



Ohio

GOVERNOR'S

CHILDREN'S INITIATIVE

CHILDREN SERVICES
TRANSFORMATION

*Safe Children.
Stable Homes.
Strong Communities.*



OFFICE OF
**CHILDREN SERVICES
TRANSFORMATION**

Final Recommendations of the
Children Services Transformation Advisory Council

November 2020



MIKE DEWINE
GOVERNOR OF OHIO



JON HUSTED
LT. GOVERNOR OF OHIO

www.Governor.Ohio.gov

A Message From the Governor



Dear Fellow Ohioans:



Tragically, every single day, thousands of Ohio children are not able to live with their families because it is not safe for them to do so. I am grateful to the foster and kinship caregivers who have opened their homes to these young people in need.

We, as a state, must give our most vulnerable children the opportunities they deserve to succeed and live fulfilling lives. That is why I have made it a priority in my administration to reform Ohio's foster care system and, shortly after being sworn in as Governor, signed an executive order to elevate foster care needs in Ohio.

While it is important that my administration works hard to provide better outcomes for kids, I believe it is crucial that we make changes based on the feedback from those who have experienced the children services system first-hand. Late last year, I announced the creation of the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council, whose members traveled across the state and listened to individuals

as they told their stories, their struggles, and offered their recommendations for improving the children services system. I thank the courageous Ohioans who shared their stories with our council members. Their testimony was a critical part in creating the recommendations in this report.

I also express my sincere appreciation to all members of the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council for their selfless work for making a difference in the lives of so many Ohio children. I believe by fulfilling the recommendations included in this report, as a state, we can improve the lives of our children -- no matter where they grow up.

Very respectfully yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mike DeWine".

Mike DeWine
Ohio Governor

Table of Contents

Children Services Transformation Advisory Council Members	4
A Message from Children Services Transformation Director Kristi Burre	5
Introduction	6
Ohio Landscape.....	9
A Vision for Equity	11
Recommendations	12
Prevention	13
Workforce.....	13
Practice.....	14
Kinship.....	15
Foster Care.....	16
Adoption.....	17
Juvenile Justice.....	18
A Commitment to Transformation – ODJFS Director Kimberly Hall.....	20

Children Services Transformation Advisory Council Members

Kristi Burre, Co-Chair, Director, ODJFS, Office of Children Services Transformation
LeeAnne Cornyn, Co-Chair, Director, Governor's Children's Initiative
Juliana Barton, Foster Alum/Advocate, Action Ohio & Columbus State Scholar Network
Chip Bonsutto, Executive Director, Ohio MENTOR
Sherry Bouquet, Executive Director, Fostering Family Ministries
Nicole Caldwell, Director, Guernsey County Children Services
Anthony Capizzi, Judge, Montgomery County Juvenile Court
Eric DeVoe, Foster Parent
Teri DeVoe, Foster Parent
Angela Earley, Kinship Caregiver

David Earley, Kinship Caregiver
Melinda Haggerty, Foster Alumna
Arlene Jones, Foster Alumna
Jeffrey Mays, Biological Parent
Rhonda Mays, Biological Parent
Elizabeth Merringer, Caseworker, Fairfield County Job and Family Services
Staci Morris, Adoptive Parent
Damon Morris, Adoptive Parent
Robin Reese, Director, Lucas County Children Services
Samantha Shafer, Chief Operating Officer, Integrated Services for Behavioral Health
Michael Wehrkamp, Judge, Paulding County Juvenile Court

Association and State Employee Acknowledgments

Kari Akins, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services
Crystal Ward Allen, Casey Family Programs
Angie Bergefurd, Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services
Michael Buerger, LeanOhio
Chelsea Cordonnier, Governor's Office of Children's Initiatives
David Edelblute, Supreme Court of Ohio
Dyane Gogan-Turner, Ohio Department of Health
Wendy Grove, Ohio Department of Education
Carolyn Hagopian, Ohio Department of Medicaid
Kimberly Hauck, Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities
John Hinton, Buckeye State Sheriff's Association
Tereasa Jamison, Ohio Department of Youth Services
Shannon Jones, Warren County Commissioner
Nick Lashutka, Ohio Children's Hospital Association

Sarah LaTourette, Ohio Family and Children First
Rachel Massoud, County Commissioners Association of Ohio
Karen McGormley, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services
Mark Mecum, Ohio Children's Alliance
Joel Potts, Ohio Job and Family Services Directors' Association
Rachel Rayburn, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services
Angela Sausser, Public Children Services Association of Ohio
Cheryl Subler, County Commissioners Association of Ohio
Hannah Thomas, LeanOhio
Lou Tobin, Prosecuting Attorneys Association
Marisa Weisel, Ohio Department of Medicaid
Kara Wente, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services
Kathryn Whittington, Ashtabula County Commissioner

A Message From Children Services Transformation Director Kristi Burre



As Director of the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services' Office of Children Services Transformation and co-chair of the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council, I applaud Governor DeWine's commitment to improving the lives of children and families. In my 20 years of work in children services, I have

never been prouder of an administration's leadership and dedication to helping vulnerable children and youth and strengthening families and communities.

It is hard to believe that one year ago, our Children Services Transformation Advisory Council members were chosen by Governor DeWine to use their firsthand experiences, system knowledge, and collective advocacy to innovate change for children, families, caregivers, and the children services workforce. Little did we know the challenges we would face in the months ahead. Although the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the timeline slightly, these dedicated council members have remained steadfast in prioritizing the work of the council and delivering a set of recommendations to Governor DeWine. The new health and economic consequences of the pandemic, and the continued social injustices throughout our communities, have only intensified the need for systemwide reform.

This final report picks up where the council's Initial Findings Report left off in February. At that time,

the council had just finished the most crucial part of its work – traveling the state to hear testimony from nearly 500 Ohioans at 10 community forums about their experiences with Ohio's foster care system. Since that time, we have continued to review hundreds of testimonials. I am extremely thankful for all the current and former foster youth who bravely shared their stories to advocate for change and a brighter future for children currently in the system. Their lived experiences and leadership must continue to be at the forefront of all our work moving forward. We cannot and will not do this without them!

