

**Ohio Annual Citizen
Review Panel Report
State Fiscal Year
2023-2024**



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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Ohio Citizen Review Panels (CRPs) are tasked with submitting an annual report to the Ohio Department of Children and Youth (ODCY), referenced as DCY throughout this report, with recommendations for the improvement of the child protective services (CPS) system in Ohio. The CRPs conduct an annual review and evaluation of an identified issue relevant for the CPS system and make actionable and measurable recommendations to the state on how to improve this issue. The CRP program is prescribed by federal statute detailed in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). This report is the product of the Ohio CRPs' annual evaluation for the 2023-2024 work year. The report details each panel's topic, process for review, and development of the recommendations submitted to DCY on May 15, 2024.

CITIZEN REVIEW PANELS

Mandate/Function

The CRP program was established in federal statute by CAPTA in 1996, and states were required to have their CRPs up and running by 1999. Depending on the size of the state, some are required to have three panels, while other states are only required to have one. CAPTA details the following two main objectives for the CRP program: (1) evaluate the impact of current child services procedures and practices upon children and families in the community, and (2) provide for public outreach. The first objective drives the main work of the program. CRPs are required to evaluate the extent to which a state is adhering to its CAPTA state plan. This evaluation involves examining policies, practices, and procedures of state child welfare agencies. Based on these reviews, CRPs then make recommendations via an annual report to the state child welfare agency with the goal of improving the child protection system. Following the submission of these recommendations, the state has six months to respond in writing to the panels about how they will address the recommendations.

The CRPs have a responsibility to provide for public outreach and comment following the completion of their annual report. The legislation reads, "Each panel shall provide for public outreach and comment in order to assess the impact of current procedures and practices upon children and families in the community and in order to meet its obligations under subparagraph (A)." (Administration for Children and Families, 2013, p. 24).

Overview of Ohio CRPs/Purpose

In January 2016, DCY entered a contract with The Ohio State University (OSU) to redesign the Ohio CRPs. Beginning in January 2016, OSU began a planning phase to prepare for three new panels. Each of the three new panels met for the first time in March 2017. Ohio added two additional panels in early 2019. This report is the product of the 2023-2024 year of work.

Each panel is named for its geographical position in Ohio, the Northwest, Northeast, Central, Southwest, and Southeast CRPs. All panels reviewed statewide data to make recommendations that are applicable statewide rather than narrowed to their respective geographic location. Panel members are volunteers and are not appointed or compensated for their work. They were strategically recruited to ensure the panels have representation across gender, race, age, and professional discipline.

OHIO CRP MISSION STATEMENT

Citizen Review Panels provide perspectives from the stakeholder community on child welfare practices and policies to improve safety, permanency, and the immediate and long-term well-being of children.



PANEL MEMBERSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATION

Northwest Ohio CRP:

Diana Theiss, CRP Chair, Sylvania Therapy and Counseling

Sarah Zimmerman, CRP Scribe, Sandusky County Board of Developmental Disabilities

Stacey Gibson, Director, Sandusky County Family and Children First Council

Shannon Keefer, private practice clinician

Amy Koziarski, private practice owner and clinician

Rose Cousino, private practice clinician

Samantha Habusta, licensed foster parent

Jaci Tiell, pastor

Northeast Ohio CRP:

Jim Molnar, CRP Chair, Child advocate

Beth Cardina, Program Coordinator at CASA/GAL Program of Summit County Juvenile Court

Anju Mader, Stark County Mental Health & Addiction Recovery

Mary Ann Sheets, Stark County CASA Volunteer

Brittany Reed, Stark County Mental Health & Addiction Recovery

Julie Stimpert, public school teacher and licensed foster parent

Theresa Lash, Coleman Services

Marianna DiGiacomo, Community Services Director of the Stark County District Library

Central Ohio CRP:

Kathryn Wolf, CRP Chair, The Center for Family Safety and Healing

Rachel Binting, School Social Worker

Pam Scott, The Buckeye Ranch

Lorie McCaughan, Professor of Clinical Studies and Supervising/Senior Attorney, General Litigation Clinic and Family Advocacy Clinic, Capital University Law School

Jo Simonsen, OhioKAN, Kinship & Adoption Navigator

Dot Erickson-Anderson, Treatment Parent Educator, Ohio Family Care Association

Jared Buerger, Outreach Specialist, A Kid Again

Michelle Fraley, Amanda-Clearcreek Local School District Primary School Principal, licensed foster parent

