**Department of Children and Youth
Response to the 2024 Ohio Citizen Review Panel
Annual Report and Recommendations
December 27, 2024**

APPENDIX A2

The Ohio State University is contracted to oversee Ohio's Citizen Review Panels (CRPs). The CRPs evaluate the impact of child protective services policies and practices and provide public outreach. The CRP program is prescribed by federal statute detailed in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA).

The Department of Children and Youth (DCY) has reviewed the 2024 Annual CRP Report and appreciates the time and dedication of panel members in examining the information, conducting analyses, developing recommendations, and compiling the annual report.

Previously, families needed to navigate multiple state agencies to access the support they required. Now that all these services are consolidated under DCY, families and children benefit from easier referrals, increased efficiency, and better care coordination. DCY represents a new approach to supporting children and families in Ohio.

DCY encompasses various areas, including maternal and infant wellness, early childhood development, early care and education, family support and stabilization, children's services, foster care, kinship care, adoption, and young adult support. This holistic approach enables DCY to focus on the continuum of care through efficient and effective service delivery. Since the department's consolidation, DCY has identified opportunities for data sharing that enhance the assessment of outcomes and impacts on children. For instance, matching home visiting and early intervention data with children services records.

DCY is grateful to the CRPs for ensuring accountability and transparency within Ohio's Child Protective Services (CPS) system. The department has highlighted projects and initiatives supporting the recommendations outlined in the 2024 Annual CRP Report.

DCY looks forward to a continued partnership to improve the continuum of care for children and families in Ohio.

NORTHWEST PANEL

Recommendation #1 - Broaden the measurement framework for child well-being in the child welfare database to include holistic indicators such as emotional well-being, comfort in the home environment, attachment, and communication with caregivers, incorporating perspectives from parents, young people, caregivers, and caseworkers to ensure a comprehensive understanding.

DCY Response

In Round 4 of the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), Ohio will interview case participants as part of the case record review. Ohio can use this qualitative data to evaluate data points that highlight well-being factors identified in the recommendation and evaluate functionality needs in the Ohio Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) to capture the additional indicators.

The professional development of child welfare staff is done through the Ohio Child Welfare Training Program (OCWTP). The OCWTP project manager has been working with the statewide training coordinator to ensure that individuals with lived experience can share their views through videotaped messages incorporated into appropriate training topics. The child's well-being is also addressed in coursework to permit critical thinking by staff when working with children and their families to maintain a "holistic" approach.

Recommendation #2 - Consider changes in eligibility criteria for social service supports to allow greater access to benefits for kinship caregivers.

DCY Response

DCY has, and continues, to focus on expanding services and supports to kinship caregivers. Programs to support kinship caregivers include but are not limited to the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program, the Kinship Permanency Incentive, Kinship Supports Intervention, Ohio Works First, Independent Legal Representation, and Early Childhood Education (public preschool). Further detail on these programs is below. Additionally, DCY is embarking on work to streamline eligibility to simplify the process to leverage the programs to support kinship caregivers.

The Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KGAP) supports kinship caregivers, accepting legal custody beyond children services involvement and after case closure. DCY recognizes that finances are often a hardship when caring for kinship children. KGAP provides a monthly subsidy and Medicaid coverage for the kinship child until the child turns 18 and possibly to age 21 if the child/young adult has a physical, mental, or medical condition or disability.

Primary criteria for KGAP are the kinship child in the custody of children services must be placed, as a foster care placement, in the kinship caregiver's home, which must be a certified foster home, for a minimum of six (6) consecutive months.

The Kinship Permanency Incentive (KPI) program is designed to promote permanent commitment by a kinship caregiver(s) through becoming guardians and custodians over minor children who would otherwise be unsafe or at risk of harm if they remained in their own homes. KPI provides up to eight incentive payments to families caring for their kin.

Kinship Supports Intervention (KSI) is a federal kinship navigator program to support kinship caregivers involved in the children services system in participating counties, ensuring model fidelity. Ohio's KSI targets kinship caregivers (relatives and fictive kin) of children involved in the child welfare system, regardless of custody status or supervision orders. The purpose of KSI is to ensure kinship caregivers have the support they need to meet the child's physical, emotional, financial, and basic needs. It is essential kinship caregivers are supported and connected with appropriate community resources.

