

Minutes

**Child Welfare Improvement Committee
Indiana Court Improvement Program
January 24, 2025 9:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.
Remote via Zoom**

Members Present:

- ☒ Tatiana Alvarez, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Mag. Pauline Beeson, Marion Superior Court
- ☐ Mag. Sally Berish, Boone Circuit Court
- ☐ Topacio Boyd, Parent Advisor
- ☐ Mag. Ashley Colborn, St. Joseph Probate Court
- ☐ Mag. Eleanor Finnell, Marion Circuit Court
- ☒ Harmony Gist, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Hon. Kurt Grimm, DeKalb Circuit Court
- ☒ Mag. Valorie Hahn, Hamilton Circuit and Superior Courts
- ☒ Hon. Christine Haseman, Monroe Circuit Court, CHAIR
- ☒ Rachael Hudgins, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Haley Inman, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Stephaney Knight, Youth Advisor
- ☐ Ashely Krumbach, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Teresa Lyles, Indiana Office of GAL/CASA, Indiana Office of Court Services
- ☐ Joel McGormley, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Hon. Tara Melton, Marion Superior Court
- ☒ Karen Mikosz, Department of Social Services, Pokagon Band of Potawatomi
- ☐ Michael Moore, Indiana Public Defender Council
- ☐ Hon. Lynn Murray, Howard Circuit Court
- ☐ Paul Okoli, Youth Advisor
- ☒ Kris Rhodes, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Lauren Virgen, Parent Advisor

Staff Present:

- ☒ Jamie Devine, Indiana Office of Court Services
- ☒ Colleen Saylor, Indiana Office of Court Services

☐Mindy Pickett, Indiana Office of Court Services

☒Leslie Dunn, Indiana Office of Court Services

Guests Present:

Julia Stevens, Indiana Public Defender Council

Senior Judge Nancy Gettinger

Senior Judge Heather Mollo

Heather Kestian, American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, Center for Legal and Judicial Innovation and Advancement

1. Welcome and Introductions

Judge Haseman

Judge Haseman welcomed and introduced attendees.

2. Approval of Minutes

Judge Haseman

The minutes of the November 22, 2024 meeting were approved.

3. Discussion and Vote on May's Meeting Location and Time

Judge Haseman

Committee members discussed whether to hold May's meeting via Zoom or in-person in Indianapolis, IN at Fuse West Conference Room, 2nd Floor of the South Tower at Capital Center, 201 N. Illinois St., Indianapolis, IN 46204. The majority of members present voted to hold the meeting in-person. To accommodate members who will be traveling, the meeting will take place from 10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m. EST.

4. Foster Parent Listening Session

**Senior Judge Gettinger
Senior Judge Mollo**

- a. At the request of Chief Justice Rush, a panel of four Judges participated in a listening session with two foster parent representatives from Champions for Children.
- b. Foster parents were given the opportunity to express their concerns with Indiana's child welfare system.
- c. Issues identified included:
 - i. Courtroom environments sometimes make foster parents feel unwelcome and discouraged from speaking
 - ii. Lack of clear communication on how and why judicial officers make case-related decisions, such as granting continuances
 - iii. Lack of consistency from judicial officers in allowing foster parents to attend hearings and be heard
 - iv. Lack of access for foster parents to DCS court reports
 - v. Lack of notice to foster parents of upcoming hearings
 - vi. Delays in issuing court orders which hinder timely permanency
 - vii. Delays to cases caused by appointing Public Defenders late in the game and/or reappointing Public Defenders after prior withdrawal
- d. A key takeaway from the listening session is the importance of achieving timely permanency for children.
- e. Recommendations for Judicial Officers include:
 - i. Ensuring foster parents feel welcome attending and sharing information at court hearings
 - ii. Issuing clear court orders, both on the record and in written form

- iii. Engaging with local stakeholders to identify barriers to timely permanency and potential solutions
- iv. Balancing foster parents' right to be heard with birth parents' right to confidentiality
- v. Considering when it would be appropriate to restrict or suspend parenting time
- f. Additional system-wide recommendations:
 - i. Develop and implement trainings for stakeholders regarding their roles, responsibilities, and limitations in moving cases forward to achieve timely permanency
 - ii. Facilitate open communication with foster parents, including ensuring they receive necessary information about their foster children, and the potential impact fostering may have on other children in the home
 - iii. When appropriate, encourage and facilitate positive and supportive relationships between foster parents and birth parents
- g. The Judges will conduct future listening sessions with birth parents and youth with lived experience.
- h. DCS is working on incorporating practice improvements via the PIP and foster parent trainings.

5. Strategic Planning: Focus on Purpose to Practice

Heather Kestian

- a. Members continued the strategic planning work started at the committee meeting on November 22, 2024, with the goal of redefining CWIC's purpose statement as the committee transitions from an advisory body to a more action-oriented group.
- b. Members broke out into small groups to collaborate and develop a revised purpose statement.
- c. Members returned from breakout groups and reported out their recommendations for a revised purpose statement.
- d. Members were given the opportunity to review each small group's proposed purpose statement and vote on their preferred statement in ranked choice order.
- e. IOCS will receive the final proposed statements and ranked choice order.
- f. At the next CWIC meeting, members will transition from defining CWIC's purpose to developing the practice.

2025 Meeting Dates

Table 1. 2025 Committee Meeting Dates

Date	Time	Format
March 28, 2025	9am-11am	Zoom
May 23, 2025	10am-12pm	Fuse West Conference Room, 2nd Floor of the South Tower at Capital Center, 201 N. Illinois St., Indianapolis, IN 46204

**Child Welfare Improvement Committee
Indiana Court Improvement Program
March 28, 2025 9:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.
Remote via Zoom**

Members Present:

- ☐ Tatiana Alvarez, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Mag. Pauline Beeson, Marion Superior Court
- ☒ Mag. Sally Berish, Boone Circuit Court
- ☐ Topacio Boyd, Parent Advisor
- ☐ Mag. Ashley Colborn, St. Joseph Probate Court
- ☐ Mag. Eleanor Finnell, Marion Circuit Court
- ☒ Harmony Gist, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Hon. Kurt Grimm, DeKalb Circuit Court
- ☐ Mag. Valorie Hahn, Hamilton Circuit and Superior Court
- ☒ Hon. Christine Haseman, Monroe Circuit Court, *Chair*
- ☒ Rachael Hudgins, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Haley Inman, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Stephaney Knight, Youth Advisor
- ☐ Ashely Krumbach, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Teresa Lyles, Indiana Office of GAL/CASA, Indiana Office of Court Services
- ☐ Joel McGormley, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Hon. Tara Melton, Marion Superior Court
- ☒ Karen Mikosz, Department of Social Services, Pokagon Band of Potawatomi
- ☐ Michael Moore, Indiana Public Defender Council
- ☐ Hon. Lynn Murray, Howard Circuit Court
- ☐ Paul Okoli, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Kristina Rhodes, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Lauren Virgen, Parent Advisor

Staff Present:

- ☒ Jamie Devine, Indiana Office of Court Services
- ☒ Colleen Saylor, Indiana Office of Court Services
- ☒ Mindy Pickett, Indiana Office of Court Services

Guests Present:

Senior Judge Nancy Gettinger

Heather Kestian, American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, Center for Legal and Judicial Innovation and Advancement

Joseph Sims, Indiana Department of Child Services

Julia Stevens, Indiana Public Defender Council

1. Welcome and Introductions

Judge Haseman

Judge Haseman welcomed and introduced attendees.