This report and recommendations represent a collective vision for a children services and foster care system that promotes safety, permanency, and well-being by strengthening families and communities. This vision depends on a public and private continuum of care that prioritizes children's existing networks and requires sensitive consideration of their diverse racial, cultural, and economic identities. We are committed to maintaining these goals so we can achieve a thriving future for Ohio's children.

Kristi Burre
Director
Office of Children Services Transformation

Introduction



Office of Children Services Transformation Timeline



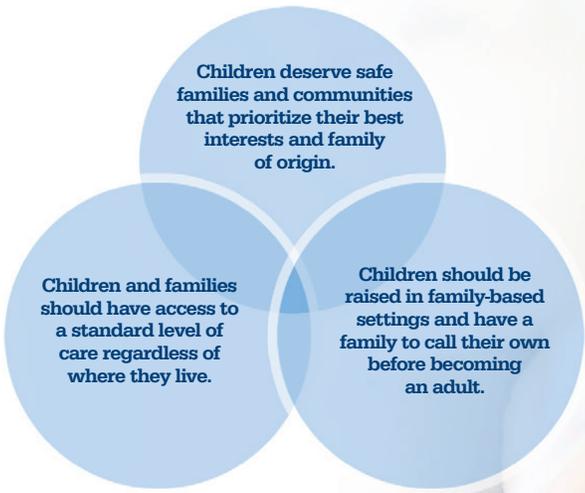
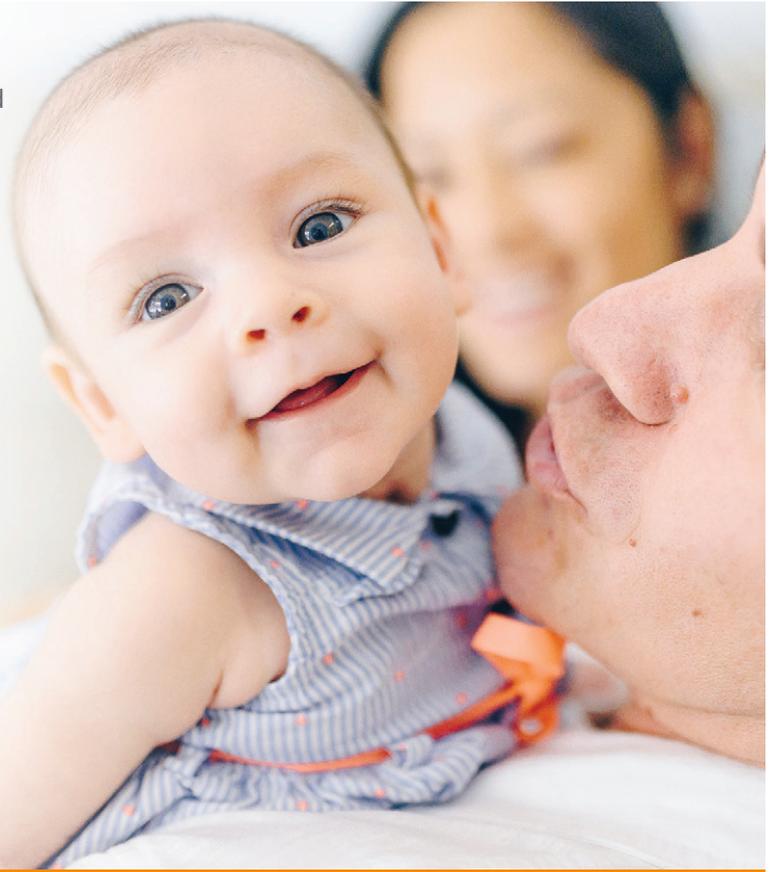
Ohio is one of nine states with a state-supervised, county-administered children services system. The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services oversees the delivery of children services across the state and provides training, technical assistance, and supervision to each of Ohio's local public children services agencies (PCSAs). Each county has their own PCSA, which is responsible for providing direct services to children and families in their county to ensure safety, permanency, and well-being.

Upon coming into office, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine committed to comprehensively reviewing Ohio's children services system and prioritizing needed reforms. Just moments after being sworn in as Ohio's 70th Governor, Governor DeWine signed Executive Order 2019-04D, elevating the priority of children services within the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. From its inception, the Office of Children Services Transformation has been committed to re-envisioning Ohio's children services system, in partnership with Ohio's PCSAs, to ensure that every child who connects with it is afforded the same services and opportunities for lifelong success.

In November 2019, Governor DeWine created the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council to conduct a comprehensive review of the children services system. Twenty-one members were appointed to carry out this work, spanning families, foster youth, and subject matter expertise from across the state. Members were tasked with:

- 1 Traveling the state to better understand local barriers and best practices.
- 2 Promoting a shared state and county vision for agency purpose and practice.
- 3 Reviewing data, trends, and policies regarding the foster care system.
- 4 Providing recommendations and strategies to strengthen all areas of the system, including kinship, foster care, adoption, workforce, and prevention.

From November 2019 to January 2020, the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council held 10 regional community foster care forums throughout Ohio to listen to public testimony on challenges and suggested solutions to improve the children services system. The forums were followed by 14 additional council meetings, held from January to October 2020, to review additional written testimony and develop recommendations. The dedication of this council, to fulfill this critical task from the Governor despite a global pandemic, is highly commended and appreciated.



Below is a summary of each Advisory Council meeting.

Meeting 1: November 4

Governor DeWine held a press conference announcing the formation of the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council and introduced the appointed members. Following the press conference, the council met for an official welcome, to review the charter and executive order, and to prepare for the regional community foster care forums.

Meeting 2: January 27

The council met via conference call to review the foster care forum feedback and discuss future meeting dates and next steps.

Meetings 3 and 4: February 4 and 18

The council was given an overview of the Initial Findings Report, a report summarizing themes heard during the foster care forums. Members were then separated into workgroups to discuss each of the following action areas: prevention, workforce, practice, kinship, foster care, adoption, and juvenile justice. Afterwards, the council identified the top three to five issues/gaps in each action area. The meeting concluded with a discussion of goals and next steps.

Meeting 5: March 3

The meeting began with a discussion on criteria for generating recommendations, emphasizing that members should be bold and think big. The council was divided into small groups to develop recommendations in three action areas: prevention, workforce, and practice. The council built consensus around common and unique recommendations from each action area.

