts and findings required at statutory hearings including the ex parte hearing, the adversary hearing, permanency before final hearings, the termination trial on the merits, and permanency after final hearings.



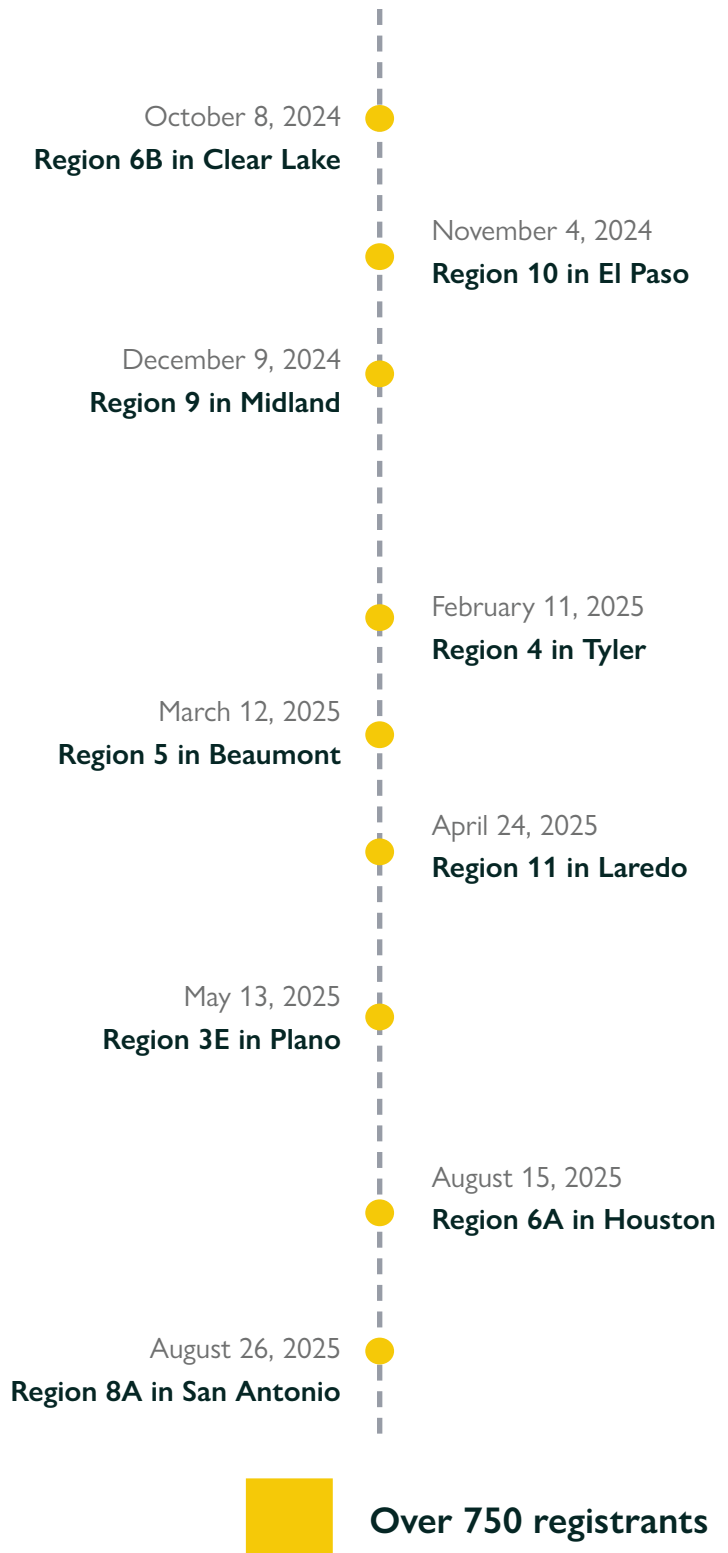
Texas Family First/Reasonable Efforts Training Dates

The Commission also partnered with the State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law Section to supplement Reasonable Efforts trainings with additional free CLE offerings for attorneys in these regions.

The first combined Reasonable Efforts and CPL training occurred in Region 10 in El Paso on November 4, 2024. Additional combined Reasonable Efforts and CPL trainings occurred on the following dates:

- Region 9 on December 9, 2024, in Midland, TX
- Region 4 on February 11, 2025, in Tyler, TX
- Region 11 on April 24, 2025, in Laredo, TX
- Region 3E on May 13, 2025, in Plano, TX

Members of the CPL Section presented on topics including the duties and responsibilities of parent and child ad litem attorneys, permanency hearings, mediation, appeals, case law updates, resources for aging out youth, and Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS).





Sr. Jurist in Residence
Hon. Rob Hofmann



Jurist in Residence
Hon. Piper McCraw

Jurists in Residence

The Jurists in Residence (JIRs) develop relationships with retired and sitting judges, and act as consultants, trainers, and speakers to provide expert and seasoned judicial advice on child welfare matters affecting courts and the legal system. Judge Rob Hofmann of the 452nd District Court in Mason County serves as Senior Jurist in Residence and Judge Piper McCraw of the 469th District Court in Collin County serves as Jurist in Residence. Both JIRs participated in multiple Children's Commission meetings, reviewed proposed legislation, provided feedback on policy and rules, led statewide discussion on topics of interest such as Community-Based Care, prevention and early intervention, placement capacity, and other issues.

Between October 1, 2025, and September 30, 2025, some examples of JIR activities include:

- Continued work as President for the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) and attended multiple Executive and other Committee Meetings
- Presented at the Region 11 Community-Based Care Convening, December 6, 2024, Weslaco
- Chaired the Children's Commission Systems Improvement Committee Meeting, January 8 and April 17, 2025, Virtual
- Chaired the Children's Commission Training Committee Meeting, January 23, April 17, and August 28, 2025, Virtual
- Chaired the Children's Commission Trial Skills Training Faculty Meeting, February 6, and September 2, 2025, Virtual
- Participated in the Executive Committee Meeting, August 29, 2025, Virtual
- Chaired the Children's Commission Trial Skills Training, September 16-18, 2025, Round Rock
- Participated in calls with Commission leadership and staff to advise on various issues



Grantee

Office of Court Administration Visiting Judge Support

The Texas Family Code authorizes presiding judges of the administrative judicial regions to appoint associate judges with expertise related to child abuse and neglect to preside in child welfare cases. In FY2025, over 279 child welfare cases were heard by visiting associate judges contracted with OCA to sit by assignment when active Child Protection Court associate judges were absent from the bench for reasons that are enumerated in statute. Without funding for visiting associate judges to provide docket coverage, these cases would have been reset until the sitting associate judge was available, resulting in case processing delay. The grant funds allowed for coverage by judges who have extensive knowledge of child welfare proceedings and statutory timelines as well as a clear understanding of the complexity of such cases, thus promoting timely permanency.