2. Approval of Minutes

Judge Haseman

The minutes of the January 24, 2025 meeting were approved.

3. Updated Purpose Statement

Judge Haseman

Chief Justice Rush approved CWIC's new purpose statement:

The purpose of the Indiana Child Welfare Improvement Committee is to mobilize and empower child welfare system stakeholders to identify, develop, and drive change to build sustainable success for children and families.

4. Program Improvement Plan (PIP) Update

Harmony Gist

- a. Indiana is in the midst of implementation of the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) Round 4 PIP
 - i. The PIP process began in September 2022
 - ii. Children's Bureau approved the PIP in November 2024
 - iii. The PIP went into effect on January 1, 2025
- b. There are 6 goals of the PIP:
 - i. Indiana will improve safety and risk assessment practices and ensure ongoing safety management from initial contact through case closure
 - ii. Indiana will enhance parent engagement and collaboration
 - iii. Indiana will improve the capacity of frontline supervisors to support the values, principles, and standards of quality practice
 - iv. Indiana will enhance the identification of the family's underlying needs, improve matching of services to needs, and address accessibility of services
 - v. Indiana will improve the diligent recruitment and retention of foster parents and enhance their capacity to care for youth
 - vi. Indiana will enhance partnerships across child welfare and judicial entities to reduce systemic barriers for timely achievement of permanency
- c. Quarter 1 began on January 1, 2025 and will conclude on March 31, 2025
 - i. Quarter 1 frontloaded key activities designed to improve child safety
 - ii. Activities implemented during Quarter 1 included:
 1. Safety Initiation Standards: re-establishing best practice and guidance for safety planning

2. Proactive Permanency Hearing Pilot: Marion County, St. Joseph County, and Lawrence Counties will pilot scheduling first review and first permanency hearings at the initial CHINS hearing
 3. Quality Hearing Study Piloted: trained Jurists in Residence observed 50 hearings in each pilot county (Allen County, Scott County, and Wabash County) to collect data regarding evidence-based best practices for child welfare hearings. Data analysts will review the findings and share outcomes.
 4. Local Administrative Meetings: DCS and the Office of Judicial Administration are aligned on the importance of collaborating at the local level to improve child welfare outcomes. Henry and Delaware Counties will pilot holding regular local child welfare stakeholder meetings to review local data/compare it to statewide performance measures, identify barriers to timely permanency, and identify/implement potential solutions.
 5. Foster Care Diligent Recruitment: local teams have convened to plan and track foster parent recruitment and retention efforts
 6. Risk & Safety Conversations: a multidisciplinary workgroup updated DCS' definitions of "risk" and "safety" and are circulating them for stakeholder input. DCS will share the final definitions with system stakeholders so they are aware of how DCS is defining those terms. DCS will include the updated definitions for Risk & Safety Vision Alignment activities among frontline staff.
- iii. Quarter 2 of the PIP begins on April 1, 2025 and ends on June 30, 2025
1. Activities that will be implemented in Quarter 2 include:
 - a. Establish PIP Feedback Loop
 - b. Improve Data Integrity for Safety Decision Making
 - c. Establish Key Behaviors for Engagement
 - d. Establish Standard Work for FCM Supervisors
 - e. Understand Unique Needs of Families
 - f. Establish Comprehensive Information Needs for Foster Placement
 - g. Reintroduce Youth and Foster Parent Bill of Rights
 - h. Improve Customer Service to Foster Parents at all Interactions
 - i. IOCS to Add Final TPR Hearing Code
 - j. DCS and Probation Permanency Staffing
- iv. Data is reviewed every two months and compared with the baseline measures from the results of the CFSR review
1. The first measurement period was January-February 2025
 - a. Timely initiation has improved
 - b. Placing siblings together has improved
 - c. Preserving connections for removed children has gotten worse
 2. The data for January-February 2025 was based on a small sample size of 33 applicable cases for review, while the PIP looked at 65 applicable cases
 3. In order to pass the PIP, each target must be reached three times
 4. DCS is working to improve engagement to in turn improve the assessment of underlying needs, safety, and increasing visits with children, parents, and foster parents. DCS believes these changes will lead to positive outcomes and improved data.

5. Birth Parent Listening Session

Senior Judge Gettinger

- a. At the request of Chief Justice Rush, a panel of four Judges participated in a listening session series with individuals with lived experience in Indiana's child welfare system.

- b. In February 2025, the Judges met with birth parent members of DCS' Indiana Birth Parent Advisory Board and gave them the opportunity to express their concerns with Indiana's child welfare system.
- c. Issues identified included:
 - i. Lack of understanding of the system and each party's roles and responsibilities
 - ii. Use of legalese in the courtroom can lead to confusion and misunderstandings
 - iii. Importance of getting to know parents and their needs
 - iv. Importance of identifying each family's unique needs and tailoring services accordingly
 - v. providing cookie cutter services
- d. Stakeholders should strive for everyone feeling as if they are a part of the team
- e. Stakeholders should be aware of the trauma of system involvement on families and DCS case managers
 - i. DCS is providing a grief counseling program for family case managers
 - ii. The Indiana Public Defender Council has developed a robust wellness training program for secondary trauma that is available to all stakeholders

6. Strategic Planning: Focus on Purpose to Practice

Heather Kestian

- a. Members continued the strategic planning work from the committee meetings on November 22, 2024, and January 24, 2025
- b. Members revisited the new CWIC purpose statement and discussed recentring the committee and its activities around the new purpose statement
- c. Members broke into small groups to discuss the following:
 - i. What must CWIC do?
 - ii. What must CWIC not do?
 - iii. Who will join CWIC/who is missing (role or person)?
 - iv. What does CWIC need to do to move forward?
 - 1. Short-term project (6-12 months)
 - 2. Mid-term project (12-24 months)
 - 3. Long-term project (24+ months)
 - v. What structure is best suited for managing the work?
- d. Following the breakout sessions, members were given the opportunity to report what their groups discussed
 - i. What must CWIC do?
 - 1. Members are interested in driving change via action and developing opportunities to explore problems and build impact reports
 - 2. The committee should be respectful of everyone's opinions, understand that stakeholders come from different backgrounds, and create an open and welcoming environment where members feel comfortable sharing their opinions
 - 3. The committee should develop an escalation process when it identifies a barrier that needs worked through
 - 4. The committee should use its shared expertise to advocate for system-wide practices to focus on the reason for system involvement—why a CHINS case opened in the first place—and ensure dispositional and parental participation orders are tailored to meet a family's needs.
 - 5. Members inquire as to whether CWIC has a legislative liaison or potential to provide input regarding proposed legislation
 - a. Members are concerned about the potential harmful impact of pending legislation, particularly HB 1605, upon problem solving courts, children, and families