Meeting 6: May 20

The meeting began with a discussion of the impact of COVID-19 on the council's work, including the move to virtual meetings. Members reflected on the heightened importance of their work. They examined the final draft recommendations in each of the three actions areas discussed at the March meeting and agreed on four prevention, five workforce, and three practice action area recommendations. The group learned about the new virtual format for future council meetings. Members agreed that going forward they would meet in smaller workgroups where they would brainstorm ideas, and later meet as a whole to build consensus on the recommendations.

Meetings 7 and 8: June 8 and July 13

The council met virtually in four workgroups to discuss the kinship action area. The workgroups discussed the following related topics: resources, communication, and family-finding efforts. Later, the council met to discuss workgroup recommendations. Members agreed on five kinship action area recommendations and addressed related recommendations in other action areas.

Meetings 9 and 10: July 27 and August 17

The Council met virtually in four workgroups to discuss the foster care action area. Workgroups discussed the following related topics: guidance/support for foster parents, the need for consistency, and normalcy for youth in care. The entire council then met to discuss workgroup recommendations. Members agreed on eight foster care action area recommendations.

Meetings 11 and 12: August 24 and September 14

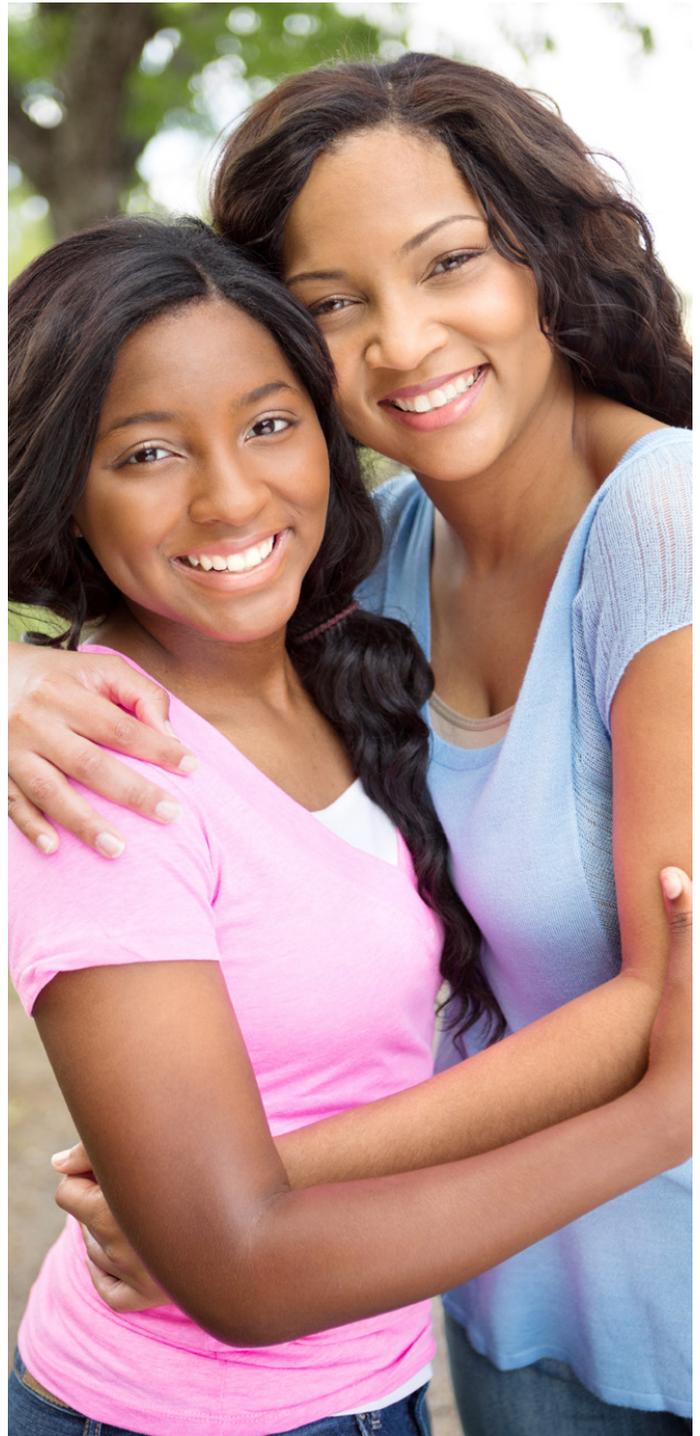
The council met virtually in four workgroups to discuss the adoption action area. Workgroups discussed the following related topics: permanency timeliness, adoption subsidies, and supports/resources for post-adoptive families. The council later met as a whole to discuss workgroup recommendations. Members agreed on six adoption action area recommendations.

Meetings 13 and 14: September 21 and September 30

The council met virtually in four workgroups to discuss the juvenile justice action area. The workgroups discussed the following related topics: expectations and accountability of guardians ad litem and court-appointed special advocates and the need for consistency across court systems. The entire council later met as a whole to discuss workgroup recommendations. Members agreed on six juvenile justice action area recommendations.

Meeting 15: October 26

The council met virtually for a final meeting to celebrate their accomplishments before issuing this final report. Several members spoke about their experiences serving on the council and Governor DeWine expressed his heartfelt appreciation for the expertise and dedication to the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council.



Ohio Landscape



Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First)



The federal Family First Act changes the way children services systems are funded across the nation, prioritizing preventative services that, to the extent possible, keep children out of foster care and with their families or relatives. Families can provide safe and loving care if given access to needed mental health services, substance abuse treatment, or improved parenting skills. Family First, along with the efforts of the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council, has the potential to transform how Ohio administers children and family services.

Under the leadership of Governor DeWine and through the historic investments in Ohio's children services system through the 2020-2021 operating budget, many initiatives to improve Ohio's child-serving systems are already underway.

Shortly after being sworn in Governor DeWine created the Governor's Children's Initiative to advance children's issues and align programming across Ohio's child-serving agencies. The priorities of the Governor's Children's Initiative include, expanding home visiting services, enhancing the quality of child care, increasing access to children's mental and physical health services, and reforming the foster care system.