Youth Voice & Normalcy

Young adults with experience in the child welfare system lent their voices and experiences in several ways to Commission efforts in FY2025. Additionally, efforts to ensure normalcy for children and youth adults in foster care continue to be embedded into all areas of the Commission's work.

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

During the October 2024 Child Welfare Judges Conference, co-hosted by the Texas Center for the Judiciary, two panel presentations featured transition-aged youth and young adults. In a panel entitled "Housing Options, Challenges, and Solutions for Transition Age Youth and Young Adults," three young adults shared their experience with independent living options, including those in DFPS' Supervised Independent Living placements, and provided insight regarding the positive impact of having safe and stable housing. Additionally, in a presentation called "The REALLY Panel: Redefining Engagement, Advocacy, and Listening to Lived Experience Youth," two young adults with lived experience in child welfare shared how they achieved their goals, the impact that judges had during their case, and suggestions for positive change.

The Children's Commission was invited by the Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS) to present an overview of bills impacting youth in care at TNOYS' Statewide Collaborative on Youth Homelessness meeting during their annual conference on June 13, 2025, in Houston.

Addressing Specialized Needs of Subpopulations

Throughout the fiscal year, a workgroup comprised of staff from the Office of the Governor, DFPS, Children's Advocacy Centers of Texas, the Children's Commission, and other stakeholders developed a resource to clarify the rights of child survivors of sexual abuse. The workgroup is led by Hon. Selina Mireles, Judge of the 4th & 5th Administrative Judicial Regions Cluster Court. The goal is to provide an easy-to-use resource that child survivors and their caregivers can use 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 29, 2024, and April 16, May 21, June 13, August 7, and September 4, 2025 to develop the resource.

Community-Based Care

The Executive Director of the Children's Commission serves as a Co-Chair of the Partners for Children and Families Committee (PCFC), the advisory body for the rollout of Community-Based Care in Texas. The PCFC met on November 14, 2024, and February 13, May 8, and August 14, 2025. The committee oversees multiple workgroups with a focus on the following topics: intake and investigations, community-based care, placement, services and supports, foster care and kinship policy, and contracts.

Prevention and Early Intervention

During FY2025, DFPS, OCA, and the Children's Commission continued the Early Intervention Court Liaison (EICL) pilot in Galveston, Bell, and Lubbock Counties. The Court Liaisons act as special assistants to the court, serve to identify and connect early childhood and family support programs to the courts and community, and offer a judicial perspective within community stakeholder meetings.

OCA and DFPS agreed to renew the EICL pilot grant for 2024-2025. In March 2025, Hon. Jamie Rawlinson, Judge of the Coastal Bend Children's Court, and Commission staff presented at the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges' annual Juvenile Justice Conference on "Prevention and Strengthening the Community from the Bench: Texas' Approach to Prevention Through an Early Intervention Court Liaison." The session provided attendees with examples of how the EICLs brought courts and community resources together and shared ways that judges can support prevention efforts. Alternative funding was not identified and the pilot concluded in August 2025.

Children's Mental Health

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

Dual Status/Juvenile Justice

In late 2023, the Children's Commission formed a new Juvenile Justice Committee to explore the need for additional capacity to support judges handling juvenile justice cases. The initial goal for the committee was to gather information and insights from judges throughout the state about the challenges and opportunities to improve the judicial handling of juvenile justice cases. The committee members include District Court, County Court at Law, and Municipal Court judges from various geographic areas of the State including: the Metroplex area, Houston area, Central Texas, East Texas, and the Rio Grande Valley.

The Juvenile Justice Committee met on June 30, 2025, to discuss the exceptional item request from the 89th Regular Legislative Session and the additional capacity at the Children's Commission to support judges and attorneys handling juvenile justice matters. With funding provided by the Legislature, the Commission will hire a juvenile justice attorney to develop the program.



Foster Care & Education

Educational issues impacting children and youth in foster care remain an important part of the Commission's collaborative work with DFPS, Texas Education Agency (TEA), Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), and other external partners.

The Foster Care & Education (FC&Ed) Committee met on July 8 and September 30, 2025, and discussed legislative changes that may impact students in foster care, creating resources for younger students, continuing education topics for attorneys and judges, and continuing to develop tools to support implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act.

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 last met on September 3, 2025, and 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 have experienced foster care as they navigate higher education.

The FC&Ed Data Subcommittee met on August 12, September 4, and September 30, 2025 to discuss and improve the exchange of data between DFPS and TEA.

Human Trafficking Prevention and Awareness

On March 5, 2025, Commission staff attended the quarterly Human Trafficking Prevention Task Force meeting led by the Office of the Attorney General. This meeting includes participants from multiple agencies from across the State, such as the Department of Public Safety, Department of Licensing and Regulation, Texas Alcohol and Beverage Commission, DFPS, and the Office of the Governor, along with local county agencies who work to prevent and end trafficking.



Resource Letters for Judges and Attorneys Handling Child Welfare Cases

The Children's Commission regularly publishes resource letters about emerging, relevant, and changing policy, laws, practice, and training opportunities that are of interest to judges and attorneys handling child welfare cases. The Children's Commission's distribution list for the Resource Letter reaches nearly 3,500 judges, attorneys, court staff, and child welfare stakeholders. Several examples of Jurist in Residence (JIR) Letters and Judicial and Attorney Resource Letters (JARLs) issued between September 30, 2024 and October 1, 2025 include:

- 10/3/2024: TIDC Family Protection Representation Appointments Reporting Deadline is October 15, 2024
- 10/10/2024: Upcoming Webinar: Trial Skills for Child Welfare Cases: Preserving the Record for Appeal
- 11/18/2024: November is National Adoption Month
- 12/5/2024: 2024 Texas Child Welfare Law Bench Book Now Available
- 12/13/2024, Jurist in Residence Letter: Judicial Scholarships to 2025 NCJFCJ Conferences
- 12/30/2024: Child Welfare Training and Resources
- 1/9/2025: January is Human Trafficking Prevention Month
- 1/15/2025: Upcoming Webinars: Court Interpreters; Non-party Mediations
- 1/16/2025: Scholarships to TexasBarCLE Child Protection Law 101 and Advanced Course
- 2/13/2025, Jurist in Residence Letter: Save the Date: 2025 CWJC; New Scholarship Offering
- 2/18/2025: Scholarships to 2025 TDCAA Conference
- 2/27/2025: New Legal Training Opportunity
- 4/4/2025: March and April Webinars
- 4/8/2025: Fall 2025 Trial Skills Training
- 4/10/2025: Child Abuse Prevention Month
- 5/2/2025: Family Help Link
- 5/9/2025: Upcoming Webinar: Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in Child Welfare Cases
- 5/15/2025: We are Hiring: Attorney Position at the Children's Commission
- 5/16/2025: Upcoming Webinar: Supporting Reunification in Child Welfare Cases
- 5/23/2025: National Foster Care Month
- 5/28/2025: Introducing the Children's Commission Conversations Podcast
- 6/12/2025: Attorney Scholarships for TexasBarCLE's Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop
- 6/20/2025: June is Reunification Month
- 7/7/2025: Children's Commission Webcast: Texas 89th Regular Legislative Session Update
- 7/24/2025: Upcoming Webinar: Trial Skills for Child Welfare Cases: Jury Trial Basics
- 7/29/2025, Jurist in Residence Letter: Registration Now Open for the 2025 CWJC
- 7/30/2025: Attorney Scholarships to TexasBarCLE's Civil Appellate Practice 101
- 8/6/2025: We are Hiring: New Juvenile Justice Attorney Position
- 8/28/2025: Educational Resources for the 2025-2026 School Year
- 9/2/2025: Pre-petition Legal Representation Survey
- 9/8/2025: Upcoming Webinar: Ties that Bind- Supporting Kinship Care
- 9/24/2025: September is Kinship Care Month

Scan the QR codes
for a complete list of
Resource Letters:



Legal Practice & Process



The Legal Practice and Process Committee met on November 8, 2024, and on January 24, April 25, and April 25, 2025.

The Legal Practice & Process (LPP) Committee focuses on assisting 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.



Prepetition Legal Representation

The Legal Representation Committee (LRC) met on October 11, 2024, and January 31, April 11, and August 8, 2025. During FY2025, the LRC identified pre-petition legal representation programs as the priority area of focus. To inform the committee about existing capacity and community needs, the committee members decided to formulate a statewide survey. The committee discussed the survey at the August meeting as well as additional areas of focus for FY2026. The prepetition legal representation survey launched on September 2, 2025, and closed on October 15, 2025. The target audience for the survey was judges, attorneys, CASA, DFPS/Single Source Continuum Contractor (SSCC) staff, service providers, and other child welfare professionals. Questions included identifying top legal issues facing Texas families, availability of attorneys to provide prepetition legal representation, and additional challenges. A report with survey results will be released in FY2026.



Child Welfare Legal Specialization

The 2024 Child Welfare Law Board Certification Exam was held over two days on September 30 and October 1, 2024. Twenty-six applicants sat for the exam, and nine attorneys obtained certification by the Texas Board of Legal Specialization (TBLS). All newly certified attorneys appear in the TBLS online directory. During this reporting period, two certified attorneys submitted reimbursement requests to the Children's Commission pursuant to the reimbursement policy posted on the Commission's website.

Standards of Representation

The Standards of Representation Committee met on November 7, 2024, and January 13, February 20-21, June 27, and September 18-19, 2025, to continue its work drafting statewide standards of practice for attorneys representing children in child welfare cases. During FY2025, the committee advanced the draft of Phase 3 (Preparatory Stage) and began substantial drafting of Phase 4 (Conciliatory and Alternative Dispute Resolution), Phase 5 (Adversarial Phase), and Phase 6 (Post-Trial Appellate Phase). Throughout the fiscal year, the committee remained focused on ensuring a comprehensive set of standards that support high-quality legal representation for children across Texas. After these standards are developed, the committee will draft standards for attorneys representing parents.

Parent Resource Workgroup

The Parent Resource Workgroup met on November 21, 2024, and January 30, April 4, and June 26, 2025. The Parent Resource Workgroup's Pre-Litigation Guide Subgroup concluded its final review of its Pre-Litigation Resource Guide prior to the commencement of the 89th Legislative Session. At the conclusion of the session, the guide was edited to reflect recent legislative changes related to the investigative stage of a child welfare case. Once finalized, a digital version of the guide will be published on the Commission's website.

The Parent Materials Workgroup reconvened on July 21, 2025 to begin developing scripts for videos which will support parents experiencing the child welfare system. The series will highlight parents with lived experience and will focus on explaining the removal petition, what to expect at the first court hearing, and the basics of the attorney-client relationship.

Legislative Matters

The Legislation and Policy Resource Committee (LPRC), established in FY2024 to support the Children's Commission by serving as a neutral resource to all three branches of government, continued throughout FY2025 to track and review child welfare legislation.

The LPRC met on May 8 and June 5, 2025, and convened bi-weekly during the legislative session to review child welfare legislation as it moved through the 89th Legislature. These meetings focused on tracking bills and considering potential impacts on the child welfare and legal systems.

Following the close of the 89th Regular Legislative Session, the LPRC reviewed the bills that passed and concluded its FY 2025 work at its June 5 meeting. The live 89th Regular Legislative Session Update webinar was held on July 29, 2025, and is available in the On-Demand Training and MCLE section of the Children's Commission website, along with the accompanying presentation.



Tribal/State Collaboration

The Commission remains committed to strengthening Tribal/State partnerships and to collaborating with Tribal partners to provide education on the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). Commission staff participate in the ICWA Constituency Group monthly calls organized by the Capacity Building Center for Courts (CBCC). Additionally, Commission staff meet regularly with the Tribal liaison from DFPS State Office and Tribal partners, including building connections with ICWA Tribal liaisons from Tribes based outside Texas.

Commission staff participated in tribal/state collaborative calls hosted by DFPS held on January 16, February 20, March 20, April 17, August 21, and September 18, 2025. Dr. Valerie Jackson, CEO of Monarch Family Services, provided the collaborative with a presentation on her current study of the obstacles to supported permanency for kinship caregivers during the January 16, 2025 collaborative call.

Commission staff attended an ICWA webinar series hosted by the Department of Justice on October 8 and November 7, 2024 and also attended virtual ICWA Community of Practice meetings hosted by the Children's Bureau on January 22 and May 25, 2025.