- b. If the committee cannot actively engage in the legislative process, since it is composed of subject matter experts, can they provide committee statements on proposed legislation?
 - ii. What must CWIC not do?
 - 1. The committee should not make unsupported judgments or decisions without data to support it
 - iii. Who will join CWIC/who is missing (role or person)?
 - 1. The committee should be intentional in including stakeholder voices that are not present and reaching out to get their feedback
 - 2. Missing members include school professionals, mental health professionals, more diversity, and meaningfully engaging people with lived experience—there are currently lived experts on the committee, but they do not attend—how can the committee better engage and include them?
 - iv. What does CWIC need to do to move forward?
 - 1. Projects should prioritize meeting the goals of the PIP
 - 2. Potential short-term project (6-12 months)
 - a. Make sure missing voices are included in the committee
 - b. Identify unnecessary steps/details that contribute to delays in permanency, including in communication pathways
 - 3. Potential mid-term project (12-24 months)
 - a. Align with legislation to help lessen the impact
 - b. Process mapping
 - 4. Potential long-term project (24+ months)
 - a. Establish or re-establish best practices
 - v. What structure is best suited for managing the work?
 - 1. Create a structure of subcommittees to do the work, with a core person(s) designated to be aware of what each committee is doing/report out to the larger committee and other outside stakeholder groups
- e. To-do: need to identify what authority CWIC has, what the committee can/cannot do, and what are the parameters of the activities in which CWIC can engage

2025 Meeting Dates

Table 1. 2025 Committee Meeting Dates

Date	Time	Format
May 23, 2025	10:00 a.m.- 12:00 p.m. EST	Fuse West Conference Room, 2nd Floor of the South Tower at Capital Center, 201 N. Illinois St., Indianapolis, IN 46204 (Zoom available)



Child Welfare Improvement Committee

INDIANA COURT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

Meeting Minutes from May 23, 2025

The Child Welfare Improvement Committee (CWIC) met on May 23, 2025 from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. The meeting was hybrid, with a Zoom option and an in-person option at FUSE West, 251 N. Illinois St., Indianapolis, IN 46204. Judge Christine Haseman chaired the meeting.

Members Present:

The following members of the Committee were present in person:

- ☒ Judge Christine Haseman, *Chair*
- ☐ Tatiana Alvarez, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Mag. Pauline Beeson, Marion Superior Court
- ☐ Mag. Sally Berish, Boone Circuit Court
- ☐ Topacio Boyd, Parent Advisor
- ☐ Mag. Ashley Colborn, St. Joseph Probate Court
- ☐ Mag. Eleanor Finnell, Marion Circuit Court
- ☒ Harmony Gist, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Judge Kurt Grimm, DeKalb Circuit Court
- ☒ Mag. Valorie Hahn, Hamilton Circuit and Superior Court
- ☐ Rachael Hudgins, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Haley Inman, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Stephaney Knight, Youth Advisor
- ☐ Ashely Krumbach, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Teresa Lyles, Indiana Office of GAL/CASA, Indiana Office of Court Services
- ☐ Joel McGormley, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Judge Tara Melton, Marion Superior Court
- ☐ Karen Mikosz, Department of Social Services, Pokagon Band of Potawatomi
- ☐ Michael Moore, Indiana Public Defender Council
- ☐ Judge Lynn Murray, Howard Circuit Court
- ☐ Paul Okoli, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Kristina Rhodes, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Lauren Virgen, Parent Advisor

Members Attended Via Zoom:

- ☐ Judge Christine Haseman, *Chair*
- ☒ Tatiana Alvarez, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Mag. Pauline Beeson, Marion Superior Court
- ☒ Mag. Sally Berish, Boone Circuit Court
- ☐ Topacio Boyd, Parent Advisor
- ☐ Mag. Ashley Colborn, St. Joseph Probate Court
- ☐ Mag. Eleanor Finnell, Marion Circuit Court
- ☐ Harmony Gist, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Judge Kurt Grimm, DeKalb Circuit Court

- ☐ Mag. Valorie Hahn, Hamilton Circuit and Superior Court
- ☐ Rachael Hudgins, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Haley Inman, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Stephaney Knight, Youth Advisor
- ☐ Ashely Krumbach, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Teresa Lyles, Indiana Office of GAL/CASA, Indiana Office of Court Services
- ☐ Joel McGormley, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Judge Tara Melton, Marion Superior Court
- ☒ Karen Mikosz, Department of Social Services, Pokagon Band of Potawatomi
- ☐ Michael Moore, Indiana Public Defender Council
- ☐ Judge Lynn Murray, Howard Circuit Court
- ☐ Paul Okoli, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Kristina Rhodes, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Lauren Virgen, Parent Advisor

Staff and Guests Present:

Jamie Devine, Mindy Pickett and Leslie Dunn from Indiana Office of Court Services, Blane Cook and Mark Fairchild from Commission on Improving the Status of Children in Indiana, Joseph Sims from Indiana Department of Child Services, and Julia Stevens from Indiana Public Defender Council.

Welcome and Introductions:

Judge Haseman welcomed and introduced attendees.

Approval of Minutes from the March 28, 2025 Meeting:

Harmony Gist motioned to approve the minutes from the meeting on March 28, 2025. Magistrate Hahn seconded the motion. The minutes were approved.

September 2025 Meeting Update:

The meeting scheduled for September 16, 2025 was moved to September 26, 2025 due to a conflict with the judicial conference.

Program Improvement Plan Update:

Harmony Gist, Deputy Director of Strategic Solutions & Agency Transformation at DCS, and Haley Inman, Division Director of Strategic Solutions & Agency Transformation at DCS, provided an update on the state Program Improvement Plan (PIP). Because DCS administers the state's Title IV-E funds, they are leading the PIP. However, the PIP is the state's plan, not just DCS' plan, and all stakeholders should collaborate to improve the state child welfare system's functionality.

The PIP has been years in the making, and is the result of root cause analysis, listening sessions with over 500 stakeholders, and data analysis. The PIP was approved by the feds in November 2024 and went into effect on January 1, 2025.

The PIP is currently in Quarter 2 (Q2). Q2 PIP activities should be completed by June 30, 2025. DCS anticipates receiving the first progress report from the Children's Bureau in July.

There are six goals of the PIP:

1. Child safety: improve risk and safety assessments and ongoing safety, not just at initiation
2. Improving parent engagement: lack of parent engagement trickles into other goals
3. Improve frontline capacity of FCMs and supervisors: looking at what to remove from supervisors' plates as they add more duties

4. Enhance ability to identify and meet families' needs: applying the correct services v. cookie cutter
5. Foster care: improve foster parent recruitment, retention, and the treatment of foster parents
6. Partnership across child welfare stakeholders, specifically courts, and working together as a team to improve child welfare

DCS has created a dashboard to keep track of the goals. The goals are further broken down into 13 strategies and 84 key activities. The PIP must be completed within eight quarters. To date, 17 activities have been successfully completed.

During Quarter 1 (Q1), DCS focused on the following activity implementation:

1. Identified and reestablished best practice for safety planning and initiating safety
 - DCS function, but shared effort to keep children safe
 - Biggest change: dashboard to see if everything is initiated for safety and starting to track it by child v. tracking it by family—i.e., tracking every child ON the assessment rather than by assessment
2. Proactive permanency hearing pilot
 - Collaboration between DCS and courts
 - Pilot counties: Marion, St. Joseph, and Lawrence
 - Setting first permanency and first review hearings at the CHINS initial hearing
3. Information sharing
 - Interagency agreements between DCS, probation, and court services
 - Agreements were not time limited, so would fizzle with turnover and no system was in place for the successor to review/sign it
 - Time limit on new agreements/process to reshare and re-sign when staff turnover occurs
4. Quality Hearings
 - Pilot counties: Wabash, Allen, Scott
 - Retired judges reviewed records of hearings and scored them using a tool developed by a researcher to track the quality of CHINS hearings
5. Collaborative stakeholder meetings
 - Pilot counties: Delaware, Henry, and Marion County
 - Bringing child welfare stakeholders (including probation) together to use data to identify systemic issues at the local level
6. Foster care diligent recruitment
7. Diligent search for relatives/kin
8. Risk & safety: updated definitions and vision alignment activities within DCS

The following activities are in progress for Q2:

1. Establishing a PIP feedback loop
2. Entering case data correctly and timely at the local level
3. Improving engagement with families
4. Establishing standard work for supervisors across counties
5. Understanding the unique needs of families and creating a real time escalation process if there is an identified lack of appropriate services
6. Reintroduce Foster Parent Bill of Rights and Youth Bill of Rights
7. TPR final hearing code now tracked in Odyssey
8. DCS and probation to establish permanency staffings to ensure children are not lingering in the system without a permanency plan

Q1 activities are still happening and being monitored, Q2 activities should be completed by June 30 and then will be monitored.