Each of these priorities requires the collaboration of numerous cabinet agencies, boards, and commissions, and the efforts detailed in this section demonstrate the many cross-agency efforts underway to better serve Ohio's vulnerable children and families. The recommendations of the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council build upon these investments and efforts.

Tiered Treatment Foster Care



All children deserve to live with a loving family. Sadly, too many Ohio youth live in residential institutions, rather than with families. To reduce Ohio's reliance on congregate settings, Ohio will expand levels of foster care beyond "traditional" and "treatment," to a multi-tiered system that better reflects the needs of today's foster youth. This project will establish a range of tiers; standardize the core features of quality treatment foster care and the range of skills, supports, and training that will be needed at each level; and address recruitment and retention strategies and interaction with birth families.

OhioRISE (Ohio Resilience through Integrated Systems and Excellence)



OhioRISE, part of the Ohio Department of Medicaid’s managed care procurement, is a specialty managed care program designed to create a child- and family-centric delivery system specifically for Ohio children with complex behavioral health and multi-system needs. OhioRISE will feature enhanced care coordination and behavioral health services targeted toward this population.

Help Me Grow Home Visiting



Help Me Grow is a voluntary home visiting program that supports vulnerable children and families. Home visiting is a two-generational service that can improve outcomes for both children and their families. Home visiting can reduce parent stress, improve parenting skills, and help caregivers set and keep goals, such as pursuing an education. Home visitors also work with children to achieve developmental milestones, such as walking, speech development, and motor skills so that they are ready for kindergarten.

Ohio Family and Children First



Ohio Family and Children First (OFCF) is a partnership of state and local governments, communities, and families that enhances the well-being of Ohio’s children and families by building community capacity, coordinating systems and services, and engaging families. OFCF’s vision is for every child and family to thrive and succeed within healthy communities. Locally, county commissioners establish the 88 Family and Children First Councils to eliminate redundancy and bring resources together for planning, monitoring, and improving outcomes for families and children.

Statewide Training



The Ohio Child Welfare Training Program is a comprehensive, competency-based, in-service training system for PCSA staff, managers, and resource families. Training is critical to the development of a skilled children services workforce and to achieving safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for children. The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services is enhancing trainer and coaching supports, increasing access to topically relevant trainings, advancing new training content, and developing an on-demand onboarding process.

Multi-System Children/Youth Technical Assistance



Through investments in the 2020-2021 state operating budget, the Ohio Departments of Job and Family Services and Medicaid funded a state-level program to prevent custody relinquishment of children and youth solely for the purpose of obtaining needed treatment. State staff provide technical assistance to county Family and Children First Councils to better support the needs of multi-system youth, while eligible families can receive financial assistance to cover the costs of their child’s needed care.



A Vision for Equity



The Children Services Transformation Advisory Council recommends that Ohio commit to formally addressing the racial injustices and implicit biases that lead to inequities and disproportionality for children and families of color. Any transformation of Ohio’s children services system must include, goals that create a culture of inclusion, formalize equity strategies, and model anti-racist behaviors and decision-making.

This effort must begin with raising awareness and creating spaces for honest, transparent conversations about racism and inequities. The voices and experiences of those directly impacted must be at the core of all discussions and transformation planning, with a vision that embraces diversity and inclusion to better serve future generations.

Actionable, systemic change will require (1) education, (2) leadership development, (3) hiring and recruitment strategies, (4) policy and practice reviews, (5) empathy training, (6) access to racially and culturally competent services, (7) and communities of support. Most importantly, all transformation efforts moving forward must utilize data to tell stories, measure access and outcomes, create meaningful benchmarks, monitor progress, and promote transparency and accountability. The 37 recommendations outlined in this report must be implemented with an equity lens to improve outcomes for racial, ethnic, and underserved populations now and in the future.

The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services began addressing this priority in October 2020 by launching a human-centered design project, with support from the Columbus Foundation and in collaboration with ChiByDesign, an organization experienced in empowering community members to develop solutions to challenges affecting their lives. In the first phase of this work, feedback was sought from foster youth, parents, caregivers, and staff in both Franklin and Lucas counties. A preliminary report is scheduled to be issued by the end of 2020.

In Ohio, children of color are overrepresented in foster care, making up 32% of kids in custody when they are only 14% of Ohio’s child population.

Compared to white youth, Black youth are:

