

The Supreme Court of Ohio

MEMORANDUM

TO: Chief Justice Sharon L. Kennedy

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

FROM: Judge Matthew Puskarich, Chair, Harrison County Court of Common Pleas,
Juvenile and Probate Division
Kyana Pierson, Deputy Director, Office of Court Services

DATE: December 19, 2025

SUBJECT: 2025 Annual Report on the Advisory Committee on Children & Families

The Advisory Committee on Children & Families (“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 work groups.

Below is a summary of the Advisory Committee’s accomplishments in 2025.

Subcommittee on Family Law Reform Implementation

The Subcommittee on Family Law Reform Implementation (“FLRI”) was formed to implement recommendations from the Advisory Committee’s *2005 Report and Recommendations on Family Law Reform*. FLRI is chaired by Judge Randall Fuller, Delaware County Court of Common, Domestic Relations Division, and members represent local domestic relations and juvenile courts, family law practitioners, and legal aid.

The Subcommittee updated the *Planning for Parenting Time Guide: Ohio’s Guide for Parents Living Apart*, a resource first published in 2012, to assist divorcing parents establish

parenting time schedules as they transition into shared parenting. The guide's audience was expanded to include never-married parents. New strategies for communicating with children were added that reflect advances in technology that easily allow for texting and video communication, and the sample parenting time schedules were updated.

Building on the *Planning for Parenting Time Guide*, FLRI established the Parenting Time Work Group to explore, from the court's perspective, the intersection of parenting time and a child's best interests, addressing the evolving needs of families and identifying strategies to improve court involvement. The Work Group began working on resources that aim to ensure judicial outcomes remain practical, adaptable, and responsive to Ohio's diverse family structures.

Additionally, FLRI's Juvenile Forms Work Group completed a draft of a new uniform "Motion to Intervene" Form. This form was written in clear, plain language and includes instructive and general information to enhance the user's comprehension of legal processes and can be used in both juvenile and domestic relations courts. The draft motion form was given to non-legal professionals for user testing, a best practice in form drafting, to help bridge the gap in understanding for self-represented litigants and improve efficiency in case processing. The form was submitted to the Court's Commission on the Rules of Practice & Procedure and is moving through the Commission's formal approval process. The Work Group drafted two additional new forms, a "Motion to Set Aside a Magistrate's Order" and an "Objection to a Magistrate's Decision," which will be further reviewed based upon public comments received from the "Motion to Intervene" and formally submitted to the Commission on the Rules of Practice & Procedure in 2026.

Lastly, FLRI drafted amendments to Superintendence Rule 48 which outlines standards of practice and responsibilities for guardians ad litem ("GAL"). The Subcommittee proposed revisions to clarify that attorneys could share the GAL report with their clients and strengthen warning language regarding the unauthorized disclosure of the GAL report. These changes will take effect in 2026.

FLRI continues to engage in efforts ensuring that family law processes are responsive, efficient, and equitable for all court users. The Subcommittee looks forward to building upon this progress in 2026, continuing its collaborative work to address emerging challenges and strengthen family law practice statewide.

Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice

The Juvenile Justice Subcommittee was established in 2015 to improve the standards, practices, and effectiveness of Ohio's courts handling juvenile delinquency cases. Members of the Subcommittee represent juvenile courts, juvenile prosecutors, Office of the Ohio Public Defender, Ohio Department of Youth Services, and Ohio Department of Education & Workforce.

Throughout the year, the Subcommittee convened to advance dialogue and collaboration around key issues impacting juvenile justice. Discussion revolved around the evolving needs of

emerging adults within the justice system, with an update from the Ohio team who participated in the “National Convening on the State Court’s Role in Effective Justice for Young People” hosted by the National Center for State Courts. Members also examined the impact of recent changes to school attendance laws, innovative local programs supporting youth rehabilitation, and other legislative and rule changes relevant to juvenile justice practices.

The Subcommittee also discussed the recommendations from the Court’s Task Force on Juvenile Diversion, which was formed to ensure courts have transparent and effective diversion programs that redirect youth from formal court involvement but also ensure victims and communities are protected. Many of the recommendations directed to the Supreme Court will be implemented by the Subcommittee, such as drafting a rule that requires local courts to adopt a local rule and written guidelines for their pre-initial appearance diversion program. The Subcommittee also began updating the Judicial Guide to Juvenile Diversion to add additional best practices, sample local rule of pre-initial appearance diversion, and resources regarding Marsy’s Law.