Trending Issues

1. Child Protective Investigations
2. Neglect
3. Temporary Managing Conservatorship
4. Safety Plans and Parent Child Safety
5. Conservatorship
6. Visitation – parent
7. Substance Use and Abuse
8. Domestic Violence
9. Investigation Findings/ARIF
10. Retaining Legal Counsel



Grantee

Texas Legal Service Center Family Helpline

With Children’s Commission funding, the Family Helpline fills a gap by providing legal information regarding child welfare matters to parents and families who do not have access to court-appointed attorneys, and where free or affordable legal representation is not readily available. Additionally, calls to the Helpline continue to involve complex legal situations and overlapping issues of child abuse and neglect, poverty, domestic violence, substance use, and a general lack of understanding of the Texas child welfare system and legal system.

In FY2025, the Family Helpline provided legal information that affected 1,341 adults and 2,493 children, completing a total of 1,615 calls from 1,254 individual callers; 361 calls were returning callers who had additional questions.

Approximately 72% of callers in FY2025 had an open CPS case; the largest case type was Investigations, which made up 60% of open CPS cases. Approximately 21% of callers had questions about a closed CPS case, and 7% of callers had questions about child safety concerns.

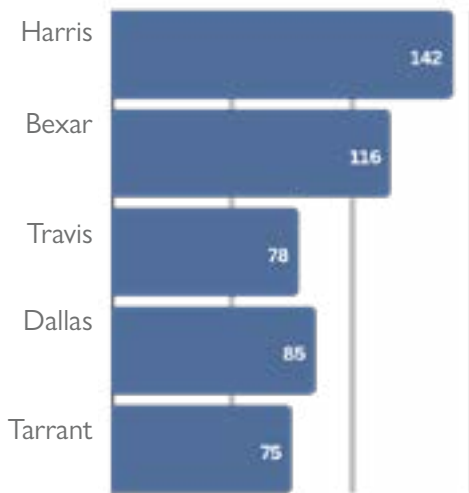
Eight of the top ten trending issues remained the same as FY24; Temporary Managing Conservatorship and Investigation Findings/Administrative Review of Investigative Findings (ARIF) replaced Best Interests and Reporting Abuse/Neglect from FY2024.

The Family Helpline was successful in serving the entire state of Texas. Although the highest number of callers continue to come from larger counties, calls to the Helpline came from 148 different counties in Texas, as well as nearly 60 out of state callers with a question about Texas law.

The vast majority of callers continue to be parents (56% are mothers and 17% are fathers); 18% of callers are non-parent relatives of a child. Helpline staff also received calls from friends, unrelated persons, and children themselves.

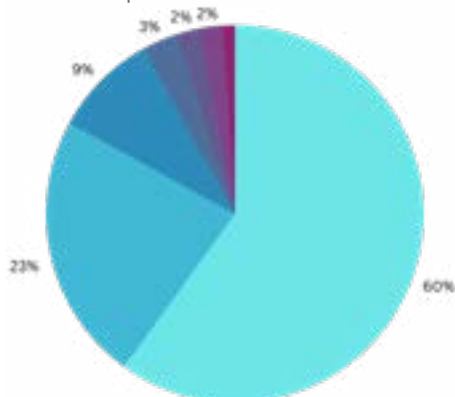
Callers to the Helpline were referred from more than 30 sources throughout the State. The top three referral sources to the Family Helpline remained the same as in FY2023 and FY2024: internet searches, referrals from DFPS, and referrals from Texas Legal Services Center and its website TexasLawHelp.org.

Calls by County



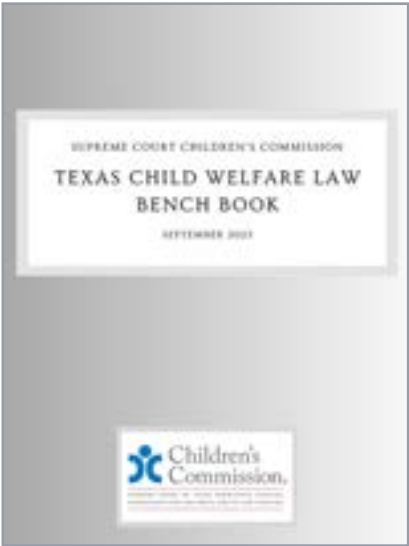
Calls by Case Type

- Investigations
- Temporary Managing Conservatorship
- Family-Based Safety Services
- Permanent Managing Conservatorship
- Court Ordered Services
- Unknown Stage
- Alternative Response



Bench Book

The Texas Child Welfare Law Bench Book (Bench Book) is updated every year and released in the month of October, in time for distribution at the Commission’s annual Child Welfare Judges Conference. The Bench Book includes the following sections: Statutory, Legal Essentials, Federal, Health, Well-being, Safety, System Issues, and Family Connections. The resource is available on the Commission’s Texas Child Welfare Law Bench Book webpage as a free, downloadable PDF for print and as an interactive resource through the LawBox app. The 2024 version was released in October 2024 and updated in January 2025. The Bench Book Committee met on May 2 and June 20, 2025 to discuss recommended changes for the 2025 version.



Bench Cards

The Bench Cards are abbreviated, quick reference visuals on specific hearings and relevant topical matters. The statutory Bench Cards include each of the required statutory hearings in a child welfare case as well as a chart of all hearings At a Glance, Required Participation, Termination Grounds, Reasonable Efforts, and De Novo Hearings. The topical Bench Cards address issues such as Education, Medical and Mental Health Care, Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), and Human Trafficking.

At a Glance

Hearing	Required Participation	Advisory Hearing	De Novo Hearing	Termination Grounds Hearing	Reasonable Efforts Hearing
Hearing with Family	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Required Participation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Termination Grounds	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Reasonable Efforts	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
De Novo Hearing	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Education	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Medical and Mental Health Care	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Human Trafficking	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Required Participation in Services Hearing Checklist

Required Participation

At the start of the hearing, the court shall:

- Identify the parties to the hearing.
- Identify the issues to be heard.
- Identify the parties to the hearing.
- Identify the issues to be heard.

At the end of the hearing, the court shall:

- Identify the parties to the hearing.
- Identify the issues to be heard.
- Identify the parties to the hearing.
- Identify the issues to be heard.

Tool Kits for Attorneys



Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing Parents and Children in Child Welfare Cases

The Commission distributed 220 printed copies of the 2024 Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing Parents and Children in Child Welfare Cases to attorneys practicing child welfare law at several training events across the state, including the Special Education, Child Welfare, and Juvenile Justice System Course in Austin on June 6, 2025; the Texas Association of Family Defense Attorneys Annual Family Defense CLE in Galveston on June 12-13, 2025; and the Annual Advanced Family Law CLE Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop in San Antonio on August 6, 2025.



Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing DFPS in Child Welfare Cases

A total of 162 printed copies of the 2024 Tool Kit for Attorneys Representing the Texas Department of Family & Protective Services were distributed during the State Bar of Texas' Child Protection Law Section's 101 and Advanced Course held in Georgetown on March 6-7, 2025 and the 2025 TDCAA Conference held in Sugarland on April 8-11, 2025. Approximately 88 additional copies of the tool kit were distributed by mail to County Attorney, District Attorney, and DFPS Regional Attorney offices upon request.

Training



The Training Committee met on October 15, 2024, and January 23, April 17, and August 28, 2025.

The Training Committee focuses on overseeing and developing 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.



Children's Commission Conversations

The Commission launched the Children's Commission Conversations podcast in Spring 2025. The podcast features informal discussions with experts focused on key topics in child welfare. Each episode offers education and practice tips designed to inform and support judges, attorneys, and others who serve Texas children, youth, and families experiencing the child welfare system. While episodes are geared towards legal and judicial audiences, they are available to anyone who may be interested. The episodes and accompanying resources are available on the Children's Commission website.

Topics include:

- Introduction to the Children's Commission Conversations
- Pre-Petition Advocacy in Child Welfare Cases
- Preserving Sibling Connections in Child Welfare Cases
- Mental Health First Aid in the Courtroom
- Visitation Best Practices
- Role of the DFPS Clinical Coordinator

Scholarships

The Children's Commission administers several judicial and attorney scholarship opportunities throughout the fiscal year. For all scholarships, the Children's Commission determines scholarship criteria and deploys an application process that includes pre- and post-conference evaluations to identify the knowledge gained as well as practices awardees plan to implement. The surveys also inquire about topics of interest to inform planning for future trainings. Attorney applicants must 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. A total of \$65,000 was allocated for scholarship recipients in FY2025. All scholarship opportunities and application information are available on the Commission's Scholarships webpage.

7

National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges Conferences | \$30,000

The NCJFCJ 2025 National Conference on Juvenile Justice was held on March 16-19, 2025, in Boston, Massachusetts. The Commission awarded 3 reimbursement scholarships for judges to attend this conference. The NCJFCJ 88th Annual Conference was held on July 20-23, 2025 in Chicago, Illinois. The Commission awarded 7 judicial reimbursement scholarships for judges to attend this conference.

17

Appellate Law Section Boot Camp | \$7,500

The State Bar of Texas, in collaboration with the Appellate Section of the State Bar, hosted a Civil Appellate Practice 101 course on September 3, 2025 in Austin, Texas. The Commission awarded 7 registration reimbursement scholarships for attorneys to attend the live event and 10 additional scholarships for the webcast replay.

17

2025 Prosecuting Domestic Violence and Child Sexual Assault Conference | \$10,000

The Texas District and County Attorney Association (TDCAA) Training hosted the 2025 Prosecuting Crimes Against Children Conference on April 8-11, 2025, in Sugarland, Texas. The Commission awarded 17 attorney scholarships to attend this training.

70

Advanced Family Law Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop | \$7,500

The Child Abuse and Neglect One-Day Workshop was held on August 6, 2025, in San Antonio, Texas. The Commission awarded 43 registration scholarships for attorneys to attend the live event and 27 scholarships for the webcast replays.

40

Advanced Child Protection Law Conference | \$10,000

The State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law Section hosted its 7th Annual Advanced Child Protection Law Course on April 6-7, 2025, in Georgetown, Texas. The Commission awarded 40 registration scholarships for attorneys to attend the live 101 and Advanced Courses or to view the webcast replays.

State Bar of Texas Child Protection Law Section

The State Bar's Child Protection Law (CPL) Section facilitates training for judges and attorneys practicing child welfare law by providing MCLE and training opportunities to their membership, hosting an Annual 101 and Advanced Child Protection Law CLE each spring, and planning the Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop curriculum for the Annual Advanced Family Law every August. The Commission collaborates with the CPL Section regarding possible trainings and partnerships through a Commission staff member's participation in the CPL CLE Committee.

At the Advanced Family Law Conference Child Abuse and Neglect Workshop in San Antonio on August 6, 2025, Commission staff distributed over 100 folders containing a one-page listing of available Commission resources including "Sam and the Search for Spots" coloring books and copies of brochures on father's rights and attorney duties.





Judicial Training

Child Protection Court Convening

Child Protection Courts (CPCs) were created to specialize in managing child abuse and neglect dockets. Like the child support court associate judges, these associate judges are appointed by their regional presiding judges and are OCA employees. The goal for these courts is to help children and families achieve safety, permanency, and well-being in a timely manner. The Children's Commission partners with OCA to provide training and other support for CPC judges and court coordinators. There are currently 30 CPCs and one Harris County CPS Impact Court; combined, these courts exclusively handle child welfare cases in 148 Texas counties.

In FY2025, Commission staff engaged in two ongoing efforts with OCA to provide training tailored to CPC judges and court coordinators: the preconference for CPC judges and court coordinators at the 17th annual Child Welfare Judges Conference (CWJC) in late October 2024 and the July 18, 2025 Child Protection Court Convening.

With input from the CPC Convening Curriculum Committee and in partnership with the OCA Children's Courts Program Manager, Commission staff coordinated the curriculum for a full day virtual convening on July 18, 2025 for the CPC judges and court coordinators. The conference included five plenary presentations for the judges and court coordinators, as well as two breakout sessions for each audience, one of which was a moderated discussion of current issues. Panel presentations included legislative updates, data and reporting requirements, best practices for courtroom management, issues specific to rural jurisdictions, and a moderated discussion with regional presiding judges. The curriculum provided Continuing Judicial Education, TBLS, and ethics hours. Speakers included members of the judiciary, TIDC staff, and OCA staff. Twenty-eight CPC judges and 31 court coordinators attended the convening.



Grantee

Texas Center for the Judiciary Child Welfare Judges Conference

TCJ hosted the 2024 Child Welfare Judges Conference. This 2.5-day conference included a pre-conference training for Child Protection Court judges and court coordinators, followed by plenary presentations on legal representation, community based care, and Regional Breakouts. The conference was held October 21-23, 2024 at the Sheraton Austin Georgetown Hotel and Conference Center. The grant also covered the planning process for the 2025 Child Welfare Judges Conference.