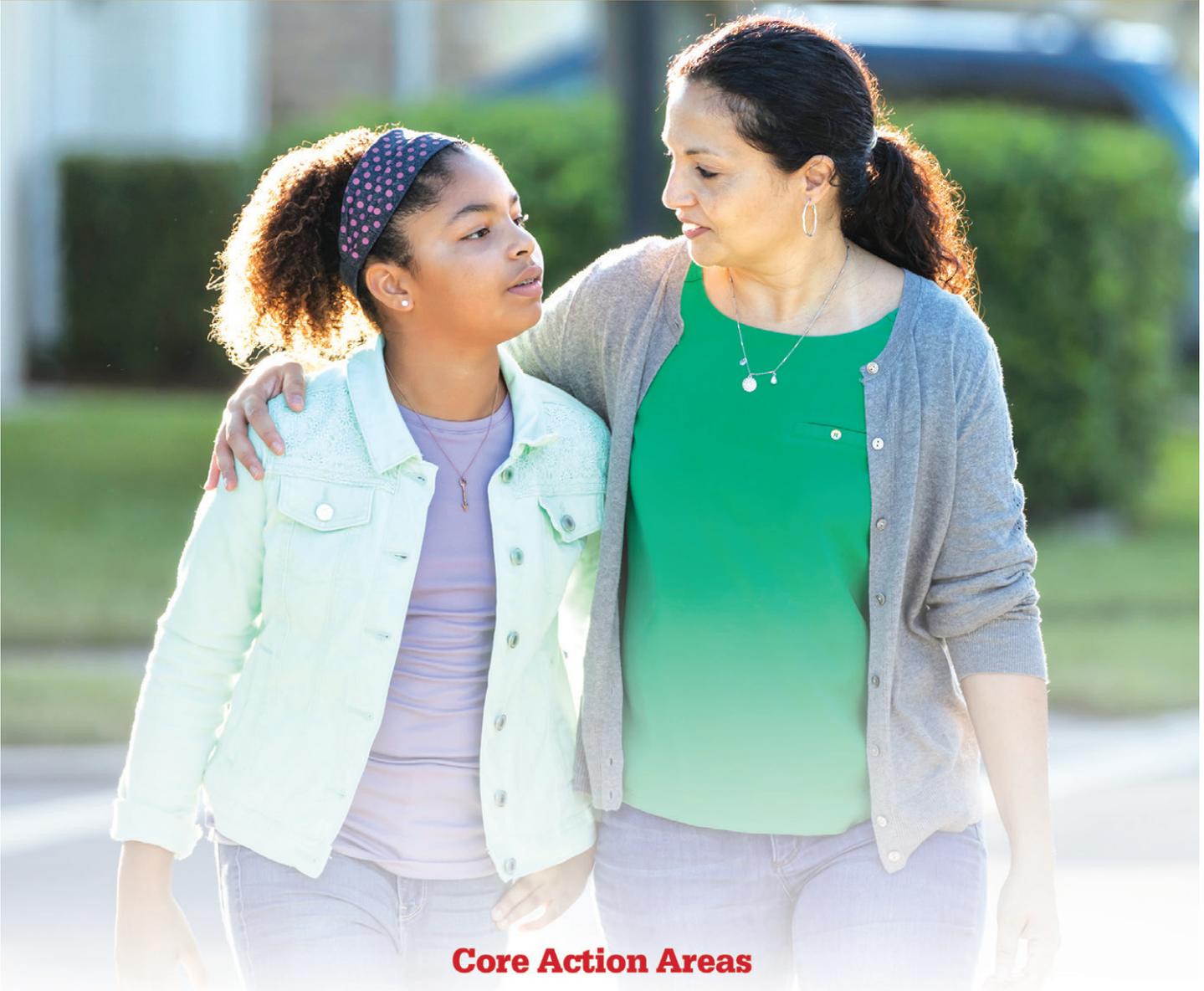
- 2.2 times more likely to be referred to children services
- 2.8 times more likely to have a report screened in for investigation
- 3 times more likely to enter out-of-home care.

Compared to white youth, Multi-Racial youth are:

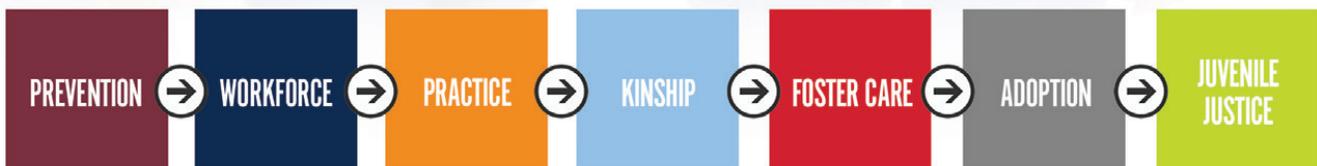
- 1.8 times more likely to be referred to children services
- 2 times more likely to have a report screened in for investigation
- 2.7 times more likely to enter out-of-home care.

(Source: Ohio ROM Reports, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Decision Point Report, January 2020)

Recommendations



Core Action Areas



The Children Services Transformation Advisory Council has prioritized the following **37 recommendations** to improve Ohio’s children services and foster care system.

These recommendations align with seven core action areas identified during the 10 forums as needing to be addressed.

PREVENTION



Prevention

All children should be raised in family-based settings and have a family to call their own prior to becoming an adult. Preventing child maltreatment requires a commitment to strengthening and supporting families so children can safely remain in their own homes and communities when possible. Nationally, the number of children in foster care has risen steadily since 2012. Ohio is no different, with nearly 30% more children in out-of-home care compared to less than a decade ago. A growing number of these children are infants, suggesting a link to Ohio's drug epidemic and highlighting the need for a preventive, community-based approach.

Families of color experience disproportionate involvement with children services and, once involved, unequal outcomes. As Ohio prioritizes prevention services, it will be imperative to create a culture of inclusion, to formalize equity strategies, and to model anti-racist behaviors and decision-making when addressing each following recommendation.

Recommendations

Invest in services, training, and supports for parents.

Develop a collaborative strategy that includes the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services and partner agencies to ensure that a broader array of support services – including trauma-informed care training, therapeutic services, and other supports – are available to families in their communities to help address stressful situations without the need for children services intervention.

Integrate and expand peer parent partner work in Ohio.

Expand access to peer mentoring services from parents who have lived experience with children services, to empower families and prevent children from entering foster care.

Elevate prenatal-to-three prevention and early intervention efforts.

Enhance prenatal-to-three prevention and early intervention efforts across Ohio's many child-serving systems. This should include the identification of barriers and efficiencies to increase enrollment, improve service delivery, and better coordinate care.

Establish a statewide, multisystem data exchange.

Establish a statewide data exchange platform to support at-risk families. Seamless state and local data sharing will enable government to make data-driven decisions and better support the needs of children and families.



WORKFORCE

Workforce

Positive outcomes for children and families involved in the children services system are often due to the strong commitment of a dedicated children services workforce. Building and maintaining a diverse, high-quality, professional, and stable workforce is integral to a children services agency's ability to protect children from abuse and neglect. However, recruitment and retention of high-quality staff are constant challenges in Ohio and across the country.

Caseworkers must often make critical decisions about the lives of vulnerable children and families, while working in stressful environments. Caseworkers can face high caseloads, inadequate supervision, safety concerns, and limited training and resources, all of which can affect the recruitment and retention of qualified staff.

The advisory council recognizes the need to improve caseworker readiness and retention through supportive work environments, removing administrative barriers, decreasing workers' safety risks, and clearly communicating expectations and standards.

Recommendations

■ Review and evaluate the University Partnership Program.

Review and evaluate the University Partnership Program to identify new opportunities to engage college students in the protective services system. The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services should leverage the Public Children Services Association of Ohio and the established University Partnership Program in this work. The program provides students with meaningful experiences that build commitment to the children services system and quality practice. The University Partnership Program has demonstrated success in attracting and retaining a high-quality workforce.

■ Establish a consistent onboarding program.