Additionally, the Subcommittee began developing a practical guide to assist judicial officers in drafting effective and comprehensive orders when a child is placed outside the home following a delinquency adjudication. The publication aims to promote clarity, consistency, and alignment with best practices in youth-centered justice.

The group continues to serve as a vital forum for cross-sector collaboration, policy review, and advocacy aimed at building a more equitable and effective juvenile justice system. Looking ahead to 2026, the Subcommittee plans to deepen its engagement with community partners and pursue targeted initiatives that support youth development, reduce recidivism, and promote restorative approaches to justice.

Subcommittee on Responding to Child Abuse, Neglect, & Dependency

The Subcommittee on Responding to Child Abuse, Neglect, & Dependency (“CAND”) brings together diverse stakeholders to improve court practices and address critical issues facing Ohio’s children and families involved in the child welfare system. Co-chaired by Magistrate Michelle Edgar, Fairfield County Court of Common Pleas, Probate & Juvenile Division, and Jeff Van Deusen, Ohio Department of Children & Youth (“DCY”), CAND has representatives from 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 for the Court’s Court Improvement Program (“CIP”) grant and DCY’s Children’s Justice Act (“CJA”) grant, both funded by the Children’s Bureau at the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (“HHS”). These grants empower the judiciary to lead initiatives that strengthen legal processes and uphold the rule of law in child welfare cases.

The Reasonable Efforts Work Group is charged with identifying strategies to ensure that federal requirements for reasonable efforts findings are consistently understood and applied in

judicial orders. This group has planned two virtual training academies for judges, magistrates, and attorneys on making and documenting reasonable efforts findings. These trainings will occur in February 2026 and will focus on a combination of presentations and interactive simulations.

The Emancipation Support & Transition Work Group focused on improving support for older youth transitioning out of foster care, including updating the *Bridges Program Toolkit for Judicial Use* to reflect recent program changes, sharing best court practices, and identifying opportunities for youth voice and specialized court programming. These revisions will be finalized in 2026.

2025 marked the fourth year of the Multi-Disciplinary Legal Representation (“MDR”) pilot project. 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. The Year 3 Pilot Program Evaluation highlighted continued growth in team collaboration, early signs of improved family engagement and system outcomes, and increasing statewide interest in replicating the MDR model. Findings informed technical assistance strategies and positioning Ohio as a leader in multidisciplinary legal representation. To build on this progress, the Court extended support for pilot sites through an additional year to ensure program continuity while also helping courts prepare for long-term sustainability.

The Dually Involved Youth (“DIY”) Initiative was expanded to continue building on its success since 2019. Partnering with the National Resource Center for the Transformation of Youth Justice (“NRC”), the initiative now includes pilot sites in Coshocton, Hamilton, Franklin, and Union counties, focused on cross-system collaboration and tailored programs for dually involved youth – those engaged in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. NRC continued to provide technical assistance to existing pilot 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 have received national recognition through published articles, a national webinar, and presentations at the Transformation of Youth Justice Symposium. The DIY project entered its second year of technical assistance with four new pilot sites, while the original four counties transitioned to ongoing support through convenings and peer learning communities.

CIP launched two new grant opportunities designed to strengthen court and child welfare collaboration. The CIP Technology Grant supports courts in reducing barriers to justice, ensuring meaningful participation in hearings, and maintaining operations during emergencies. Juvenile and probate courts were given the opportunity to apply for funding to strengthen virtual hearing capabilities, enhance digital communication with families and attorneys, support right-to-counsel awareness, and improve disaster preparedness. Up to ten sites may be awarded funds. The Abuse, Neglect and Dependency (“A/N/D”) Mediation Grant provides funding for courts to establish or expand mediation programs that promote early resolution, reduce court backlog, and enhance family engagement particularly in A/N/D cases and for youth preparing for emancipation. Up to five sites were planned for award.