Child Welfare Judges Conference

The Children's Commission, in partnership with the Texas Center for the Judiciary (TCJ), hosted the 17th annual CWJC on October 21-23, 2024. A pre-conference training hosted by OCA was held on the opening day of the conference for CPC judges and court coordinators and was followed by the full conference. More than 100 judges attended from across the state. A greater number of general jurisdiction judges attended than ever before, and the audience also included judges who were new to the bench. Overall, there were 13 presentations, including a national keynote speaker, members of the judiciary, DFPS leadership, OCA leadership, SSCC leadership, and youth with lived experience in the child welfare system. Additionally, regional breakouts were convened with DFPS and SSCC staff, including RDIs, CPS RDs, RSIs, and SSCC representatives from regions with community-based care. Twelve concurrent regional breakout sessions were held, giving judges the opportunity to meet with agency and SSCC staff to review their regional data with the goal of improving outcomes for children, youth, and families. The full conference curriculum provided 14.0 Continuing Judicial Education hours, 2.0 ethics hours, and 9.0 Family Violence hours.



Webinars

The Children's Commission promotes child welfare-related legal education by creating online Minimum Continuing Legal Education (MCLE) content; by producing child welfare law-related training in partnership with various stakeholders, including TexasBarCLE; and by obtaining Texas MCLE and Texas Board of Legal Specialization (TBLS) credit. These trainings are offered "on demand" on the Commission website at no cost. Some of these courses may be eligible for Family Violence credit hours for judges.

These offerings may also be considered in some jurisdictions to meet the statutory three-hour education requirements in Texas Family Code §§ 107.004 and 107.0131 for attorneys to qualify for court appointments on child welfare dockets or to qualify to remain on a court-appointed list. These offerings may also be considered to meet statutorily required trauma-informed training hours. All of the Commission's web-based content is archived and is available on the On-Demand Training and MCLE webpage. The webinars included below were produced during FY2025 by the Children's Commission.



Domestic Violence in Child Welfare Cases: Best Practices for Judges and Attorneys

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



Trial Skills for Child Welfare Cases: Preserving the Record for Appeal

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



Utilizing Court Interpreters in Child Welfare Cases

On February 25, 2025, the "Utilizing Court Interpreters in Child Welfare Cases" webinar covered legal requirements, logistics, client communication, and courtroom dynamics for utilizing court interpreters throughout a child welfare case.



Non-Party Participation in Child Welfare Mediations

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



Utilizing Day Care to Support Children and Families

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



Representing Children with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in Child Welfare Cases

On May 30, 2025, the “Representing Children with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in Child Welfare Cases” webinar addressed diagnosis, testing, and treatment for children with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) and considerations for judges and attorneys in child welfare cases.



Supporting Reunification in Child Welfare Cases

On June 24, 2025, the “Supporting Reunification in Child Welfare Cases” webinar provided insights into barriers and strengths as children and families navigate the complexities of the child welfare system and work towards successful reunification.



89th Regular Legislative Session Update

On July 29, 2025, the “89th Regular Legislative Session Update” webinar provided a comprehensive overview of child welfare-related House and Senate bills passed during the 89th Regular Legislative Session, including the subject of each bill, the statutes affected, and the effective dates.



Trial Skills for Child Welfare Cases: Jury Trial Basics

On August 22, 2025, the “Trial Skills for Child Welfare Cases: Jury Trial Basics” webinar provided practice tips on how to prepare for a jury trial in a child welfare case and included a discussion about pretrial motions and requests for rulings, considerations for voir dire, and how to present opening and closing statements to a jury.



Ties that Bind—Supporting Kinship Care

On September 30, 2025, the “Ties that Bind—Supporting Kinship Care” webinar panel discussion addressed unique considerations for informal and formal kinship caregivers, such as identifying legal, financial, and mental health barriers; improving communication; navigating safety plans; bridging service gaps; and accessing resources.

Children’s Commission
YouTube On-Demand MCLE
Videos Playlist





Attorney Training Trial Skills Training

The Fall 2025 Trial Skills Training Contested Hearing Practices Course continued to focus on practice skills required to represent clients in contested hearings before the bench, such as the Adversary Hearing and Final Hearing. It included half days of virtual instruction on September 4 and 10, 2025, and 2.5 days of in-person instruction on September 16-18, 2025 in Round Rock, Texas. Twenty-five participants completed the virtual portion of the course, earning 6.75 hours of MCLE credit, including 1.0 ethics hours. Participants who completed the in-person portion of the course earned 17.75 hours of MCLE credit, with 1.25 ethics hours.

In preparation for the training, participants were asked to view 3.0 hours of MCLE focused on evidentiary skills. New sessions at this year's training included lay and expert witness discussion panels and a required efforts practice scenario. Additionally, mock direct and cross-examination of lay witness practice sessions more closely resembled a contested hearing with this iteration's inclusion of opposing counsel providing objections during questioning in each breakout room.

Texas District and County Attorneys Association (TDCAA)

In collaboration with TDCAA, the Children's Commission provided 12 one-hour sessions of child welfare related content during the 2025 Prosecuting Domestic Violence & Child Sex Assault Cases Conference held on April 8-11, 2025, in Sugarland. The Legal Practice and Process DFPS Representation Subcommittee served as the curriculum committee for this course and met on October 28, and November 15, 2024, to identify topics and speakers for the two-day child welfare track. This is the third conference TDCAA has invited the Children's Commission to assist with by providing a tailored training track for prosecutors representing DFPS throughout the state.



Grantee



Texas Department of
Family and Protective Services

Texas Department of Family and Protective Services Attorney Training Support

The DFPS Regional Attorney Training was held in San Antonio on October 22-23, 2024. The Children's Commission provided funding to support this training. The overall objective and purpose of this program is to update the attorneys and legal support staff of the Department of Family and Protective Services on current issues faced by the agency and in child welfare more broadly. The training topics included: termination grounds update, education advocacy, defending against sanctions, expert testimony, CBC Transition, protecting the appellate record, trial skills, ethics, kinship placements, and others. Sessions that received credit for MCLE were recorded and made available for DFPS attorneys who could not attend the live training and district and county attorneys who represent DFPS in child welfare cases.

Data



The Data Committee met on October 15, 2024, and on January 7, April 15, and July 31, 2025.

The Data Committee advances the Commission's data-driven initiatives supporting improved outcomes for children and families in the child welfare system.