Ohio Works First (OWF) and "Child Only Benefits" are benefits from the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS), which are cash payments through the OWF program to help support children living with guardians other than their parents. Children must be living in approved, adult-supervised arrangements with a parent, legal guardian, relative, or legal custodian. Eligibility is based on the child's placement status, not the caregiver's income. The monthly support amount is based on the number of children in the assistance group. For example, one child might receive $302 per month, while two children might receive $412 per month. This is not a time-limited program, nor is there a work requirement.

Independent legal representation is a federal program that provides reimbursement for children, parents, and kinship caregivers of candidates for foster care and/or children in custody, as well as their parents/kinship caregivers. It is recognized there are times when a kinship caregiver and a parent may disagree on what is in the child's best interest and warrant independent legal representation to express their interests and represent their concerns or to assist with removing barriers to maintaining the child in their home.

Early Childhood Education Grant (ECE) is a program that provides high-quality early learning services to Ohio's preschool-age children and helps to prepare children for success in kindergarten. The state-funded ECE Grant is awarded to early care and education programs that provide developmentally appropriate learning environments that address the outcomes and goals essential for healthy development and academic growth. The funds provide preschool services to economically disadvantaged children whose family income falls at or below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty level. Family income is not required for eligibility for children placed in foster care or kinship care with a case plan or family service plan or a child placed in kinship care, as documented through Kinship Permanency Incentive program

payments. DCY was able to expand ECE through additional resources allocated in House Bill 33 and through improved data sharing. As a result of the new department, 150 children in kinship and foster care were connected with free public preschool.

Recommendation #3 - Conduct a comprehensive study of the services and programs currently provided by local PCSAs that enhance child well-being or meet a child's well-being needs.

DCY Response
Ohio is currently preparing for Round 4 of the CFSR. One part of the CFSR includes the development of a statewide assessment that looks at states' performance in three areas specified in the law and regulation: safety, permanency, and well-being. The statewide assessment also determines states' performance on seven systemic factors. Two factors are the state's service array and resource development and the agency's responsiveness to the community. Using data from the statewide assessment and county self-assessments from the PCSAs will provide a baseline to evaluate existing services, effective practices, and service gaps.

NORTHEAST PANEL

Recommendation #1 - Conduct an analysis of existing programs in Ohio to support family stabilization following reunification. DCY should then use this information to develop best practices and share resources across PCSAs.

DCY Response
The DCY technical assistance teams can create guidance documents and provide technical assistance on the value of and research around services that are proven effective for family stabilization after reunification. Such stabilization services will likely work towards our goal of reducing re-entry into foster care.

As discussed above, Ohio is preparing for Round 4 of the CFSR. The statewide assessment also determines states' performance on seven systemic factors. Two factors are the state's service array and resource development and the agency's responsiveness to the community. Throughout Round 4, DCY will gather information to help inform how the department can leverage existing programs to support stabilization following reunification.

OCWTP has recruited qualified trainers to develop and deliver a training course, Coaching Your Clients to Success, to support families after reunification. This course focuses on coaching caseworkers and community service providers to practice family-centered practices while supporting clients' self-efficacy by encouraging them to believe in and realize their potential for success and then teaching them how to put that potential into action.

Additionally, DCY is working to build resources that will allow one number for families/caregivers to call when they have questions or concerns. This line will be managed by the DCY team with the ability to connect caregivers with parent and youth ambassadors who live and know their community for further support.

Recommendation #2 - Encourage the use of evidence-based programs that bring foster and kinship families together with primary families during and immediately after reunification. Explore ways to incentivize foster and kinship families for this work.

DCY Response
DCY will continue to support agencies in identifying and applying evidence programs focusing on this work. The programs and trainings below have been implemented to help foster, kinship, and primary families during and after reunification.

Wendy's Wonderful Kids, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, supports hiring adoption professionals, known as recruiters, dedicated to finding permanent families for the longest-waiting children in foster care. These recruiters are located throughout Ohio and serve public agencies. Recruiters first efforts are designed around searching for any kinship families for each of the children on their caseloads. Assistance is provided to any identified kinship to transition a child into their home.

