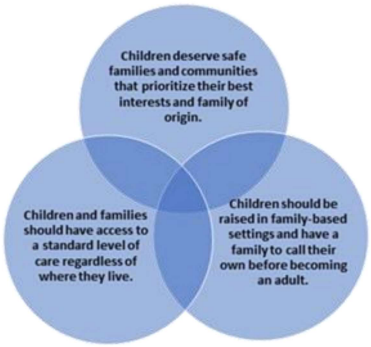


Children Services Transformation Advisory Council Recommendations

Prevention

Invest in services, training and supports for parents. Develop a collaborative strategy that includes ODJFS 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 programs designed to provide peer mentoring with other parents with lived experience with the children services system to empower families and prevent children from entering foster care.

Elevate prenatal-to-three prevention and early intervention efforts. Create collaborative strategies to further evaluate and strengthen prenatal-to-three prevention and early intervention cross-system efforts that prioritize the diverse needs of children and families involved in the children services system. This should include the identification of barriers and necessary processes that will lead to more effective, efficient, and ethical coordination of services for children and families referred for early intervention services.

Establish a statewide, multisystem data exchange. Establish a statewide data exchange platform to support at risk families. This will ensure state and local agencies are able to share information with one another, so they will be better equipped to meet the unique needs of children and families in the children services system to better coordinate their care.

Workforce

Review and evaluate the University Partnership Program (UPP). Review and evaluate the University Partnership Program (UPP) to identify and expand opportunities for prospective students. ODJFS should leverage the Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO) and the established University Partnership Program (UPP) in this work. The program will provide students meaningful experiences that build commitment and capacity for improving the children services system, with the goal of attracting and retaining a high-quality workforce.

Establish a consistent onboarding program. Launch a statewide onboarding program for integrating new employees into the Public Children Services Agencies.

Create a tiered program for caseworkers to help expand career pathways in children services. Create expanded career pathway programs that prepare and support children services caseworkers to promote career longevity. This strategy should include ODJFS and partner agencies building on known best practices and successful innovative approaches to create a tiered program for Ohio.

Reduce organizational and state level red tape. Evaluate unnecessary red tape and duplication 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 technology 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

Create regional best practice hubs to drive training, technical assistance (TA), coaching, communication, innovation and collaboration. Create regional hubs that maximize training, TA, coaching, communication, innovation, and collaboration that align with specific state priorities, regional priorities, and the needs of children and families. This will help ensure there are strategies to support the workforce and enhance agency 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 and to formulate standards associated with critical screening decisions statewide.

Institute a statewide children services ombudsman. Establish a state level ombudsman to act as an independent entity for the investigation and resolution of 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

Integrate targeted kinship caregiver training through the Ohio Child Welfare Training Program (OCWTP). Strengthen and create new trauma informed kinship caregiver training, that includes a focus on the importance of supportive birth parent and kinship relationships and 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, when out-of-home placement is needed, to include: (a) prioritizing father engagement (b) exploration of search engine tools to locate kin (c) expectations of the court for review and documentation (d) and details of 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 and agencies to identify gaps and challenges, with a goal to formulate strategies that support cross-system family finding priorities and activities.

Establish a federal Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KGAP). Explore a federally subsidized KGAP that promotes permanency for children who cannot return to their parents. KGAP will provide ongoing financial support to kin who make a commitment of legal guardianship to a child in their care. The recommendation to establish KGAP would only work in tandem with a plan to license kin 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, ODJFS 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

Establish a Foster Youth Bill of Rights. Establish in law a clearly articulated set of rights that youth in foster care may expect of the children services system.

Establish a Resource Family Bill of Rights. Establish in law a clearly articulated 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, as these experiences help youth build relationships and develop skills to prepare for adulthood.

Strengthen relationships between birth families and foster parents. Establish changes in foster care recruitment, training and rules to support relationships between birth families and foster parents to create reunification-focused relationships.

Develop trauma informed training for all involved in the system including resource families, caseworkers, agency staff, courts, service providers, mandated reporters (e.g. teachers, counselors), kin and parents. The training at a minimum must include understanding 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 different types of technology to create a tool that is easy to use, up to date and guides a youth and/or caregiver to resources including available benefits and supports, necessary qualifications/eligibility requirements and application details.