Tishia Gunton, Clinical Social Work Program Coordinator at Nationwide Childrens Hospital

Southwest Ohio CRP:

Anthony Carter, CRP Chair, Police Officer, Retired

Kimberly Budig, CRP Vice-Chair, Dayton Children's Hospital, Foster, Kinship & Complex Care Program Social Worker

Charlotte Caples, Advocacy Director, Special Programs, Guardian Ad Litem

Mike Robinson, Retired Community Mental Health Manager/therapist

Amy Winkler, Ohio Medicaid

Stephanie Moes, Legal Aid Society of Southwest Ohio, LLC

Suzan DeCicca, Cincinnati Public Schools

Kimberly Altick, private practitioner

Southeast Ohio CRP:

Terry Cluse-Tolar, CRP Chair, Ohio University

Bridget Moore, The Ohio State University

Michele Papai, private practice mental health practitioner

Brenda Wachenschwanz, Athens County Juvenile Court

Micki Lamb, Integrated Services for Behavioral Health

Lindsay Place, Athens Co. Public Libraries

Tara Huffman, Director of Athens County CASA/GAL Program

STAFF SUPPORT

OSU provides administrative support to the CRPs under contract with DCY, with team members representing The Ohio State University (OSU) College of Social Work, and the University of Michigan (UM) School of Social Work. Sarah Parmenter, the project manager for the CRPs, is a University Partnership Program (UPP) graduate and former Ohio CPS caseworker. She is currently a doctoral candidate at OSU. Dr. Susan Yoon is an Associate Professor at OSU College of Social Work. She is an expert in childhood trauma and resilience following child maltreatment. She has worked closely with Ohio PCSAs for the implementation of the Ohio START (Sobriety, Treatment, and Reducing Trauma) program. Dr. Kathryn Maguire-Jack transitioned from OSU to UM in the Fall of 2019, where she is now an Associate Professor of Social Work. She remains committed to Ohio CRP and continues to support the project. She has worked with child protective services in research and evaluation capacities at the state and county levels since 2006 in Ohio, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Yujeong Chang is a current Ph.D. student at OSU and her research focuses on examining protective factors and resilience in youths with experiences of child maltreatment. She served on multiple child maltreatment prevention research and evaluation projects as well as a foster care/adoption caseworker intern during her master's program at UM. She currently serves as a research assistant for the Ohio START program as well as the Ohio CRP project.

The team members provide the following services to the CRP program:

- membership recruitment for all panels
- tracking/maintenance of panel membership
- training of new CRP members
- maintenance of the online training site
- assisting with agenda creation for bi-monthly meetings
- partnering with new chairpersons to run the meetings
- facilitating communication between CRPs and DCY/PCSAs
- providing support to panels in obtaining data from DCY
- assisting panels in gathering data from other sources
- data analysis

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank DCY for their assistance with data collection and insight into the panels' topics throughout the 2023–2024 CRP work year. We would also like to thank all the focus group participants including caseworkers, primary parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents who participated in data collection. Their stories and insights were invaluable and informed the panels' recommendations for the year. The panels place great value in their relationships with all child-serving partners in Ohio.

ACRONYMS

- CAPTA- Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act
- CASA- Court Appointed Special Advocate
- CFSR- Child and Family Services Review
- CRC- Children’s Residential Center
- CRP- Citizen Review Panel
- CPS- Child Protective Services
- CWS- Child Welfare System
- ESSA- Every Child Succeeds Act
- FCFC- Family and Children First Council
- FFPSA- Family First Prevention Services Act
- IEP- Individualized Educational Plan
- LOS- Letter of Support
- MSY- Multi-System Youth
- OAC- Ohio Administrative Code
- OCWTP- Ohio Child Welfare Training Program
- ODCY - Ohio Department of Children and Youth
- ODE- Ohio Department of Education
- OhioKAN- Ohio Kinship & Adoption Navigator
- OhioMHAS- Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services
- OhioRISE- Ohio Resilience through Integrated Systems and Excellence
- ORC- Ohio Revised Code
- OSU- Ohio State University
- PCSA- Public Children Services Agency
- PCSAO- Public Children Services Association of Ohio
- PRTF- Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility
- QRTP- Qualified Residential Treatment Programs
- SACWIS- Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System
- VPS- Voluntary Protective Services
- YAB- Youth Advisory Board

STRATEGIC PLAN OVERVIEW



STRATEGIC PLAN FOR THE OHIO CITIZEN REVIEW PANELS

Mission: Citizen Review Panels provide perspectives from the stakeholder community on child welfare practices and policies to improve safety, permanency, and the immediate and long-term wellbeing of children.