Data Committee

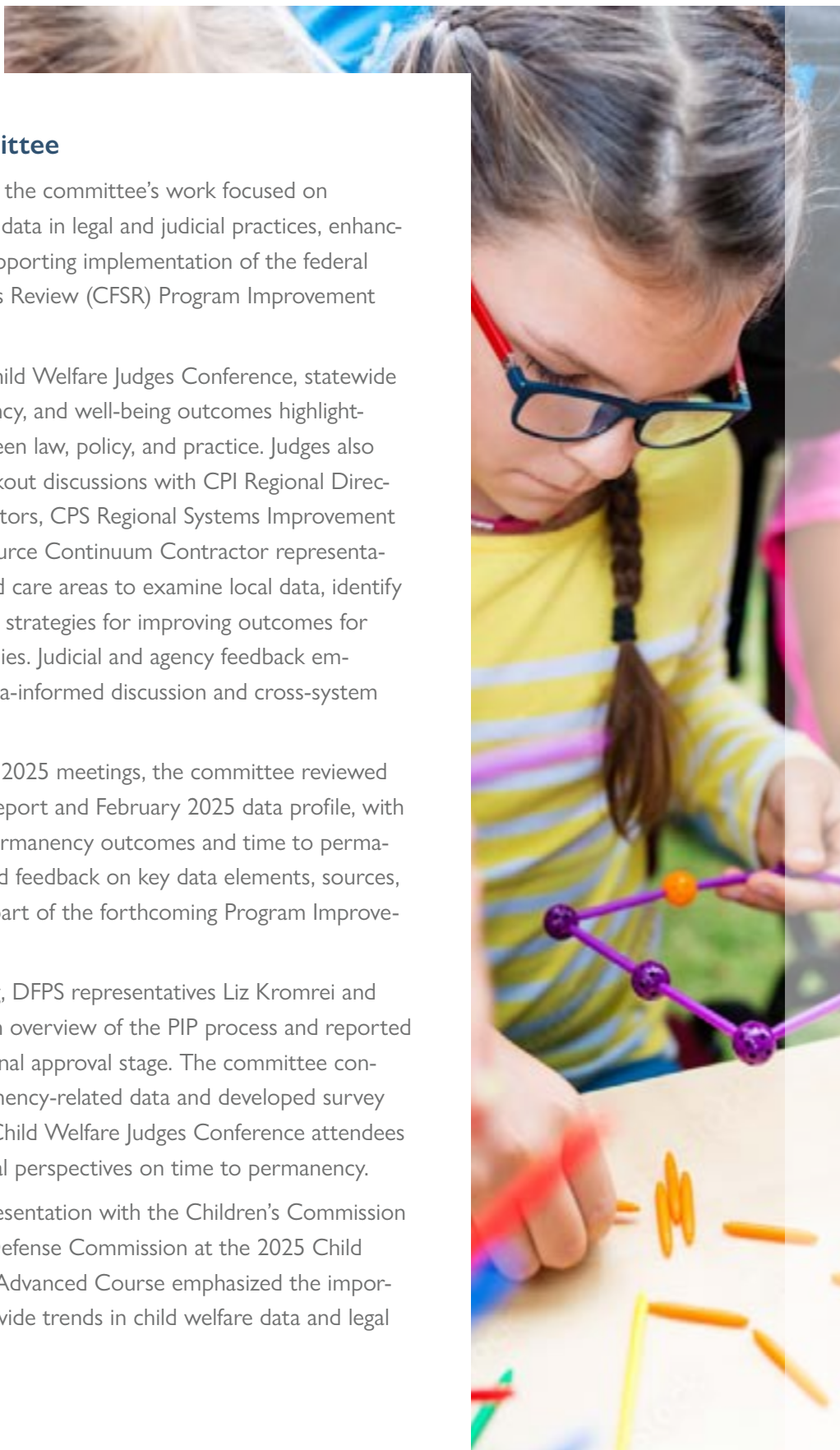
During FY2025, the committee's work focused on strengthening the use of data in legal and judicial practices, enhancing collaboration, and supporting implementation of the federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) Program Improvement Plan.

At the October 2024 Child Welfare Judges Conference, statewide data on safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes highlighted the connection between law, policy, and practice. Judges also engaged in regional breakout discussions with CPI Regional Directors, CPS Regional Directors, CPS Regional Systems Improvement Specialists, and Single Source Continuum Contractor representatives in community-based care areas to examine local data, identify challenges, and exchange strategies for improving outcomes for children, youth, and families. Judicial and agency feedback emphasized the value of data-informed discussion and cross-system communication.

At the January and April 2025 meetings, the committee reviewed the federal CFSR Final Report and February 2025 data profile, with focused discussion on permanency outcomes and time to permanency. Members provided feedback on key data elements, sources, and metrics to track as part of the forthcoming Program Improvement Plan.

At the July 2025 meeting, DFPS representatives Liz Kromrei and Julie Shores presented an overview of the PIP process and reported that the plan was in its final approval stage. The committee continued analysis of permanency-related data and developed survey questions for the 2025 Child Welfare Judges Conference attendees to further explore judicial perspectives on time to permanency.

Additionally, the joint presentation with the Children's Commission and the Texas Indigent Defense Commission at the 2025 Child Protection Law Section Advanced Course emphasized the importance of reviewing statewide trends in child welfare data and legal representation.



Grantee

Office of Court Administration **OCA-CIP Technology Project**



Funded by the Children's Commission and developed by OCA, CPCMS is a case management system unique to Child Protection Courts. OCA provides project management, programming, and testing services for CPCMS. OCA staffs a CPCMS Advisory Council of CPC judges, OCA staff, and Children's Commission staff to identify and discuss various enhancements and issues. In FY2025, CPCMS managed 10,866 cases involving 10,287 children/youth in 155 Texas counties.

OCA Notice & Engagement

The Notice and Engagement feature of the Child Protection Case Management System (CPCMS) continued to expand its reach and functionality throughout FY2025. As of May 2025, 117 new users enrolled to receive automated hearing notifications, bringing total enrollment to 2,497 users. By September 2025, enrollment increased to 174 new users for the fiscal year, with overall participation rising to 2,554 users statewide.

System utilization also increased significantly. As of May 2025, CPCMS generated hearing notifications for 3,981 hearings, with 13,559 individual notifications sent. By September 2025, CPCMS issued notifications for 6,682 hearings, totaling 23,551 notifications. These figures reflect a 7.2% increase in users and a 10.8% increase in notifications sent compared to the same period in FY2024.

To support broader access, the Office of Court Administration developed an Application Programming Interface (API) to allow courts not using the CPCMS to upload hearing data directly into the Notice and Engagement System. The API is intended to expand hearing notification capabilities to all courts handling child welfare cases and to offer a no-cost alternative mechanism for issuing hearing notifications. OCA will continue identifying and engaging jurisdictions interested in adopting the API.