The DCY training team developed and delivered training courses on strengthening relationships in collaboration with agency partners, external stakeholders, resource families, primary parents, and youth, focusing on the impact of these co-parenting relationships. A kickoff event, Ohio's Approach to Strengthening Relationships Between Primary and Resource Families, was held to highlight the importance of the available training, which focuses on working towards reunification as a team. Available trainings now include:
- Navigating the Whitewater of Reunification: Primary Family, Agency, and Foster Parent Collaboration
- Working Toward Successful Reunification: Strengthening the Relationship Between Primary and Resource Families
- Reunification as the Primary Permanency Goal
- Engaging Primary Families
- Working With Birth Parents: Making it Positive for Everyone

Recommendation #3 - Develop consistent case closure practice and increase funding and support for kinship families after case closure across all PCSAs.

DCY Response
Ohio Administrative Code (OAC) Rule 5101:2-38-09 specifies the criteria for conducting a case review. The case review, which must be completed within 30 days of case closure, is designed to thoroughly assess the Family Case Plan. It determines the presence of active threats,

evaluates the effectiveness of provided services against the identified issues, and assesses whether the overall level of risk has been reduced. DCY's practice team has began to review the data to track timely case closures and has taken a more proactive approach to review and hands on technical assistance.

Additionally, Ohio's county children services agencies identify unique strategies to support kinship providers based on local county resources. While additional resources for kinship providers are supported, counties need flexibility in funding and types of support to design a comprehensive support structure based on each county's unique needs and conditions.

The Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KGAP) is a program to support kinship caregivers, accepting legal custody beyond children services involvement and after case closure. DCY recognizes that finances are often a hardship when caring for kinship children. KGAP provides a monthly subsidy and Medicaid coverage for the kinship child until the child turns 18 and possibly to age 21 if the child/young adult has a physical, mental, medical condition or disability.

Ohio Kinship and Adoption Navigator (OhioKAN) is a statewide program for kinship and adoptive families, developed to assist families with access to services throughout the state and within the caregiver's community. OhioKAN is available to all kinship caregivers. OhioKAN has completed an effectiveness evaluation which has demonstrated the following favorable program outcomes: higher satisfaction with OhioKAN services; higher perceived accessibility of community resources; higher levels of resourcefulness; lower levels of concrete needs; lower levels of conflict in the caregiver-child relationship; and higher levels of closeness in the caregiver-child relationship. During the evaluation period, OhioKAN operated five regions with services as usual, offering only resources based on a brief assessment of need; the other five regions offered the full range of OhioKAN services.

Since July 1, 2024, the entire state has access to the full OhioKAN program, which includes access to Benefits Coordinators, direct referrals to a provider, warm handoffs, flexible funds to meet a short-term need, and other assistance to access needed resources. With the expanded program services, caregivers and adoptive parents will have greater access to services and resources, leading to greater stability and family well-being.

The Kinship Permanency Incentive (KPI) program is designed to promote permanent commitment by a kinship caregiver(s) through becoming guardians or custodians over minor children who would otherwise be unsafe or at risk of harm if they remained in their own homes. KPI provides up to eight incentive payments to families caring for their kin.

Recommendation #4 - Undergo evaluation to understand barriers to clear and consistent communication between child welfare workers and families at the case closure.

DCY Response
Enhancements were made to the Ohio Comprehensive Child Welfare Automated System (CCWIS) alleged perpetrator report disposition notification letter to be easily readable and include information regarding Ohio's Central Registry and the PCSA's appeal process of the investigation's disposition. PCSAs can either include a hard copy of the agency's appeal process when sending or providing the disposition notification to the alleged perpetrator or enter the PCSA's appeal process directly into Ohio CCWIS and select to have the appeal process generated on the disposition notification. Letters and notifications are being designed with human-centered design principles throughout CCWIS.

DCY is committed to further evaluating any barriers to communication between agencies and families at case closure.