Ohio's Round 4 of the Child and Family Services Review ("CFSR") began in April 2025. The CFSR aims to ensure that state and local agencies comply with federal requirements that promote child safety, well-being, and permanency. CAND worked with HHS's Administration for Children & Families and DCY to strengthen partnerships among the judiciary, state child welfare agencies, and legal practitioners representing parents, children, and agencies. A CFSR legal/judicial child welfare specialist provided an overview of Round 4 to the members at our CAND meetings. Additionally, Court staff led in the coordination of the legal and judicial community interviews as part of the CFSR information gathering efforts.

In 2025, CIP provided sponsorship support for the Ohio Court Appointed Special Advocates ("CASA") "Celebrate Kids!" Conference, which achieved record success with over 687 attendees from across the state. The sponsorship allowed CASA volunteers, judges, court staff, and practitioners to attend. The conference not only strengthened the knowledge and resilience of those working on behalf of abused and neglected children but also reinvigorated their commitment to improving outcomes for Ohio's families.

CASA programs in Ohio strengthened and expanded their reach in 2025, broadening access to high-quality advocacy for children in abuse, neglect, and dependency cases with the assistance of the CIP grant. Athens County CASA extended services into Hocking County, while CASA of Southern Ohio grew into Lawrence County. Medina County's CASA program transitioned to an umbrella program under the Children's Center of Medina County, and Mahoning County CASA evolved from a court-based program to a nonprofit organization. Today, CASA volunteers serve more than 9,000 children statewide. These expansions highlight Ohio CASA's unwavering commitment to ensuring that more children benefit from consistent, trained volunteer advocacy across Ohio.

CIP also works with the Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board ("OHIO YAB"), which brings youth with lived experience in foster care together to guide and inform system improvements. CIP supported OHIO YAB quarterly meetings where members share their firsthand experiences with state agency representatives to shape child welfare system policies. Additionally, CIP assisted with the annual Leadership & Life Skills Summit, which focused on essential skills young people need as they transition into adulthood, such as college and vocational skill building, job interviewing, financial management, and effective communication.

Finally, the Court planned quarterly OhioRISE (Resilience through Integrated Systems & Excellence) roundtables beginning in December 2025. These sessions are designed to give court staff and stakeholders a space to ask questions, share experiences, and learn from one another on how to collaborate with OhioRISE.

These collective efforts reflect CAND's leadership in guiding the judiciary to advance meaningful improvements in Ohio's child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

Through these efforts, the Subcommittee reaffirmed its commitment to advancing initiatives that strengthen family law practice statewide, improve outcomes for families, and uphold the principles of fairness and accessibility in the administration of justice.

Subcommittee on Vulnerable Persons

2025 marked the initial year for the Subcommittee on Vulnerable Persons (“SVP”). Chaired by Judge James Walther, Lorain County Court of Common Pleas, Probate Division, it is an expansion of scope from the prior Subcommittee on Adult Guardianship. The SVP seeks to protect, empower, and advocate for vulnerable individuals — especially those living with mental illness or in need of guardianship or adoption — by promoting their legal rights, dignity, and well-being, and by advancing person-centered practices that promote least restrictive alternatives, personal autonomy, and community integration. The members represent courts, the Ohio Departments of Aging, Behavioral Health Developmental Disabilities, Job & Family Services, Disability Rights Ohio, and other stakeholder groups.

Just in its infancy, SVP began work on expanding awareness and use of assisted outpatient treatment (“AOT”), which allows for a person with a severe mental illness to receive treatment while under the supervision of a community treatment provider. The AOT Work Group shepherded the adoption of Superintendence Rule 79.01, which outlines standards for probate courts in administering an AOT program. There was also a companion revision to Judicial Conduct Rule 2.9 to carve out an exception to the ex parte communication prohibition for judicial officers and court staff for purposes of an AOT program. The Work Group began development of an AOT toolkit and planning for a training for probate judges, local alcohol, drug, and mental health services boards, and other community members for 2026. These efforts were born out of a recommendation by the Governor’s Work Group on Competency Restoration to provide alternative treatment options for individuals with a severe mental illness rather than incarceration or hospitalization.

Looking ahead, members identified potential future projects around topics such as adult protective services, the use of guardians ad litem in probate court, the “pink slip” process, and training for court investigators.

Additional Work of the Advisory Committee

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 use of plain language, DCY’s Child Match Program, the Crime Victims Compensation Fund Program, legislative changes, and rule amendments.