Goal One: The five statewide panels will work collaboratively to make meaningful recommendations to DCY on the state of child welfare in Ohio.

Regular Meetings

- Annual meeting of all CRP members will be held in May each year to select topic areas
- Quarterly meetings with OSU and DCY program staff
- Internal OSU meetings to direct programming
- Five meetings of each CRP during the 2023-2024 work year

Five Annual Reports

- Each panel will submit an annual report to DCY summarizing its activities, analyses, and recommendations.

DCY Responses

- DCY will provide a response to the report and recommendations of each panel within six months of submission.

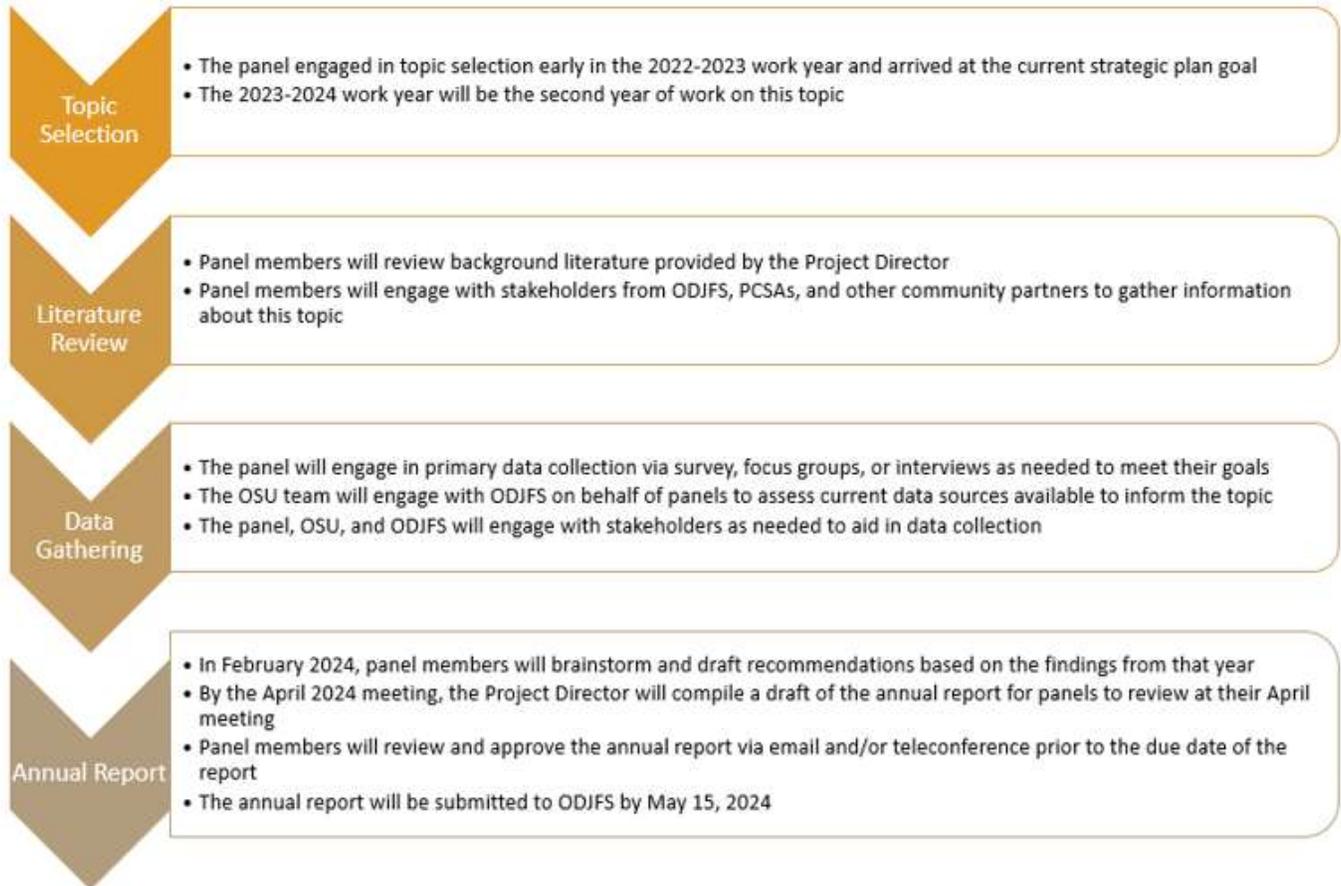
Member Recruitment and Retention

- When membership drops below 10 on the panel, panel members will make suggestions for additional citizens to recruit for the panel.
- Panel membership will ideally include representation from foster care, mental health, substance use, physical health, education, law enforcement, officers of the court, and the faith community.

