

# The Supreme Court of Ohio

## MEMORANDUM

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**TO:** Chief Justice Sharon L. Kennedy

**CC:** Robert Horner, III, Administrative Director  
Stephanie Graubner Nelson, Director, Office of Court Services

**FROM:** Hon. Linda T. Teodosio, Summit County Common Pleas Court, Juvenile Division  
Chair of the Advisory Committee on Children & Families  
Kyana Pierson, Manager, Children & Families Section

**DATE:** January 31, 2025

**SUBJECT:** 2024 Annual Report on the Advisory Committee on Children & Families

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The Advisory Committee was created in 2002 to advise the Supreme Court of Ohio and its staff regarding promoting policy recommendations, establishing programs, and delivering services for children and families in Ohio's domestic relations, juvenile, and probate courts. The Advisory Committee provides guidance on statewide rules and uniform practice standards, develops educational resources for local courts, stakeholders, and the public, and conducts training for judicial officers and court staff.

The Advisory Committee addresses a broad spectrum of family law areas, including child protection, kinship care, child custody, parental rights, termination of marriage, juvenile justice, and adult guardianship. The work is completed through its four subcommittees and their associated workgroups.

Below is a summary of the Advisory Committee's accomplishments in 2024.

### Subcommittee on Adult Guardianship (SAG)

SAG, chaired by newly-retired Judge Dixilene Park, Stark County Common Pleas Court, Probate Division, makes recommendations for standards of practice, data collection, and monitoring protocols in adult guardianship matters. Members of this subcommittee represent local probate courts, guardianship organizations, guardianship advocates, legal aid, the Ohio Department of Aging, the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities, the Ohio Department of Job & Family Services, and the Ohio Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services.

One of SAG's annual responsibilities is to host the Probate Preconference that kicks off the Ohio Association of Probate Judges' Summer Conference. In 2024, the topic focused on ways probate

courts can utilize technology to increase access to litigants and improve court efficiency in probate courts. Presenters discussed various ways technology can be used to process and monitor guardianship cases, as well as strategies for expanding the public's access to legal information.

The scope of the Subcommittee will expand next year to include all vulnerable persons, not just adult guardianships. The updated subcommittee will remain focused on promoting the least restrictive alternative, while still preserving the rights, dignity, and well-being of *all* vulnerable individuals.

#### Subcommittee on Family Law Reform Implementation (FLRI)

FLRI is co-chaired by Magistrate Serpil Ergun, Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Court, Domestic Relations Division, and retired Judge Denise McColley, Henry County Common Pleas Court, Domestic and Juvenile Divisions. The Subcommittee was formed to implement recommendations from the Advisory Committee's *2005 Report and Recommendations on Family Law Reform*. Members of FLRI represent local domestic relations and juvenile courts, family law practitioners, and legal aid.

FLRI released two online resources. The first, *Domestic Relations Resource Guide*, was created to serve as the primary curriculum for new domestic relations judges and magistrates during the jurisdiction-specific portions of New Judge and New Magistrate Orientation. This online resource contains active links to relevant statutes, rules, and case law. The other online resources focused on limited scope representation (LSR) which allows a lawyer to provide a specific set of legal tasks as determined by the client instead of full representation. The *Limited Scope Representation Guide* is designed for lawyers, litigants, and courts. It outlines the permissible rules under which lawyers can engage in LSR, provides sample checklists and engagement letters, and identifies example case types where it may be appropriate to use. Courts, local bar associations, and legal aid organizations are encouraged to include a link to this resource on their websites.

#### Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice

The Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice was established in 2015 to improve the standards, practices, and effectiveness of Ohio's courts handling juvenile delinquency cases. This Subcommittee is chaired by Judge Beth Gill, Franklin County Common Pleas Court, Domestic Relations and Juvenile Divisions, and includes members representing juvenile courts, juvenile prosecutors, Office of the Ohio Public Defender, Ohio Department of Youth Services, and Ohio Department of Education & Workforce.

In 2024, the Subcommittee continued its focus on school attendance promoting a holistic approach whereby schools and courts collaborate with community partners to address the underlying cause of school attendance issues. These collaborative efforts were highlighted by several local courts conducting school attendance workshops with their school administrators, school resource officers, and local providers to discuss best practices and a venue for open dialogue. Many of these gatherings incorporated the *Developing an Effective School Attendance Program* toolkit developed by the Subcommittee published in 2023.

The Subcommittee also discussed the benefits of establishing Youth Advisory Boards in local juvenile detention centers as a means of incorporating youth voice into the policies and practices of these facilities. The creation of such a board at the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Detention Center and its early successes were featured. Additionally, the Subcommittee examined tools juvenile courts can use to support data-driven decision-making and reviewed the *Juvenile Justice Bench Cards* used by new judicial officers.