DCS's Child and Family Services Review process is one of the few state-led reviews in the country; this is due to the high quality of DCS' case review system. To monitor the PIP's progress, DCS will use a federal scoring tool.

Progress is measured every two months. So far, two measurement periods have taken place: January-February 2025 and March-April 2025. DCS' main focus at this time is to improve services to protect children and prevent removal and reentry into care. DCS has made the following progress:

1. Ongoing assessments and management of risks
 - No change from prior measurement period
 - Goal: 71%, at 63.6%
2. Caseworker visits with children in the home or elsewhere
 - Saw some improvements in FCMs meeting with the children alone, asking good questions, and having quality conversations re: safety
 - Improved about 6%, goal is 68% and at about 67%
3. Identifying families' needs and improving engagement with parents
 - DCS needs to improve on identifying fathers early in the case, involving them, and identifying their needs. There is a barrier to engaging incarcerated fathers. Cases move better and faster when fathers, and relatives, are involved.
4. Sizeable increase on goal related to resource families

Judicial stakeholders have been more meaningfully involved in this PIP than in prior PIPs—it works best with collaborative relationships

Young People Listening Session Update, Leslie Dunn:

Leslie Dunn, Director of the Indiana Office of Court Services Children & Families Division, provided an update on the youth listening session. At the request of Chief Justice Rush, a panel of four judges participated in a listening session series with individuals with lived experience in Indiana's child welfare system to get a better sense of their concerns with the judiciary.

The panel of judges included Judge Kenworthy from the Indiana Court of Appeals and three Senior Judges who advise CIP (Senior Judges Galvin, Gettinger, and Mollo)

CIP collaborated with the Commission on Improving the Status of Children in Indiana to coordinate the sessions.

Issues identified at the youth listening session included:

1. Young people would like to be included in case decisions
2. Young people want to more meaningfully participate in court in a manner most comfortable for them
3. Young people identified similar issues that the panelists heard during the listening sessions with foster parents and parents, including:
 - They do not understand the court process, why decisions are being made, and the distinction between DCS and the courts
 - There is a feeling of "us against them" and that decisions are often made to them, rather than with them
 - There is a perception that families are treated differently in different counties despite similar circumstances
4. Young people would like judicial officers to recognize their own implicit biases and the trauma/impact of trauma of system involvement
5. Young people want to feel more supported as they age out of the system, including being adequately informed of the benefits of participating in older youth services/collaborative care opportunities
6. Young people feel that the courts do not hold DCS accountable in the same way that young people are
7. There is tension between the foster parents' desire for timelines to move more quickly/cases to stick to strict timelines, and the young people's opinion that the 15/22 is random/creates unnecessary pressure and that strict timelines can lead to bad outcomes—they want families to have more time to reunify when appropriate/making progress

IOCS is taking the steps to address the identified concerns. Judge Kenworthy and Judge Galvin are presenting on the feedback and recommendations from the listening sessions at the Juvenile Judges Annual Meeting.

The committee discussed the feedback and further recommendations include:

1. Encourage judicial officers to create a more welcoming courtroom environment so everyone feels comfortable participating
 - Find something specific about a child and then ask them about it—for example, “How was your football game?”
 - Connect with young people on something personal to them
 - Recognize trauma and slow down/provide more guidance to help everyone feel more comfortable in the courtroom
2. Help everyone understand the purpose of the hearing and the reason behind decisions
 - If a continuance is granted, explain why both on the record and in the written court order, and ensure everyone understands who asked for the continuance and why
 - Support young people as they prepare to age out of the system
 - Balance the needs of the family with timelines
 - Provide additional training for judges
3. Building sustainable change
 - IOCS developed a guide for judges to include foster parents in CHINS/TPR court hearings
 - IOCS is in discussions with IARCA about updating the parent version of the “In the Child’s Best Interest” resource
 - IOCS is discussing creating a document explaining the rights of young people at each hearing—this could be a potential project for CWIC
 - IPDC is putting on a CLE on client communication between a panel of parents and PDs across the state to help PDs learn to communicate
 - Emphasize an understanding of the process
 - IPDC is discussing development standard form letters/emails explaining certain junctures of the case and their choices
4. ICWA and international issues
 - If this is all hard for US-born/English-speaking families, imagine how hard it is for families from a different country
 - Consider translating the materials into other languages
 - Consider incorporating information re: ICWA into materials

FFY 2024 Court Performance Measures Report:

Jamie Devine, Court Improvement Program Administrator, provided an overview of the FFY 2024 Court Performance Measures Report. The data in the report is from October 1, 2023-September 30, 2024. The data excludes cases opened prior to October 1, 2018 because they may not reflect current practice. The data is exit cohort and is reported in the median, but is available in the average on the public-facing data dashboard.

The data shows statewide improvements in time to permanency. Median time to permanency improved from 611 days in FFY 2023 to 549 days in FFY 2024. “Permanency” includes cases that end in reunification, guardianship, relative placement, or adoption. While CIP tracks time to wardship termination for APPLA, time to APPLA and “other” reasons not related to achieving permanency (ex. aging out, death of child, runaway, emancipation) are not considered achieving permanency.

Other measures included:

- CHINS filings increased from 9,843 in FFY 2023 to 12,744 in FFY 2024
- The median time to adjudication was 56 days
- 82% of dispositional hearings were held within 30 days of adjudication

- 70% of first review hearings were held timely
- The median time to first permanency hearing was 336 days
- The median time from the date a CHINS petition was filed to the date the trial court issued the TPR order was 683 days
- 63% of TPR orders were issued within 180 days of the filing of the TPR petition
- Reunification: 56% of cases, and the median time to permanency was 390 days
- Adoption: 27% of cases, and the median time to permanency was 952 days
- Guardianship: 11% of cases, and the median time to permanency was 469 days
- Relative placement: 3%, and the median time to permanency was 470 days
- APPLA: 3% of cases, and the median time to permanency was 864 days

The report compares Indiana’s data with other states in Region 5. The regional data is from 2022. Indiana leads the region in the number of adoptions.

The report also contains information regarding CIP’s activities and projects during FFY 2024, as well as a list of resources.

Legislative Update:

Mark Fairchild, Executive Director of the Commission on Improving the Status of Children in Indiana (CISC), provided an update on the recent legislative session. CISC encapsulates all branches of government and various agencies to propose policy.