CENTRAL PANEL

Recommendation #1 - Engage in research efforts to identify retention efforts and strategies that are effective.

DCY Response
DCY has a contract with the Ohio Children's Alliance (OCA) to implement a marketing and recruitment campaign to increase the number of foster parents across Ohio. As part of this work, OCA distributed a statewide survey in fall 2022 to 13,500 current and former foster caregivers in Ohio. The survey asked respondents to share what encouraged them to begin fostering, the support they received or wished they had received, and the barriers they encountered while fostering. OCA received 2,310 voluntary responses representing every county in Ohio. This report provides a detailed description of foster caregivers' responses. The primary objectives of this evaluation included:

- Identification of factors that encouraged and motivated current and former foster caregivers to begin fostering.
- Developing an understanding of current foster caregivers' capacity to provide care, with the goal of increasing retention rates.
- Identifying the challenges encountered by foster caregivers.
- Identifying needed support among current and prospective foster caregivers.

While OCA utilizes this information to focus marketing and recruitment efforts with paid advertisement on the DCY and It Takes Heart social media and the It Takes Heart Website, it is also being utilized to develop an updated statewide foster care recruitment toolkit for public and private agencies.

Additionally, through contracts with 12 Childcare and Resource Hubs across Ohio, DCY supports community engagement and activities for foster caregivers. These Hubs host Parent Café sessions to create localized support groups for foster caregivers. DCY is currently exploring the best way to track these activities across the Hubs to better inform on effective retention activities.

Additionally, DCY launched a pilot specifically to engage and recruit treatment foster homes. Thirty-four counties are participating through 10 pilot collaborations. Thus far, 13 new treatment foster homes have been recruited, and 15 children have been served. This work will inform the supports necessary to support foster parents serving and caring for our children with increased needs.

DCY will explore the potential collaborations, opportunities, and existing resources available to understand the barriers, supports, strategies, and circumstances that result in the retention of foster families.

Recommendation #2 - Provide grant awardees with support to track successes of retention using consistent cross-site measures/methods.

DCY Response
During State Fiscal Year (SFY) 25, foster parents licensed to serve treatment and medically fragile level of care youth and approved kinship caregivers were eligible for $3,000 per home to fund any of the following categories: foster parent professional development, placement-specific supports and services, or youth-specific supports and services. The funds aim to meet the needs of youth placed in homes and support foster home retention and placement stability. There was so much interest in the funds that funds were exhausted quickly, with 519 foster parent and 173 kinship caregiver applications being submitted in the first week.

Applicants who receive funding are required to complete a short survey 60-90 days after receiving funds that will document how the funds were used, how many youths were impacted with access to the funds, and additional services and supports these homes have identified would be beneficial to their continued ability to meet these youth's needs. The result of this survey will be an avenue to evaluate where additional support is needed to retain already licensed foster parents.

Recommendation #3 - Complete exit interviews when foster parents decide to stop and record reasons for exit.

DCY Response
DCY is investing in a tool, Salesforce Marketing Cloud, that will allow DCY to communicate with foster parents directly to identify reasons for placement disruption or closing. DCY can

obtain structured data to help inform services, supports, programs, policies, and systemic improvements. The goal is to implement the tool and campaigns by the end of June 2025. The goal is to implement the tool and campaigns by the end of June 2025. The tool will be available for future purposes as well.

Recommendation #4 - Revise statewide recruitment and retention materials to include recommendations on improving communication and collaboration between child welfare agencies and foster parents.

DCY Response

Through the Foster Care Recruitment campaign, DCY has developed comprehensive directories for families to search all options for licensing agencies in their county. Training on the Foster and Adoptive Family Journey, a framework for meeting families where they are on their path from an interest in foster care or adoption to feeling confident enough to begin the certification process, has been developed to better support potential foster families. The Foster Care Recruitment vendor has led multiple training sessions for public and private agencies to learn more about the best practices for recruitment, including paid advertising and organic social media. They have also created branded professional flyers and other recruitment materials for agency usage.