Launch a statewide onboarding program to ensure consistent integration of new staff into Ohio's public children services agencies.

■ Create a tiered program for caseworkers to help expand career pathways in children services.

Create expanded career pathway programs that empower children services caseworkers to continue learning and growing in their profession. The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services and partner agencies should build on best practices and successful approaches to create a tiered program that promotes career longevity.

■ Reduce organizational and state level red tape.

Evaluate unnecessary policies and regulations to expedite processes and decision-making. This will allow caseworkers to focus on improving outcomes for families and children.

■ Explore and identify technological solutions and support for caseworkers.

Identify technological solutions to support caseworkers and to better meet the unique needs of children and families involved with children services. This will enhance practice and support the workforce while ensuring better coordination of care.



PRACTICE

Practice

Promoting outcomes that strengthen children and families begins with a diverse workforce who can do their jobs efficiently, safely, and to the highest quality. Constituent engagement, foster care forum testimonials, and county children services agencies themselves indicated continuing concerns about inconsistent practice throughout the state and the need for additional guidance and support from the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

The organizational framework for children services varies from state to state, and that structure determines the balance of authority between state and local agencies. As indicated earlier, Ohio is one of nine county-administered states, which means counties have a considerable level of authority. This structure provides opportunities for the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services to focus on consistency in practice, articulating standards of excellence, and supporting continuous improvement of service delivery.

Practice is an action area that will continue to evolve over time and will require ongoing evaluation to support practices that are strength-based, family-centered, trauma-informed, and respectful of families' culture, values, customs, beliefs, and needs.

Recommendations

■ Create regional best practice hubs to drive training, technical assistance, coaching, communication, innovation, and collaboration.

Create regional hubs that maximize training, technical assistance, coaching, communication, innovation, and collaboration that align with specific state priorities, regional priorities, and the needs of children and families. This will help ensure that county agencies have strategies to support their workforces and enhance their organizational culture through policy and practice improvements.

■ **Strengthen consistent screening decision-making.**

Establish a team to review and evaluate screening decision-making practices throughout Ohio to create consistency through statewide standards for critical screening decisions.

■ **Institute a statewide children services ombudsman.**

Establish a state-level ombudsman to independently investigate and resolve complaints made by or on the behalf of children and families involved with children services. Ohio should have an independent outlet for individuals to voice their concerns with the foster care system.



Kinship

Research in Ohio and nationwide shows that children placed with kinship caregivers have greater stability, achieve permanency in fewer days, and are less likely to experience subsequent abuse or neglect. Children placed with kinship caregivers also experience less trauma and maintain meaningful connections with family members and kin. However, only about 27% of Ohio youth in care are placed with kinship caregivers. As children enter foster care, it is imperative that agencies improve efforts not only to locate kin, but to also better engage with them.

Kinship caregivers are a vital resource that historically have not received the same supports as other caregivers. Many kinship caregivers are asked to take on the full-time care of youth with little notice and minimal information. They often receive no training, little or no financial support, and insufficient information regarding the youth they are being asked to care for. Kinship caregivers should know what is expected of them and how the child has been or may be impacted from trauma.

Work has already begun to support a kinship culture in Ohio that prioritizes collaboration, advocacy, and supports. 30 Days to Family[®] Ohio is an intense, short-term intervention that aims to place children with safe and appropriate relatives within 30 days of entering care. The Ohio Kinship and Adoption Navigator Program (OhioKAN) supports formal and informal kinship caregivers and adoptive parents by providing information and referrals to supportive services. Additionally, the Department of Job and Family Services is developing a licensure path for kinship caregivers, opening the opportunity for an array of services and supports. This path will allow for waivers of certain licensure requirements. The advisory council recognizes the need to elevate the importance of kin and a child's family of origin.

Recommendations

■ **Integrate targeted kinship caregiver training through the Ohio Child Welfare Training Program.**

Create a new trauma-informed training program for kinship caregivers that emphasizes the importance of supportive birth parent and kinship relationships, along with co-parenting best practices.

■ **Establish statutory requirements and tools for family-finding and due diligence.**

Prioritize family connections for children by requiring the identification and engagement of kin from the onset of children services involvement, especially when out-of-home placement is needed. Family-finding efforts should: (a) prioritize father engagement, (b) utilize search engines to locate kin, (c) take into consideration the expectations of the court for review and documentation, (d) and clarify the circumstances under which family-finding efforts may be discontinued.

■ **Identify collaborative strategies for family-finding in other systems.**

Review current family-finding efforts across other systems, such as child support, and use these opportunities to strengthen Ohio's family-finding process.

■ **Establish a federal Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KGAP).**

Explore federally-subsidized KGAP, which can promote permanency for children who cannot return to their parents. KGAP provides ongoing financial support to kinship caregivers who commit to legal guardianship of a child in their care. Successful implementation of KGAP in Ohio requires a plan to license kinship caregivers.

■ Incorporate the terminology “resource parents” to define kinship and foster families involved in the children services system.

Understanding the importance of language and its impact on children and families involved in the children services system, the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services should align with federal guidance and prioritize using the term “resource parents” to define those who are providing care to youth in the foster care system.



Foster Care

Children enter foster care when they cannot remain safely at home or with a kinship caregiver. The foster care system is designed to be a support for children and their families, in order to achieve reunification. Unfortunately, the very act of entering foster care results in trauma for children. Agencies must strive to address not only children’s safety needs, but also their well-being and permanency needs. Without the understanding that all three needs are fundamental and interconnected, children entering foster care will continue to be further traumatized by the very system meant to protect and care for them.

On April 29, 2020, the federal Children’s Bureau issued Information Memorandum [ACYF-CB-IM-20-06](#), “Foster Care as a Support for Families.” It details the opportunity states have to change the foster care experience for children and parents, moving from a system that compounds trauma and prolongs permanency to one that supports healing, promotes timely reunification, and strengthens families. Adopting this new vision requires changing Ohio’s current system in a variety of ways. A child’s best interests must be central to any permanency decision, but reunification should be actively supported by all involved in the child’s life. This includes agency staff, judges, attorneys, service providers, foster parents, and others.