HB 1098 ensures that 30 entities under CISC have youth/family representation. The goal is to ensure CISC is truly informed by the people impacted in the development of a state plan for family and youth engagement and a system of best practices. CISC will include caregiver voices (anyone who cares for a child) and youth feedback to identify points of complexity and inefficiency, duplication of services and potential areas for consolidation, improving time to permanency, and reducing the trauma of system involvement.

HB 1403 seeks to improve the effectiveness of the Youth Justice Oversight Committee (YJOC). YJOC was previously awarded grant funds for local programming, including for diversion, community alternatives, and behavioral health. YJOC will increase efforts to assist local communities in applying for the grants. The Juvenile Reinvestment Advisory Council (JRAC) will reach out to ensure that all key players are informed. CISC will support YJOC in its efforts to increase youth and family engagement. CISC is considering how stakeholders can create a macro-level system to track improvement efforts.

SB 482 focuses on school-level issues. It added language about not expelling students solely for truancy. It defines the term “chronically absent” for schools. Right now, schools use multiple categories to define “absent” or “present,” which makes it hard to intervene before judicial involvement. Schools currently call the DCS hotline if a student has 10 unexcused absences. Before filing a case, prosecuting attorneys may hold a meeting with the school and relevant stakeholders to develop a plan to improve attendance. CISC is looking at how to develop models and guidance for these meetings, including how to identify when to convene a meeting and what can be done to improve the process in all counties. CISC is considering whether to use YJOC dollars to build out truancy prevention programs. CISC is working to connect communities who are already doing this well using evidence-based models with other communities across the state.

Over the past three legislative sessions, eight bills were proposed looking at direct representation for youth in foster care. None passed. It has been difficult to narrow down who would be eligible for direct representation, especially with the attorney shortage. CISC is looking into what can be done to find a sensible solution, and is considering starting with cases involving human trafficking, older youth in residential care, and/or older youth who are aging out of foster care. Existing processes for youth to access representation include pilots through

GAL/CASA. As the conversations continue, it will be important to balance the benefits of direct representation with not wanting to extend the time a case is open.

HB 1605's intention is to reduce time to permanency and limit reunification efforts to avoid children lingering in foster care without permanency. The language includes restrictive elements that will be up for interpretation moving forward. The bill's author spoke to different stakeholders in the development of the legislation. Specific items include:

- The individual with whom a child, and/or a representative of licensed child placement agency, is placed is able to attend the CHINS proceedings in its entirety
- The individual providing care/supervision for the child can intervene in TPR concerning the child
- Parties to the case have full rights of discovery at every hearing
- Reunification services
 - Limited to a specific length of time
 - By 7/1/26: down to 12 months with two possible 90-day extensions
 - Time to permanency numbers are improving—this takes us to 540 days for the process so it tightens it up and does NOT allow additional extensions—questions remain as to whether that be clarified in the future for families in treatment, who need psych assessments that may take 6 months, etc.
- Permanency hearing
 - If child has been removed at least 12 months, a permanency hearing must be held
 - A permanency hearing must be held upon request by any party to CHINS proceeding
- If a child is removed for 12 of the most recent 22 months, the court must order a concurrent plan besides reunification
- TPR petition
 - Must be filed no later than 30 days for hearing
 - DCS must file at certain timelines
 - Intervenors, including foster parents, can file
 - Some limiting factors
 - Placement must have had the child for 12 months and have an established relationship with the child

There is a focus on getting children into adoptive homes, however the state does not have adoptive homes for all children. This could lead to the unintended consequence of legally orphaning older youth and them ending up in residential care, which could lead to long-term poor outcomes.

CISC is willing to house a permanency taskforce for stakeholders to focus on time to permanency.

Wrap-Up /Closing:

Meeting adjourned.

Next Meetings:

July 18, 2025 at 9:00 AM-11:00 AM ET via Zoom

September 26, 2025 at 9:00 AM-11:00 AM ET via Zoom

November 21, 2025 at 9:00 AM-11:00 AM ET via Zoom



Child Welfare Improvement Committee

INDIANA COURT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

Meeting Minutes from July 18, 2025

The Child Welfare Improvement Committee (CWIC) met on July 18, 2025 from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. The meeting took place over Zoom. Judge Tara Melton chaired the meeting.

Members Present:

The following members of the Committee were present:

- ☒ Judge Tara Melton, *Chair*
- ☒ Tatiana Alvarez, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Kelly Bray, Indiana Office of GAL/CASA, Indiana Office of Court Services
- ☐ Mag. Eleanor Finnell, Marion Circuit Court
- ☒ Hon. Geoffrey Gaither, Marion Superior Court
- ☒ Harmony Gist, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Hon. Kurt Grimm, DeKalb Circuit Court
- ☒ Mag. Matthew Gruett, Lake Superior Court
- ☒ Mag. Valorie Hahn, Hamilton Circuit and Superior Court
- ☒ Jarrod Hummer, Parent Advisor
- ☐ Mandy Hummer, Parent Advisor
- ☒ Haley Inman, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Joel McGormley, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Karen Mikosz, Department of Social Services, Pokagon Band of Potawatomi
- ☐ Michael Moore, Indiana Public Defender Council
- ☒ Hon. Leigh Morning, Rush Superior Court
- ☒ Mag. Joann Price, Lake Superior Court
- ☒ Kristina Rhodes, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Joseph Sims, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Gilbert Smith, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ DeOnyae-Dior Valentina, Young Person Advisor

Staff and Guests Present:

Jamie Devine, Colleen Saylor, Mindy Pickett, Rae Feller, and Leslie Dunn from Indiana Office of Court Services, Heather Kestian from the American Bar Association, Kim Nightingale, Indiana Department of Child Services, Senior Judge Nancy Gettinger, Senior Judge Heather Mollo, and Julia Stevens from Indiana Public Defender Council.

Welcome and Introductions:

Judge Melton welcomed and introduced attendees.

Approval of Minutes from the May 23, 2025 Meeting:

Judge Grimm motioned to approve the minutes from the meeting on May 23, 2025. Harmony Gist seconded the motion. The minutes were approved.

HEA 1605 & SEA 143: Presentation & Discussion

Rae Feller, State Director of GAL/CASA, gave a presentation on recent legislation that impacted child welfare law. Recurring themes in the new laws include time limits on reunification efforts and moving cases forward more timely.

A new section, I.C. 31-32-1-5, states that procedural deadlines in CHINS or TPR proceedings are not subject to waiver, but allows for extensions necessitated by unanticipated, emergency circumstances, the circumstances of the case, or the Indiana Rules of Trial Procedure.

I.C. 31-32-2-3.5 was added, and clarifies that a child's placement or a representative of a licensed child placing agency providing services is entitled to attend, in its entirety, any hearing conducted as part of a CHINS or TPR proceeding. Committee members expressed concerns about how this will effect children in multiple placements and ensure their confidentiality is protected; situations in which a provider may not feel comfortable sharing information in front of placement that may jeopardize the safety of the child; and the impact on parents' rights to confidentiality.

I.C. 31-32-2.5-1 and I.C. 31-32-2.5-3 regarding foster parent intervention in CHINS and TPR cases were amended. Committee members note that based upon the statutory language, there could be debate about whether best interest applies in all circumstances; however, I.C. 31-10-2-2 requires a consideration of the child's best interests in CHINS and TPR decision-making.

I.C. 31-34-1-2 amended the definition of CHINS 2 to include failure of the child's parent, guardian, or custodian to protect the child from exposure to the use, possession, sale, or manufacture of illegal drugs.