As mentioned previously, DCY has a contract with OCA to implement a marketing and recruitment campaign to increase the number of foster parents across Ohio. As part of this work, OCA distributed a statewide survey in fall 2022 to 13,500 current and former foster caregivers in Ohio. This included information on the challenges and support needed for foster caregivers. OCA also utilizes this information to train agencies for foster recruitment strategies and to develop an updated statewide foster care recruitment toolkit for public and private agencies.

SOUTHWEST PANEL

Recommendation #1 - Creating a new ESSA guidance should include versions for front-line staff like caseworkers and teachers that are user-friendly and address the specific duties of each party.

DCY Response

DCY and the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce (DEW) are in the process of publishing a revised version of the joint guidance document created when ESSA was enacted. Additional federal guidance is anticipated in the near future. DCY and DEW partners plan to update the joint guidance document as necessary. Additional reference documents that specify the role of the caseworkers and teachers can be planned at that time.
DEW and DCY continue to partner and collaborate to support ESSA for youth in foster care.

The DEW-and-DCY-Joint-Foster-Care-Guidance.pdf (ohio.gov) is available on DEW's and DCY's websites. In addition, Ohio's Foster Care Checklist | Ohio Department of Education and Workforce is available. It is a reference tool that walks through the steps that districts and custodial agencies must complete each time a youth is placed into foster care, or a placement change occurs. A full list of resources for federally required Foster Care Liaisons per district that is fully available to custodial agencies remains on DEW's website, Liaisons Supporting Students Living in Foster Care.

DEW and DCY continue to identify the need for information sharing. To this end, both departments consistently offer public training and learning opportunities. During the summer and fall of 2024, DEW and DCY presented at the Ohio School Board Association conference and the CASA Conference on best practices in ESSA for youth in foster care. DEW and DCY are exploring opportunities to offer education and informational sessions on the basics of ESSA and the importance of collaboration between local school districts and child protective service agencies for education and child protective services staff.

Recommendation #2 - Dedicate more staff resources to support the work of key individuals bridging work on educational needs between DCY and the Ohio Department of Education (ODE).

DCY Response
With the creation of DCY, staff are identifying how the collective work impacts the PCSAs and students needing educational support, including the impact on students in foster care, such as the Office of Exceptional Children and Student & Academic Supports. Connections have been made between DCY and the Department of Education and Workforce (DEW) to work collaboratively on resources, and data sharing needs to support identifying needs and improvements for youth attendance, academics, transition, and graduation timelines.

The transition of agency certification functionality into Ohio Certification for Agencies and Families (OCAF) will enable DCY to add school information for all facilities. This will allow agencies to designate what type of school program they will use (i.e., public, charter, online, or facility-based school program). Additionally, DCY plans to expand the integration between the Ohio Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) and the Ohio DEW system that currently exchanges the Statewide Student Identifier (SSID) for children in custody. The expansion will include grade, school, and graduation details for each child in custody. With both efforts, there will be more transparency and accountability in the educational programming and outcomes of children served by the facilities.

Recommendation #3 - Create a database to gather information about the educational programming of all Children's Residential Centers (CRCs), group homes, and Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities (PRTFs) in Ohio.

DCY Response
With the transition of agency certification functionality into Ohio Certification for Agencies and Families (OCAF), DCY can add school information for all facilities. This would allow agencies to designate what type of school program they will use (i.e., public, charter, online, or facility-based school program). Additionally, DCY plans to expand the integration between the Ohio Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) and the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce (DEW) system that currently exchanges the Statewide Student Identifier (SSID) for children in custody. The expansion will include grade, school, and graduation details for each child in custody. With both efforts, there will be more transparency and accountability in the educational programming and outcomes of children served by the facilities.

DCY partnered with the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OhioMHAS) and issued a capacity survey to all DCY and OhioMHAS child-serving congregate care agencies to obtain data on bed utilization. The information from the survey is important to assist the state agencies in addressing ongoing placement challenges, such as bed capacity, utilization, and workforce. This data should be available in the spring of 2025.

SOUTHEAST PANEL

Recommendation #1 - Engage in research efforts, using qualitative and quantitative data, to better understand the nuanced and complex nature of the recruitment of foster families.