Current and new foster parents must understand that they have a responsibility to assist in the reunification process, in addition to providing care for the child. Positive relationships between birth and resource families lead to open communication, maintenance of a child’s routines and traditions, and stronger bonds between youth and their families.

Foster families also must be supported and recognized for the important role they play in the lives of the entire family. Foster parents need proper trauma-informed training, supports to assist in children’s day-to-day and treatment needs, and recognition as skilled members of the team. The recent passage of House Bill 8 of the 133rd General Assembly, signed into law by Governor DeWine on October 20, 2020, will ensure that foster parents receive quality training to support the youth in their homes.

For youth, foster care should not just provide them with a safe place to live, in a family setting whenever possible, but also ensure that they have a voice in their care and an opportunity for a normal childhood. Many youth in foster care report that they are unable to participate in age-appropriate activities. This denies them opportunities to develop the critical skills they need to transition into adulthood. Evidence shows that youth who age out of care have poorer outcomes, often stemming from inadequate preparation for transitioning into adulthood.

Recommendations

■ Establish a Foster Youth Bill of Rights.

Codify a clear set of rights that youth in foster care may expect of the children services system.

■ Establish a Resource Family Bill of Rights.

Codify a clear set of rights that kinship and foster caregivers may expect of the children services system.

■ Strengthen required normalcy standards for youth in foster care.

Strengthen Ohio statutes to ensure that all children in foster care can engage in a range of developmentally appropriate experiences necessary for healthy emotional and social development – called normalcy activities – as these experiences help youth build relationships and develop skills to prepare for adulthood.

■ Strengthen relationships between birth families and foster parents.

Refocus foster care recruitment, training, and rules to develop relationships between birth families and foster parents.

- **Develop trauma-informed training for all involved in the system, including resource families, caseworkers, agency staff, courts, service providers, mandated reporters (such as teachers and counselors), kinship caregivers, and parents.**

Having a shared understanding of trauma and how it relates to children and families is vital among all who are impacted by the children services system. Trauma-informed training, at a minimum, must include information about trauma and its impact on development.

- **Establish a statewide technology resource that can be easily accessed to find information, benefits, and resources for youth and resource families.**

Explore developing a tool to connect youth and caregivers to needed resources and information.

- **Elevate foster youth and caregiver recognition and appreciation.**

Establish a statewide campaign to recognize and celebrate foster youth and caregivers throughout Ohio.

- **Establish requirements for concurrent planning.**

Codify the requirement to pursue more than one permanency goal simultaneously, with full knowledge of all involved, to increase permanency outcomes so children do not linger in foster care. Foster caregivers who have cared for a child for an extended period of time could be considered kin for permanency purposes.

“Supporting people earlier in their lives will set them up for the rest of their lives to be independent and rely less on the others just to get by. Please consider looking at what we can do to better the lives of foster youth and to give us a fighting chance at normal and successful lives.”

– Jeremy Collier, Foster Alum



Adoption

All children deserve a safe, loving, and permanent home before exiting agency custody. About 3,000 Ohio children are awaiting adoption on any given day, and over 500 more are in planned permanent living arrangements (PPLA), at risk of aging out of care. Research shows that children who age out of the foster care system without permanency have poorer outcomes compared to other young adults.

When children cannot achieve permanency by reunifying with a parent or guardian, it is imperative that efforts continue to achieve permanency through adoption or legal guardianship. The state has implemented a variety of programs to help youth – particularly older youth – achieve permanency. About 65% of children in foster care are adopted by their foster parents each year. When a family makes the commitment to adopt a child, they should be supported both during and after the adoption process, to ensure that the unique needs of the child can be met long-term.

The advisory council recognizes the need to remove barriers to permanency by increasing the pool of adoptive families, building the workforce to process adoptive family applications, better informing and educating older youth about their options, and improving consistency in the adoption subsidy negotiation process.

Recommendations

- **Ensure that permanency education and youth voice are incorporated into a Foster Youth Bill of Rights and the Foster Youth Rights Handbook.**

Partner with youth organizations, Public Children Services Agencies, and other stakeholders to develop educational materials for older youth about their permanency options, including relational permanency. Ensure that youth are prepared for and invited to participate in meetings and court hearings.

■ **Expand child-centered recruitment efforts.**

Build on Ohio’s successful investments in child-centered permanency, such as Wendy’s Wonderful Kids and Youth Centered Permanency Roundtables. The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services should continue to work with both the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and Kinnect to expand these programs and increase legal and relational permanency for youth.

■ **Promote permanency planning by limiting the Planned Permanent Living Arrangement option.**

The Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (PPLA) is essentially long-term foster care and does not represent legal permanency for children. The state should reinforce existing statutory limits for PPLA, while also assessing the need to further limit this legal status.

■ **Ensure the successful implementation of the Statewide Foster Care and Adoption Assessor Registry.**

For many prospective adoptive families, the wait to become certified can take months. The state should evaluate the current home assessor workforce, develop home study completion measures, and adjust requirements for assessors, if needed.

■ **Strengthen and standardize adoption subsidy negotiation processes.**

The current adoption subsidy negotiation process for counties and new adoptive parents is burdensome and inconsistent. Consider a state/county hybrid model that prioritizes necessary long-term support, while preserving children’s permanency. Also consider implementing a non-retaliation provision in the Ohio Revised Code or Ohio Administrative Code.

■ **Evaluate the option of having the Post Adoption Special Services Subsidy (PASSS) administered by the Ohio Kinship and Adoption Navigator Program (OhioKAN).**

Explore moving the administration of the PASSS program to the state level to ensure consistency for adoptive parents throughout the state.



Juvenile Justice

The judicial branch is a valuable partner to the children services system. Children services agencies and Ohio’s courts work together to make decisions in the best interest of children and families, when court involvement is necessary to protect children. As Ohio continues its transformation efforts, the judicial branch’s engagement and support will be critical. Removing the stigma associated with abuse and neglect allegations can increase family engagement, reduce time to permanency, reduce litigation time, facilitate a focus on solutions and services, and normalize the process of requesting help.

Professionals representing both the children and the parents must be able to provide accurate and detailed information to the court. Youth in foster care deserve to have those looking out for their best interest gather all needed information before filing a recommendation to the court. Additionally, everyone involved must understand court timeframes and their impact on securing timely permanence. Increased support to achieve permanency for a child within these timeframes must be a collaborative effort by everyone involved.