I.C. 31-34-8-7 was amended to clarify that the parties (child; child's parent, guardian, or custodian; department; and GAL/CASA) have the rights of parties under the Indiana Rules of Trial Procedure, including rights of discovery, subpoena, examination of witnesses, and presentation of evidence at any hearing, including a fact-finding hearing.

I.C. 31-34-5-3 added language to the findings for detention, requiring courts considering whether the child's safety precludes the use of family services to prevent removal to give great weight to evidence of the presence of a fentanyl containing substance or a fentanyl related substance for which the child's parent/guardian/custodian does not have a valid prescription in the child's residence; or that the child has been exposed to fentanyl containing substance or a fentanyl related substance for which the child's parent/guardian/custodian does not have a valid

prescription. Committee members anticipate scientific arguments regarding disproven myths about the dangers of fentanyl v. other drugs.

I.C. 31-34-12-4.6 creates new CHINS rebuttable presumptions when a child lives in the same household as an adult who is subject to an order requiring the adult to participate in a program of care, treatment, or rehabilitation; or if the child's parent, guardian, or custodian willfully or knowingly exposed the child to the illegal manufacture or distribution of a legend drug or controlled substance, or exposed the child to methamphetamine, fentanyl, or a fentanyl containing substance.

I.C. 31-34-20-1 was amended to add considerations for the court in determining appropriate reunification services. Committee members discussed that this section now reads as if it may give judges discretion to make findings similar to no reasonable efforts, which could look very different across counties when consistency is a goal of system improvement efforts. The committee discussed the interplay with problem solving courts, which intentionally look into a parent's history to ensure services are appropriately tailored to meet their needs. Many parents enter the system for substance abuse and mental health issues, have a background of not completing services, and there is a concern that this legislation could lead to their past prohibiting future opportunities. Committee members expressed concern that this legislation focuses solely on the parents, even though the family case manager and providers play a large role in whether a parent succeeds.

I.C. 31-34-20-1.6 was added, and limits the time for reunification services from the time of removal or disposition (whichever is earlier), to 15 months if the child is removed after 6/30/25 and before 7/1/26, and 12 months if the child is removed after 6/30/26. The court may extend the provision of reunification services for 90 days if, after an evidentiary hearing, it finds by a preponderance of the evidence that the parent/guardian/custodian has substantially complied with the dispositional decree and the extension is in the child's best interest. The court may extend provisional reunification services for an additional 90 days if, after an evidentiary hearing, it finds by clear and convincing evidence that the parent/guardian/custodian has substantially complied with the dispositional decree and the extension is in the child's best interest. Reunification services may be extended if, after an evidentiary hearing, the court finds that by no fault of the parent/guardian/custodian, they were not afforded an adequate opportunity to substantially participate in the reunification services.

Committee members expressed concerns with delays in provision of services; that relapse is a part of recovery; the potential negative impact on problem solving courts, where it can take 18-24 months to address addiction and peripheral issues. Committee members discussed the importance of prevention and providing appropriate services to parents and families earlier in the case—for example, Washington State and Iowa have successful parent support programs that show higher rates of reunification and shortened time to permanency. Monroe County has a successful parent navigator program. Depending on the circumstances, parents may be able to seek services on their own, which could help build a support system once their case closes. The Indiana Public Defender Council is working to develop a pre-petition legal advocacy program to provide services pre-petition and help families avoid system involvement.

I.C. 31-34-21-5 was amended to require the court to include written findings after review hearings considering the amount of time the parent/guardian/custodian has remaining to complete reunification services.

I.C. 31-34-21-5.5 was amended. The department may conduct a criminal history check of the parent/guardian/custodian, or any household member of the parent/guardian/custodian, prior to reunification. If the department chooses to conduct such a criminal history check, then the department shall use the results to decide whether it is safe for the child to return home, and provide the results of the criminal history check to the court.

I.C. 31-34-21-7 was amended to require the court to hold a permanency hearing upon request of any party to the CHINS proceeding; clarify that for concurrent permanency planning, at least one plan must not return the child to the care and custody of the parent/guardian/custodian from whose care and custody the child has been removed; and that if the child is less than 16 years old, the permanency plan may be guardianship or placement with a permanent custodian only if the proposed guardian or custodian appears before the court and testifies to the individual's willingness to assume custody of the child.

I.C. 31-24-21-7.3 was amended and specifies that posting of nonidentifying information of the child on the internet to facilitate a potential adoptive placement only applies if the child is not already in a pre-adoptive placement in a proposed adoptive home; the information may include the child's first name and picture.

I.C. 31-35-1-5 was amended to require a court to hold an initial hearing on a TPR petition not later than 30 days after the date on which the petition is filed.

I.C. 31-35-2-3.5 was added and allows the child's placement, who is also an intervenor in a CHINS case, to file for TPR; clarifies the circumstances to file a TPR petition are when federal law requires the filing of the petition; the parent either has not completed or has not benefitted from reunification services that they were ordered to participate in and either has not been granted an extension of reunification services or has exhausted all extensions; a previous TPR petition was filed with regard to the child that was subsequently dismissed and 90 days or more have passed since the dismissal.

I.C. 31-35-2-4 was amended to provide additional factors to consider when terminating the rights of incarcerated parents, including the age of the child; the relationship between the child and the parent; the nature of the parent's current and past provision for the child's development, cognitive, psychological, and physical needs; the parent's history of criminal behavior, including frequency of incarceration and the unavailability of the parent to the child due to incarceration; and any other factor the court considers relevant. This section of the code also amends the circumstances for granting TPR to include that the parent has completed treatment for alcohol or controlled substance use, but has resumed the use of alcohol or a controlled substance after being reunified with the child. The committee discussed concerns about this section because relapse is a natural part of the recovery process.

HEA 1099 repeals the definition of "abandoned child" and replaces it with "safe haven child." It amends the definition of "abandoned infant" and "safe haven infant."

SEA 143 Parental Rights legislation prohibits a governmental entity from substantially burdening a parent's fundamental right to direct the upbringing, religious instruction, education, or health care of the parent's child, unless required to advance a compelling governmental interest and is the least restrictive means to do so. It also addresses a parent's access to information regarding the child and permits a parent to bring suit against a governmental entity for a violation and to raise this provision as a defense in a judicial or administrative proceeding brought against the parent by a governmental entity or a private entity. The chapter does not authorize abuse or neglect, permit courts from issuing lawful orders, prevent claims of immunity, and in other circumstances. The committee discussed the inherent conflict between this legislation and 1605 and anticipate seeing this come up in cases. The committee also discussed the UCCJEA's application to CHINS cases and the importance of being mindful of exigent circumstances/emergency jurisdiction.

CWIC Potential Project Planning

Heather Kestian, Senior Attorney, ABA Center on Children and the Law, National Legal and Judicial Child Welfare Center for Innovation and Advancement, facilitated a strategic planning session. The committee reviewed the results of past strategic planning sessions focused on defining CWIC's purpose statement, principles, people, practices, and structure. Committee members broke into small groups to discuss identifying potential projects for the committee to work on which are grounded in CWIC's purpose. The group was encouraged to consider projects that are actionable, add value, are connected to prior strategic planning goals, and to think big. The small groups were asked to brainstorm projects for the short-term (6-12 months), mid-term (12-24 months), long-term (24+ months). The small groups then reconvened and reported out their ideas. CIP staff will compile the suggestions and send out a survey for committee members to provide input on the anticipated impact and effort of the potential projects.