#### Subcommittee on Responding to Child Abuse, Neglect, and Dependency (CAND)

The Subcommittee is co-chaired by Magistrate Michelle Edgar, Fairfield County Common Pleas Court, Probate and Juvenile Divisions, and Jeff Van Deusen, Ohio Department of Children & Youth. It brings together diverse stakeholders to improve court practices and address critical issues facing Ohio's children and families involved in the child welfare system. CAND members represent courts, state and local child welfare agencies, attorneys, mental health care professionals, education, developmental disabilities, law enforcement, and other child-serving organizations.

CAND serves as the steering committee to the Court's Court Improvement Plan (CIP) grant and the Ohio Department of Children & Youth's (DCY) Children's Justice Act grant, both funded by the Children's Bureau at the United States Department of Health & Human Services. These grant dollars are used to fund various projects supported by CAND and Court staff.

2024 marked the third year of the Multi-Disciplinary Representation (MDR) project. Teams in Clark, Cuyahoga, Erie, Stark, Summit, and Wayne Counties have created teams of attorneys, social workers, and parent advocates to reduce trauma and improve outcomes for families in the child welfare system. They have achieved notable progress, including specialized training, targeted interventions, improved data-sharing, and reduced recidivism rates in several counties. This success was highlighted at a two-day MDR convening held in November. Participants engaged in skill-building sessions, team-building activities, and discussions on funding opportunities and long-term strategies. The event fostered collaboration and offered valuable networking opportunities for participants statewide. As the MDR program enters its fourth and final year, efforts will focus on ensuring sustainability in pilot counties and creating tools for statewide implementation.

The Dual Status Youth initiative focuses on cross-system collaboration and tailored programs for dually involved youth – those youth engaged in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. This initiative began in 2019 and is a collaboration with the Robert F. Kennedy National Resource Center for Juvenile Justice (RFK). RFK provides technical assistance to sites in Clark, Champaign, Fairfield, and Hancock counties, which have demonstrated strong leadership, tailored interventions, enhanced data sharing, and multi-disciplinary training. Ohio's successes were nationally recognized in an RFK-published article and a webinar featuring Judges Kristen K. Johnson, Hancock County Common Pleas Court, Probate and Juvenile Divisions, and Katrine Lancaster, Clark County Common Pleas Court, Domestic Relations and Juvenile Divisions, who shared insights on supporting dual status youth. The Dual Status Youth initiative will expand to include Coshocton, Hamilton, Franklin, and Union Counties next year.

CIP funding helped sponsor the Ohio CASA's 29th Annual "Celebrate Kids!" Conference in Columbus. More than 700 court-appointed special advocates (CASA), judges, attorneys, and child welfare professionals from across Ohio attended the three-day event featuring training on topics such as youth aging out of foster care, domestic violence, poverty, and juvenile human trafficking. Federal grant dollars also supported the creation of additional local CASA programs, the Judicial College's guardian ad litem education program, and the Ohio Youth Advisory Board.

Court staff partnered with DCY to host the first-ever Kids Summit, bringing together over 800 county leaders from across the state. Attendees included representatives from juvenile courts, children services, law enforcement, and family advocates gathering to learn how to streamline services for children and families. Key speakers included Chief Justice Sharon L. Kennedy and Governor Michael DeWine stressing the importance of local child-serving agencies to more efficiently work together. The summit provided an opportunity for collaboration, learning, and the sharing of innovative strategies to improve outcomes for Ohio's children and families.

#### Additional Work of the Advisory Committee

The Advisory Committee formed a workgroup to examine legal deserts in family law jurisdictions. The workgroup seeks to identify ways to attract, support, and retain qualified attorneys dedicated to the practice of family law. To date, the workgroup has examined law school attendance and graduation data, Ohio attorney statistics, and current initiatives aimed at increasing indigent defense. The workgroup will work to identify strategies to promote the practice of family law to law students and newly-licensed attorneys and retain current family law practitioners.

The Advisory Committee, through the Court's Children & Families Section, conducted several trainings for judicial officers, court staff, clerks, law enforcement, and other multi-disciplinary justice partners. Court Café lunch-and-learn webinars featured topics such as community-based juvenile diversion programs, school district financial responsibility, parenting coordination, safe haven babies, and rule amendments.

Thank you for your support and the continued opportunity to improve the delivery of court services to Ohio's children and families. We welcome your feedback and suggestions on the Advisory Committee's work.