

GOAL I (COLLABORATION) | ADMINISTER THE COURT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM (CIP) FUNDS TO ASSESS CURRENT AND FUTURE NEEDS OF THE COURTS, PROVIDE A FORUM FOR MEANINGFUL COLLABORATION, ENCOURAGE CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT, AND PROMOTE BEST CHILD WELFARE AND COURT PRACTICES TO IMPROVE THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Strategy: Confer with the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) on the Child and Family Service Reviews, Program Improvement Plans, Child and Family State Plans, and the Court Improvement Program Strategic Plans.

GOAL II (SYSTEMS IMPROVEMENT) | EXECUTE INNOVATIVE PROJECTS AIMED AT ENCOURAGING FAIRNESS AND JUSTICE FOR CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES; PROMOTING JUDICIAL LEADERSHIP IN COURTS AND COMMUNITIES; AND EXPANDING COURT AND CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM CAPACITY TO SUPPORT CONTINUOUS, SYSTEMIC IMPROVEMENT.

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

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

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

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

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

Children's Commission Strategic Plan Fiscal Year 2025

Strategy: Emphasize the importance of engaging children and youth in case planning, court processes, and promote normalcy and the inclusion of young adults with lived experience in system improvement efforts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GOAL III (LEGAL PRACTICE & PROCESS) | ASSIST TRIAL AND APPELLATE COURTS, JUDGES, AND LEGAL ADVOCATES TO ENSURE THAT CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES INVOLVED WITH CHILD WELFARE EXPERIENCE A LEGAL SYSTEM IN WHICH THEY HAVE ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND THEIR RIGHTS ARE PROTECTED.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Objective: Develop resources to help parents involved in the child welfare system to navigate the process, encourage authentic parent engagement, and ensure parental rights are protected.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Strategy: Maintain tool kits for attorneys representing parents, children, and DFPS in child welfare cases.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GOAL IV (TRAINING) | OVERSEE AND DEVELOP JUDICIAL AND LEGAL TRAINING EFFORTS AT ALL LEVELS OF PRACTICE THAT IDENTIFY AND PROMOTE BEST PRACTICES TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES AND ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN A WELL-INFORMED JUDICIARY AND BAR.

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

Children's Commission Strategic Plan Fiscal Year 2025

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GOAL V (DATA) | OPERATIONALIZE DATA-DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING THROUGH CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND AN ANALYSIS OF PUBLICLY AVAILABLE CHILD WELFARE AND COURT DATA TO IDENTIFY LEGAL PROCESSES AND PRACTICES THAT PRODUCE DESIRED OUTCOMES, AS WELL AS WHICH PRACTICES NEED IMPROVEMENT.

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

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

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

Strategy: At the annual judicial conference, partner with DFPS to provide a statewide data presentation as well as tailored data presentations on state, regional, and local challenges and opportunities and encourage data-driven systemic improvements and collaborative efforts.

Objective: Study the efficacy of virtual or hybrid court hearings in child welfare cases and develop training, tools, and resources designed to maintain the benefits of technology.

Strategy: Partner with OCA to support the maintenance, enhancements, data collection, impact, and usability of the Child Protection Case Management System (CPCMS), including integrating CPCMS with other data systems.