Wrap-Up /Closing:

Meeting adjourned.

Next Meetings:

September 26, 2025 at 9:00 AM-11:00 AM ET via Zoom

November 21, 2025 at 9:00 AM-11:00 AM ET via Zoom



Child Welfare Improvement Committee

INDIANA COURT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

Meeting Minutes from September 26, 2025

The Child Welfare Improvement Committee (CWIC) met on September 26, 2025 from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. The meeting took place over Zoom. Judge Tara Melton chaired the meeting.

Members Present:

The following members of the Committee were present:

- ☒ Judge Tara Melton, *Chair*
- ☐ Tatiana Alvarez, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Kelly Bray, Indiana Office of GAL/CASA, Indiana Office of Court Services
- ☐ Mag. Eleanor Finnell, Marion Circuit Court
- ☐ Hon. Geoffrey Gaither, Marion Superior Court
- ☒ Harmony Gist, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Hon. Kurt Grimm, DeKalb Circuit Court
- ☒ Mag. Matthew Gruett, Lake Superior Court
- ☒ Mag. Valorie Hahn, Hamilton Circuit and Superior Court
- ☒ Jarrod Hummer, Parent Advisor
- ☒ Haley Inman, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Joel McGormley, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Karen Mikosz, Department of Social Services, Pokagon Band of Potawatomi
- ☒ Michael Moore, Indiana Public Defender Council
- ☒ Hon. Leigh Morning, Rush Superior Court
- ☐ Mag. Joann Price, Lake Superior Court
- ☐ Kristina Rhodes, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Joseph Sims, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Gilbert Smith, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ DeOnyae-Dior Valentina, Young Person Advisor

Staff and Guests Present:

Jamie Devine, Colleen Saylor, and Leslie Dunn from Indiana Office of Court Services, Senior Judge Nancy Gettinger, Senior Judge Heather Mollo, and Julia Stevens from Indiana Public Defender Council.

Welcome and Introductions:

Judge Melton welcomed and introduced attendees.

Approval of Minutes from the July 18, 2025 Meeting:

Magistrate Hahn motioned to approve the minutes from the meeting on July 18, 2025. DeOnyae-Dior Valentina seconded the motion. The minutes were approved.

Quality Hearing Initiative

Senior Judge/Jurist in Residence Heather Mollo gave a presentation on the results and recommendations of the quality hearing initiative, an effort to assess the quality of child welfare hearings in the state. The study was developed in partnership with DCS, CIP, and the ABA as a part of the Program Improvement Plan. Three pilot counties (small, medium, and large by population) were selected to participate in the study.

Senior Judges/Jurists in Residence Heather Mollo, Nancy Gettinger, and Stephen Galvin received training from an ABA researcher on court observation, which allowed them to capture critical information when observing hearings. Each Jurist in Residence (JIR) remotely listened to 50 CHINS hearings, including detention, initial, disposition, review, and permanency hearings. Once the JIRs completed their observations, CIP Data Analyst Colleen Saylor collated the data and sent it to the ABA researcher, who evaluated the data and prepared findings.

The Jurists in Residence's observed categories including who was present at hearings; the level of discussion on 21 different topics; judicial engagement; attorney practice; and child advocate practice. Because of the nature of the evaluation, the Jurists in Residence only reviewed information presented on the record and noted that written information and information learned in companion hearings was not included in this study. The Jurists in Residence provided the study results back to the judge in each pilot county and the feedback was well received.

The study found that on average, hearings lasted 16 minutes, and the national average is 20 minutes. Permanency hearings and initial hearings lasted longer. Only 3 hearings, or 2% of the total observed hearings, were continued; all were initial hearings and all were continued for reasons related to the father's portion of the case.

Regular topics of discussion included barriers to permanency and concrete steps to achieve permanency. DCS attorneys regularly present information, including information that is favorable to parents, on the record.

Judicial engagement is considered high quality when judicial officers ask questions and engage in discussion about different relevant topics. At each hearing, the court should assess risk to inform decisions and maintain focus on child safety and well-being, and if the child is removed, engage in discussion about what is preventing the child from returning home.

Research shows that when parents are present, more topics are discussed, which improves the quality of the hearing. Discussion should include the parents' progress and next steps in the case. Though often present at hearings early in the case, parent attendance at hearings decreased over time. Attorneys for parents presented information on the record in about 50% of hearings, presenting a potential training opportunity.

The advocate for the child often rested on their report or indicated that they were in agreement with DCS. Advocates for the child are encouraged to orally highlight their report and recommendations to improve the quality of hearings. Additionally, children are rarely present at hearings. Children should be present in court when possible and when in the child's best interest; to decrease disruption in the child's school day, parties should consider coordinating with schools to support the child's participation by Zoom when possible.

To promote transparency and informed decision making, the record should clearly reflect what comes into evidence in the form of written reports, including which individual submitted the report, what was contained in each report, and a summary of key information from each report.

Committee members discussed the study results and identified potential opportunities for training for public defenders and GAL/CASA. The committee discussed the benefits and challenges to providing public defenders to parents at initial hearings. Committee members discussed the possibility of implementing regional trainings between public defenders and DCS to ensure they get the same information, and incorporate trial practice and wellness breakout sessions.

Direct Representation Pilot

Leslie Dunn facilitated a discussion on the CIP Direct Representation Pilot. CIP is gathering input from stakeholders about how to structure the pilot. Due to limited funding, the pilot will be small. CIP is considering selecting a small, medium, and large county for the pilot. Questions for stakeholders include:

- How helpful would the pilot be?
- Would judicial officers appoint direct representation for youth?
- How often is direct representation for youth needed?
- What kinds of cases should be prioritized for representation?
- What should the referral process look like?
- What measures should be tracked, and how?

The ultimate goal of the project is to provide attorneys for youth who need an attorney the most, based upon the best interests of the youth.

The committee members discussed the attorney shortage and the impact this may have on locating qualified attorneys to provide direct representation. The committee suggested creating a focus group for young people to gather their input; creating an FAQ or brief explaining the pilot and requests for input in further detail; surveying stakeholders; and how the committee may be able to assist with creating tangible feedback regarding the pilot.

PIP Update

Haley Inman presented an update on the PIP. 41 of 83 PIP activities have been completed. Quarter

3 ends on September 30, 2025 and Quarter 4 begins on October 1, 2025. The focus of the PIP is shifting from safety to wellbeing, quality, training/workforce development, and strategy. There is a push on “customer service” to foster parents; coordination between DCS and Probation and DCS and the Courts; and implementing more hands-on training. Progress is measured every 2 months—a sample of thirty-three cases (the number required by federal partners) are reviewed. The most recent measurement period is the first for which the period under review incorporates PIP implementation. For this iteration of the PIP, rather than having to hit target improvements once, DCS must meet sustained targets to maintain improvements. This measurement period showed improvement in visits with fathers. DCS and PIP partners are making good progress on achieving the goals of the PIP.

CWIC Project Planning

Committee members broke out into the Collaboration Workgroup and the Communication Workgroup to discuss appointing a chair and meeting cadence. Joseph Sims will chair the Collaboration Workgroup. Magistrate Hahn will chair the Communication Workgroup.

Wrap-Up /Closing:

Meeting adjourned.