DCY Response
With the support of Ohio Children's Alliance (OCA), DCY supported a research survey, Foster Care in Focus: Insights from Former and Current Ohio Caregivers to better understand the challenges impacting the recruitment and retention of foster caregivers. This data, along with market research, was used to develop target markets across Ohio to better tailor recruitment and retention efforts in these areas. OCA continues to explore child welfare data to enhance targeted recruitment campaign material and advertising to support the removal and placement trends within Ohio. OCA is also updating the statewide recruitment toolkit with this foundational knowledge and research to be utilized by public and private agencies.

DCY is investing in a tool, Salesforce Marketing Cloud, that will allow more in-depth analysis of current homes and will allow for enhanced and, when necessary, targeted advertising to help increase foster homes in/with certain demographics (geography or personal demographics)

and overall based on the analysis. The goal is to have the tool and campaigns implemented by the end of June 2025. The tool will be available for future purposes as well.

Recommendation #2 - Provide grant awardees of the recruitment and retention funding from the 2022-2023 fiscal years with technical assistance to track successes of recruitment in a consistent manner.

DCY Response
The Ohio Children's Alliance (OCA), which was awarded the Foster Care Recruitment Marketing campaign contract, has developed tracking mechanisms to maintain data related to recruitment efforts. Recruiters track information on families and the various points of contact with those families while also evaluating the nature and outcome of recruitment events held across the State. DCY is using this information to identify potential barriers to the recruitment and certification process for potential foster caregivers' experience.

During SFY25, foster parents licensed to serve treatment and medically fragile level of care youth and approved kinship caregivers were eligible for $3,000 per home to fund any of the following categories: foster parent professional development, placement-specific supports and services or youth-specific supports and services. The funds aimed to meet the needs of youth placed in the homes to support foster home retention and placement stability. There was so much interest that funds were exhausted quickly, with 519 foster parent and 173 kinship caregiver applications being submitted in the first week.

There will be additional data available on how the funds were used and applicant feedback on additional resources that would be helpful. This information will be available in the spring of 2025.

Recommendation #3 - Empower foster parent associations to help engage in recruitment and incentivize their work.

DCY Response
Childcare and Resource Hubs across Ohio hold community engagement and activities for foster caregivers. These Hubs also host Parent Café sessions to create localized support groups for foster caregivers. Additionally, the Ohio Children's Alliance (OCA) offers targeted marketing material and training to agencies to support statewide recruitment. OCA has provided five topic-specific recruitment and marketing trainings accessible to all public and private agencies recruiting foster families to support their efforts. To date, these topics have included the foster and adoptive family journey, social media strategies, paid social media strategies, digital advertising strategies, and traditional advertising for recruitment.

Recommendation #4 - Complete exit interviews when foster parents decide to stop and systematically record reasons for exit.

DCY Response
DCY is investing in a tool, Salesforce Marketing Cloud, that will allow DCY to communicate with foster parents directly to identify reasons for placement disruption or closing. DCY can obtain structured data to help inform services, supports, programs, policies, and systemic improvements. The goal is to implement the tool and campaigns by the end of June 2025. The tool will be available for future purposes as well.

Recommendation #5 - Develop innovative strategies to recruit foster families of color, including Black foster families.

DCY Response
Through market rate research that identified families that are culturally similar to children in care, Ohio Children's Alliance (OCA), through a contract with DCY, can focus on new recruitment strategies to better engage culturally diverse families. Information on these new target audiences will be shared with local agencies to assist in recruiting representative families in their region. The Foster Care Recruitment campaign uses diversified representation in marketing materials and advertising, including diverse races, ages, family representations, sibling groups, and differently abled people. With the implementation of Salesforce Marketing Cloud, DCY can use publicly available data to create recruitment campaigns, whether through ads or email advertising, while targeting certain demographics, such as people of color, to encourage them to become foster families. Marketing Cloud will also allow DCY to analyze campaigns to determine their effectiveness and ensure they are reaching people.

Thank You
In conclusion, DCY would like to thank the CRPs for their hard work and dedication to enhancing child welfare in Ohio. DCY is committed to addressing the recommendations made by the CRPs through the new and exciting initiatives underway across the department.