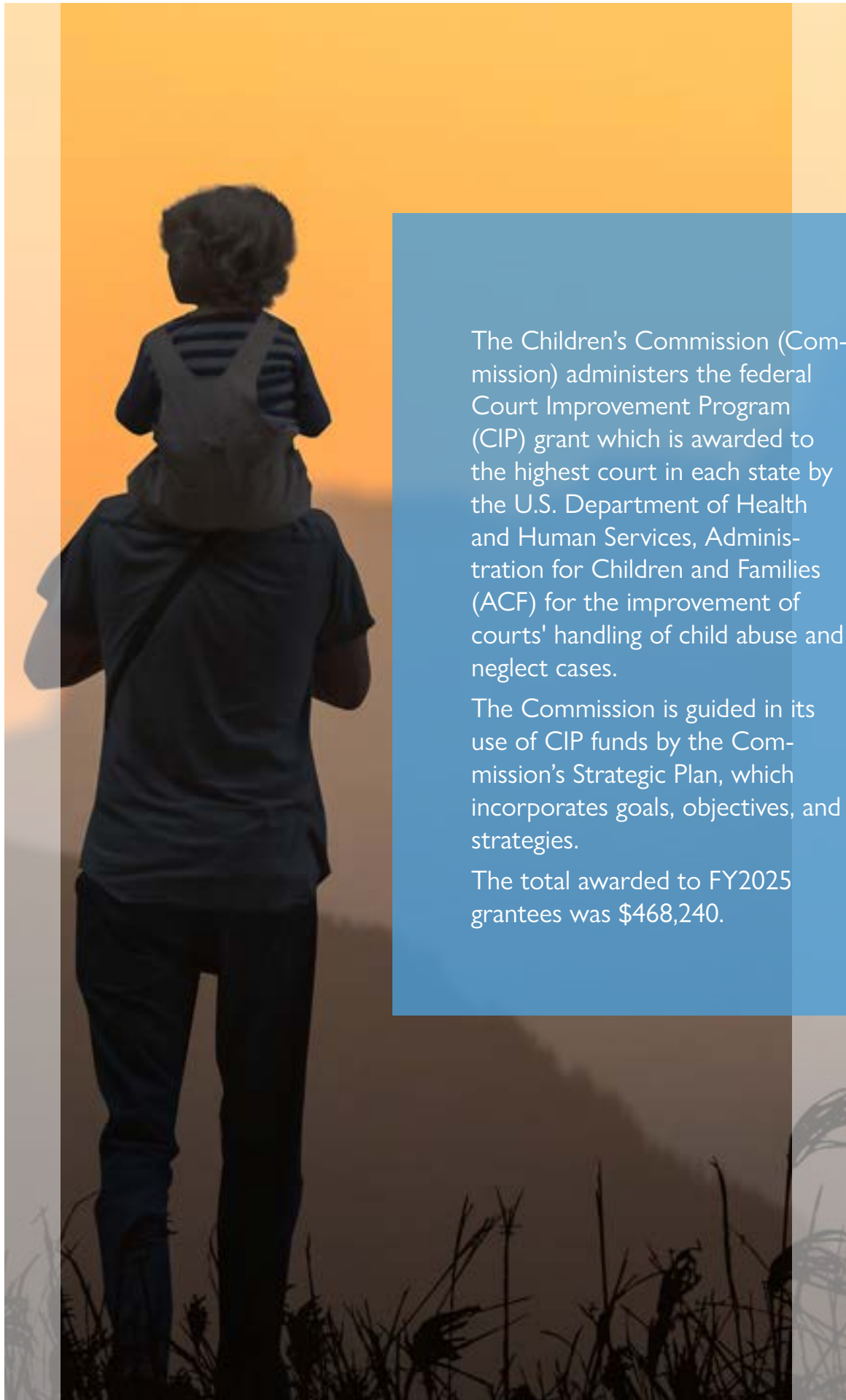
Child Protection Case Management System (CPCMS)

Through a grant with the Children's Commission, OCA continued to enhance CPCMS to improve usability, data quality, and overall system performance in FY2025. The CPCMS Advisory Council met on December 6, 2024, March 21, 2025, and August 1, 2025 to review planned updates, consider enhancement requests, and approve modifications designed to support Child Protection Courts statewide.

At Advisory Council meetings, members approved several enhancements including:

- Adding new "Kinship-Licensed" and "Supervised Independent Living (SIL) - Transitional Living Program (TLP)" placement options;
- Including "nail test" as a substance use testing option;
- Adding a dropdown allowing courts to indicate whether an adoption was granted to a relative, fictive kin, or non-relative;
- Including "Reinstatement of Parental Rights" as a final order and hearing type;
- Alphabetizing parties on the Case Summary screen;
- Updating the respondent service method "Certified" to "Certified Mail";
- Adding "Out of County" to the Incarceration Type field;
- Resolving an error causing "Adoption" to appear in non-adoption cases on the Case Summary page;
- Ensuring accurate respondent listings on the "Order Establishing Parent-Child Relationship";
- Updating the Respondent page to allow a null value for "Waived Right to Counsel" and adding two new counsel status options: "Not in opposition" and "Not indigent";
- Refining search results to prevent rescheduled hearings from appearing as the next hearing;
- Removing the requirement for a date of service when "Cite by Publication" or "Cite by Posting" is selected; and
- Introducing a new procedural order to track the outcomes of appealed cases returned to Child Protection Courts.

OCA announced the retirement of Darrell Childers, the long-time programmer of CPCMS, at the end of September 2025. Since 2012, Mr. Childers served as the sole programmer and database developer for CPCMS, playing a pivotal role in its functionality, ongoing improvements, and reliability. His 16 years of dedicated service significantly strengthened CPCMS and supported Child Protection Courts across Texas. The Commission expresses deep appreciation for his contributions and lasting impact.



The Children's Commission (Commission) administers the federal Court Improvement Program (CIP) grant which is awarded to the highest court in each state by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF) for the improvement of courts' handling of child abuse and neglect cases.

The Commission is guided in its use of CIP funds by the Commission's Strategic Plan, which incorporates goals, objectives, and strategies.

The total awarded to FY2025 grantees was \$468,240.

FY2025 **Grantees**

		<p>Office of Court Administration CIP Technology Projects OCA-CIP Visiting Judge \$128,279</p>
	<p>TEXAS CENTER FOR THE JUDICIARY Child Welfare Judges Conference \$232,460</p>	
		<p>TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY & PROTECTIVE SERVICES Regional Training Support \$12,500</p>
	<p>TEXAS LEGAL SERVICES CENTER Family Helpline \$95,001</p>	



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