The Advisory Council recognizes the need to work in partnership with the judicial branch to ensure that all parties are well-represented at court hearings, are informed about timeframes, and are working together to strengthen families and achieve permanency.

Recommendations

- **Collaborate with the Supreme Court of Ohio’s Advisory Committee on Children and Families to identify strategies to achieve greater accountability and increased communication with guardian ad litem programs to ensure better outcomes for children and families with children services court cases.**

The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services

will partner with the Supreme Court of Ohio's Advisory Committee on Children and Families and other associations to implement new amendments for Rule 48 of the Rules of Superintendence, related to guardian ad litem oversight and court processes. This will ensure cross-system awareness and rule effectiveness.

■ **Review and evaluate court-appointed special advocate and guardian ad litem programs to identify opportunities for recruitment and expansion.**

Explore current court-appointed special advocate and guardian ad litem programs to understand their strengths, weaknesses, training needs, and expansion opportunities.

■ **Support continued strategic collaborative efforts between the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services and the Supreme Court of Ohio's Advisory Committee on Children and Families to create an implementation plan for multidisciplinary legal representation for parents.**

Quality legal representation on behalf of all parties in the children services system improves outcomes for children and families. The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services and the Supreme Court of Ohio should explore the creation of a multidisciplinary legal representation model that mirrors the program designed by the Children's Bureau, within the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

■ **Strengthen guidance for all involved systems and parties in children services court cases to reinforce the established 12-month requirement for reunification and permanency, with possible six-month extensions when justified by family-specific needs.**

Partner with the Supreme Court of Ohio to review data regarding extensions, refiled proceedings, continuances, and appeals. Update guidance and improve education to courts and Public Children Services Agency staff regarding the use of extensions and the negative impact that unjustified extensions have on children and families. Explore options to utilize the Supreme Court of Ohio's public-facing dashboard, as well as other data-reporting mechanisms, to promote better outcomes and uniformity across counties.

■ **Review Public Children Services Agency legal representation structures throughout the state.**

Partner with the Public Children Services Association of Ohio, County Commissioners Association of Ohio,

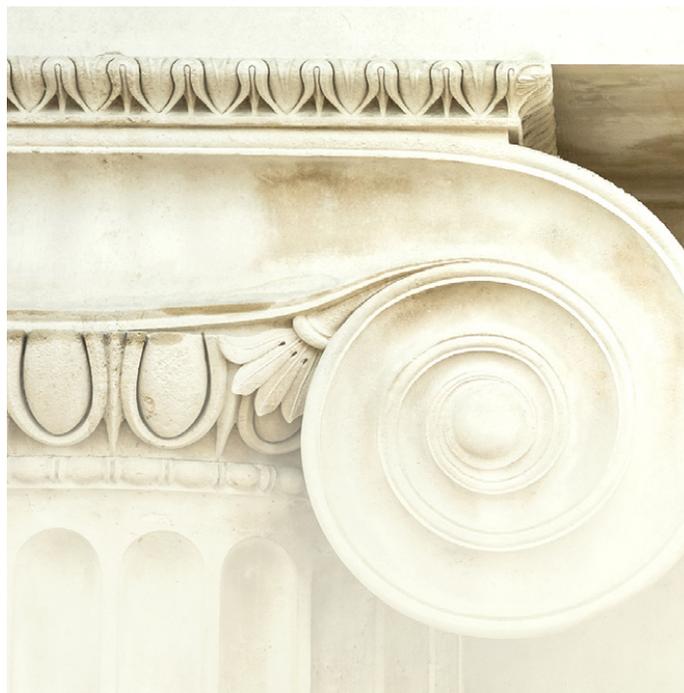
Ohio Prosecuting Attorneys Association, and Ohio Association of Juvenile Judges to evaluate county models for legal representation. Determine best practices and opportunities for strengthened county partnerships that result in accountable, collaborative decision-making processes.

■ **Support the Supreme Court of Ohio Advisory Committee on Children and Families' recommendation to implement a Child in Need of Protective Services (CHIPS) court framework to replace Ohio's current abuse, neglect, and dependency court system.**

The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services should continue partnering with the Supreme Court of Ohio to implement a CHIPS model that provides a child-centered, family-focused alternative to the abuse, neglect, and dependency model currently utilized.

"In December, our county was fortunate to host a site for the Foster Care Transformation meetings which afforded some of our volunteers an opportunity to attend the event. The testimonies given were quite moving. Our court has increased efforts to ensure foster parents are notified of hearings, their right to attend and/or make a statement. Our CASA volunteers have been pleased with this push, feeling that the transformation may have played a part in it. Many CASA volunteers have even facilitated getting the foster parents' statements in front of the jurists."

- Melissa Perduk, Executive Director of Warren County CASA



A Final Word From Ohio Department of Job and Family Services Director Kimberly Hall



A Commitment to Transformation



I commend all who were involved in the development of these recommendations; for the long hours and challenging discussions that were necessary to comprehensively review Ohio's children services and foster care system. Your special expertise, personal experiences, and unique backgrounds have been invaluable.

Continuing the momentum of this effort, and ensuring lasting change for Ohio's children and families, will be a top priority that the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services stands ready to carry forward. This will require continued collaboration and partnerships with our county children services agencies, foster youth, parents, caregivers, the private sector, cross-system agencies, association leaders, and elected officials. As Director of the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services,

I am 100% committed to these efforts. Next steps will include communicating a core governance structure to help us lead this work, define the implementation strategies, ensure community involvement, and design the necessary metrics to monitor improved outcomes. Again, I thank the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council members for their dedication to Ohio's children and families. I look forward to the next phase of our journey toward transformation.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kim Hall". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Kimberly Hall
Director
Ohio Department of Job and Family Services

*Safe Children.
Stable Homes.
Strong Communities.*



OFFICE OF
**CHILDREN SERVICES
TRANSFORMATION**

Final Recommendations of the
Children Services Transformation Advisory Council

November 2020



MIKE DEWINE
GOVERNOR OF OHIO



JON HUSTED
LT. GOVERNOR OF OHIO

www.Governor.Ohio.gov