Next Meetings:

November 21, 2025 from 9:00 AM-11:00 AM ET via Zoom

January 23, 2026 from 9:00 AM-11:00 AM ET via Zoom

March 20, 2026 from 9:00 AM-11:00 AM ET via Zoom

May 15, 2026 from 10:00 AM-12:00 PM ET In-Person, Fuse West Conference Room, 2nd Floor of the South Tower of the Capital Center, 201 N. Illinois St., Indianapolis, IN 46204



Child Welfare Improvement Committee

INDIANA COURT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

Meeting Minutes from November 21, 2025

The Child Welfare Improvement Committee (CWIC) met on November 21, 2025 from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. The meeting took place over Zoom. Judge Tara Melton chaired the meeting.

Members Present:

The following members of the Committee were present:

- ☒ Judge Tara Melton, *Chair*
- ☒ Tatiana Alvarez, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Kelly Bray, Indiana Office of GAL/CASA, Indiana Office of Court Services
- ☐ Mag. Eleanor Finnell, Marion Circuit Court
- ☐ Hon. Geoffrey Gaither, Marion Superior Court
- ☐ Harmony Gist, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Hon. Kurt Grimm, DeKalb Circuit Court
- ☐ Mag. Matthew Gruett, Lake Superior Court
- ☒ Mag. Valorie Hahn, Hamilton Circuit and Superior Court
- ☒ Jarrod Hummer, Parent Advisor
- ☒ Haley Inman, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Joel McGormley, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Karen Mikosz, Department of Social Services, Pokagon Band of Potawatomi
- ☐ Michael Moore, Indiana Public Defender Council
- ☐ Hon. Leigh Morning, Rush Superior Court
- ☒ Mag. Joann Price, Lake Superior Court
- ☒ Kristina Rhodes, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ Joseph Sims, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☐ Gilbert Smith, Indiana Department of Child Services
- ☒ DeOnyae-Dior Valentina, Young Person Advisor

Staff and Guests Present:

Audrianna Lingren and Blane Cook from Commission for Improving the Status of Children in Indiana (CISC), Mindy Pickett and Colleen Saylor from Indiana Office of Court Services, Senior Judge Nancy Gettinger, Senior Judge Heather Mollo, and Heather Kestian from the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, Center for Legal and Judicial Innovation and Advancement

Welcome and Introductions:

Judge Melton welcomed and introduced attendees.

Approval of Minutes from the September 26, 2025

Meeting:

Mag. Hahn motioned to approve the minutes from the meeting on September 26, 2025. DeOnyae-Dior Valentina seconded the motion. The minutes were approved.

Introduction of GAL/CASA State Director

Judge Melton introduced Melissa Cunnynggham, the new GAL/CASA State Director

Centering Lived Expertise in Child Welfare Decision Making

Workgroup participants with lived experience and guests shared their roles and perspectives on integrating lived expertise into child welfare decision-making.

The Engagement Coordinator described the purpose of the position, its connection to the Children's Commission, and the group's progress to date. The workgroup piloted a co-leadership model and is now entering the next phase following implementation of the coordinator role under HB 1098.

Participants highlighted recent contributions to legislation, motivations for engaging in this work, and available resources. They emphasized the importance of approaching lived experience with respect and good intentions, noting that many decision-makers have limited insight into how the system functions in practice. Differences in experiences across counties create additional challenges. One participant used an analogy: leaving a dangerous situation can motivate individuals to help others still inside. They also stressed the role of community partners who had positive impacts and shared examples of statewide and national engagement opportunities.

Resources referenced:

- Casey Family Programs guidance on partnering with individuals with lived expertise
- National Research Agenda materials on "What's Next"
- "Promoting Meaningful Partnerships with Lived Experience Experts" (full brief)

Participants emphasized the importance of involving youth and parents from the outset of any project or workgroup. Lived experts should be treated as partners and voting members,

with meaningful roles in designing outcomes. Trust was identified as a key factor in family success.

Workgroup Report Out

Committee members broke out into their respective workgroups

CWIC Collaboration Workgroup, chaired by Joseph Sims shared

The CWIC Collaboration Workgroup reported that it meets biweekly and is in the process of selecting its first major project. The group is focusing on adapting a PIP activity for statewide use and is developing a stakeholder meeting toolkit. They are mapping existing resources to avoid duplication and aim to provide a standardized yet flexible toolkit that communities can tailor to their needs.

The workgroup intends to create a roadmap for communities that are launching or restructuring their efforts, outlining starting points, expected progression, and a framework for success. Plans also include establishing a SharePoint site for stakeholder access to resources, guides, and other materials, as well as identifying missing stakeholder voices and methods for two-way communication with CWIC. They are gathering feedback from pilot sites involved in the PIP to inform improvements to the toolkit.

Meetings are held every other Tuesday at noon, though the schedule may be adjusted to increase participation.

CWIC Communication Workgroup, chaired by Sr. Judge/JIR Heather Mollo shared

The Communication Workgroup reported that it has met primarily during CWIC sessions and is working to clarify its scope and potential projects. Members discussed possible resource needs and barriers, including whether financial constraints exist and whether tools such as a mobile app for parents and caregivers could be developed.

The group identified several potential projects, including creating a parent resource guide and developing communication tools to support engagement in legislative processes. A SharePoint site may be established to improve internal communication and organize materials. Members also plan to review a set of bilingual (English/Spanish) informational videos and explore additional videos to ensure representation of parents, caregivers, and youth perspectives.

The workgroup intends to conduct a survey to identify existing local resources that support families involved in the court system and to gather materials for review and potential inclusion in the SharePoint site. They also discussed how best to share collected resources, with local stakeholder meetings identified as a strong dissemination option. The group is considering developing statewide materials that counties can tailor to local needs.

Regular meetings will be scheduled moving forward.

Member updates:

Haley reported that DCS is continuing work on the PIP. Formal approval has not yet been received due to the government shutdown. She noted that several additional sustained targets have been met and that the PIP activities remain ahead of schedule. Haley will send the data sheet to CIP for distribution and requested to be added to the next meeting agenda to provide a formal progress update.

Judge Melton asked whether others have encountered issues with DCS covering payments for SIJS filings. In one case, the court was asked to order DCS to pay the fee, and DCS objected.

Tatiana Alvarez explained that she handles referrals for immigration relief and that historically these costs were paid through funds from DCS-connected immigration agencies, not directly by DCS. DCS may have covered costs only when they were tied to medical appointments. With recent changes, she does not believe that Child Advocates is being reimbursed for filing fees and related expenses any longer. Because DCS does not work in the immigration arena, they do not currently pay for these costs.

There was discussion about adding this issue to a future agenda to seek guidance, develop recommendations, and consider adding as a project to one of the workgroups to explore solutions. Members agreed that the issue needs to be addressed and discussed what other counties might be doing and whether there are creative approaches available.

Tatiana also noted she received an email listing cases in which they are working with FCM staff but SIJS fees have not been paid, and she was asked whether any alternative options had been identified.

Wrap-Up /Closing:

Meeting adjourned.

Next Meetings:

January 23, 2026 from 9:00 AM-11:00 AM ET via Zoom

March 20, 2026 from 9:00 AM-11:00 AM ET via Zoom

May 15, 2026 from 10:00 AM-12:00 PM ET In-Person, Fuse West Conference Room, 2nd Floor of the South Tower of the Capital Center, 201 N. Illinois St., Indianapolis, IN 46204