Elevate foster youth and caregiver recognition and appreciation. Establish a statewide strategy that prioritizes recognition and appreciation for foster youth and caregivers throughout Ohio.

Establish requirements for concurrent planning. Institute statute that promotes the pursuit of more than one permanency goal simultaneously, with full knowledge of all involved, to increase permanency outcomes so children do not linger in foster care if reunification is not achieved.

Adoption

Ensure permanency education and youth voice is incorporated into a Foster Youth Bill of Rights and the Foster Youth Rights Handbook. Partner with youth organizations, PCSAs and other stakeholders to develop educational materials for older youth regarding permanency options, including relational permanency. Ensure youth are prepared for and invited to participate in meetings and court hearings.

Expand child centered recruitment efforts. Build on Ohio's successful investments including the evidence-based Wendy's Wonderful Kids child-centered recruitment model and the Youth Centered Permanency Roundtables (YCPRT) program. ODJFS should continue to work with both the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption (DTFA) and Kinnect to expand each program in order to increase legal and relational permanency for youth.

Promote permanency planning by limiting the option of Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (PPLA). PPLA is essentially long-term foster care and does not represent legal permanency for a child. The state of Ohio needs to reinforce existing limits while also assessing the need to further limit this legal status and support and promote permanency planning early on and throughout the life of the case.

Ensure the successful implementation of the Statewide Foster Care and Adoption Assessor Registry. Develop a utilization plan that includes consideration for resource gaps and the impact on home study completion data measures. Consider modifying statute to expand who qualifies as an assessor.

Strengthen and standardize adoption subsidy negotiation processes. Reduce the burdensome and inconsistent negotiation process for counties and new adoptive parents that prioritizes necessary long-term support and preserves the child's permanency. Consider a state/county hybrid model and consider implementing a non-retaliation provision in ORC or OAC.

Evaluate the option of having the Post Adoption Special Services Subsidy (PASSS) program administered by the Ohio Kinship and Adoption Navigator Program (OhioKAN). Explore moving the administration of the PASSS program to the state level to ensure consistent processes and decision-making for adoptive parents throughout the state.

Juvenile Justice System

Collaborate with the Supreme Court of Ohio to identify strategies to achieve greater accountability and increased communication with Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) programs to ensure better outcomes for children and families with children services court cases. ODJFS will partner with the Supreme Court of Ohio and other necessary associations to implement the new amendments for Rule 48 of the Rules of Superintendence related to GAL oversite and court processes to ensure cross-system awareness and rule effectiveness.

Review and evaluate Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) programs to identify opportunities for recruitment and expansion. Explore the best practices and opportunities of the current CASA and GAL programs, as they relate to court involved children services cases, to understand the strengths, weaknesses, training needs and expansion opportunities of each program.

Support continued strategic collaborative efforts between ODJFS and the Supreme Court of Ohio 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 the outcomes for children and families. In accordance with the priorities of the Children's Bureau and the investment of federal IV-E dollars into a multidisciplinary legal representation model for parents and children, ODJFS and the Supreme Court of Ohio will ensure the creation of an implementation plan to replicate this model.

Strengthen guidance for all involved systems and parties of a children services court case to reinforce the established 12-month timeline requirement for reunification and permanency, with consideration for justified family specific needs for 6-month extensions. Partner with the Supreme Court of Ohio to review data regarding extensions, refiled proceedings, continuances and appeals. Update guidance and improve education to court and PCSA staff regarding the use of extensions and the negative impact unjustified decisions that delay permanency have on children and families. Explore options to utilize the Supreme Court of Ohio's public facing dashboard, as well as other quality data reporting mechanisms, to promote better outcomes and uniformity across counties.

Review PCSA legal representation structures throughout the state. Partner with the Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO), County Commissioners Association of Ohio, Ohio Prosecuting Attorneys Association, and Ohio Association of Juvenile Judges to evaluate the various county models for legal representation throughout the state to determine best practices and opportunities for strengthened county partnerships that result in accountable, collaborative decision-making processes and alignment.

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. ODJFS 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 under which the state currently operates.