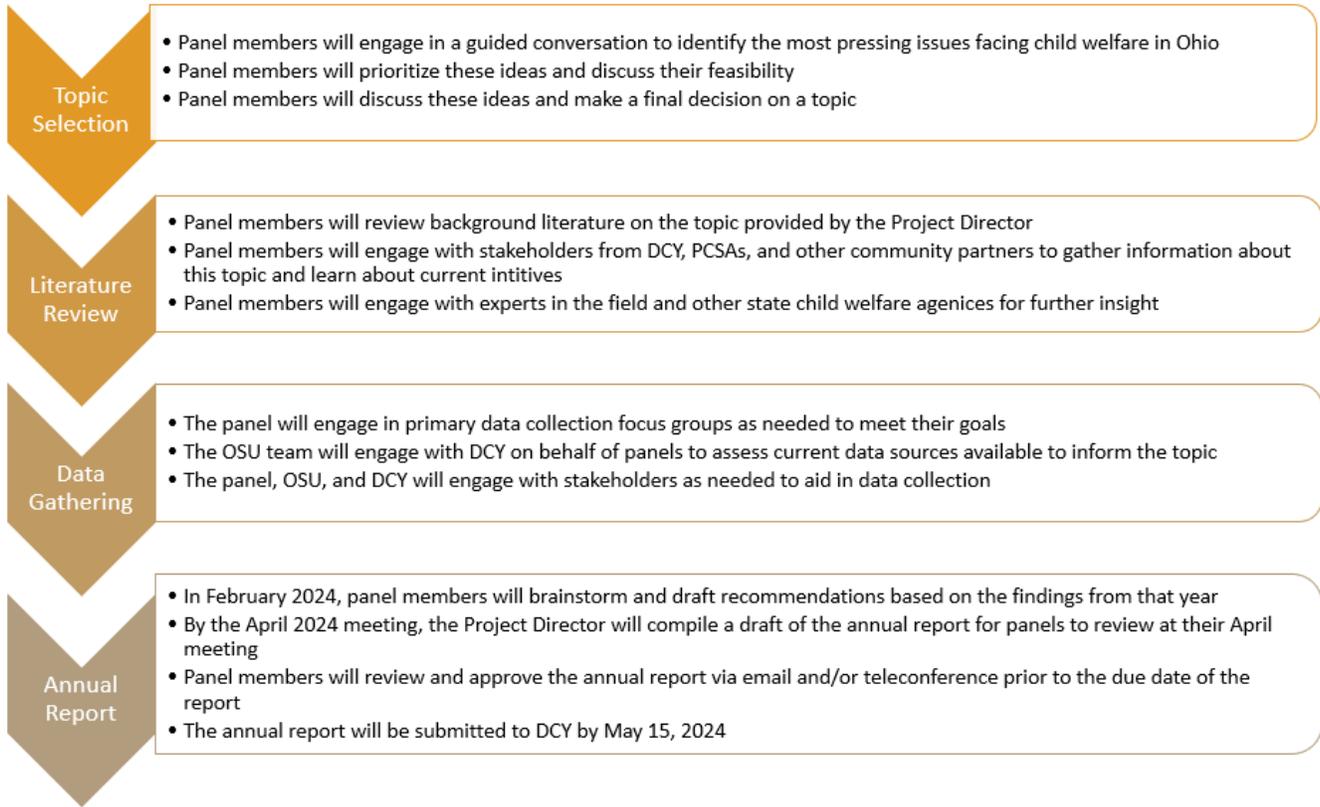
Member Training

- New members will receive training and onboarding via the online training website
- More tenured members will complete new and ongoing training via the website
- OSU staff will provide training as needed during the work year during regular meetings
- OSU staff will provide leadership training and opportunities for panel chairs

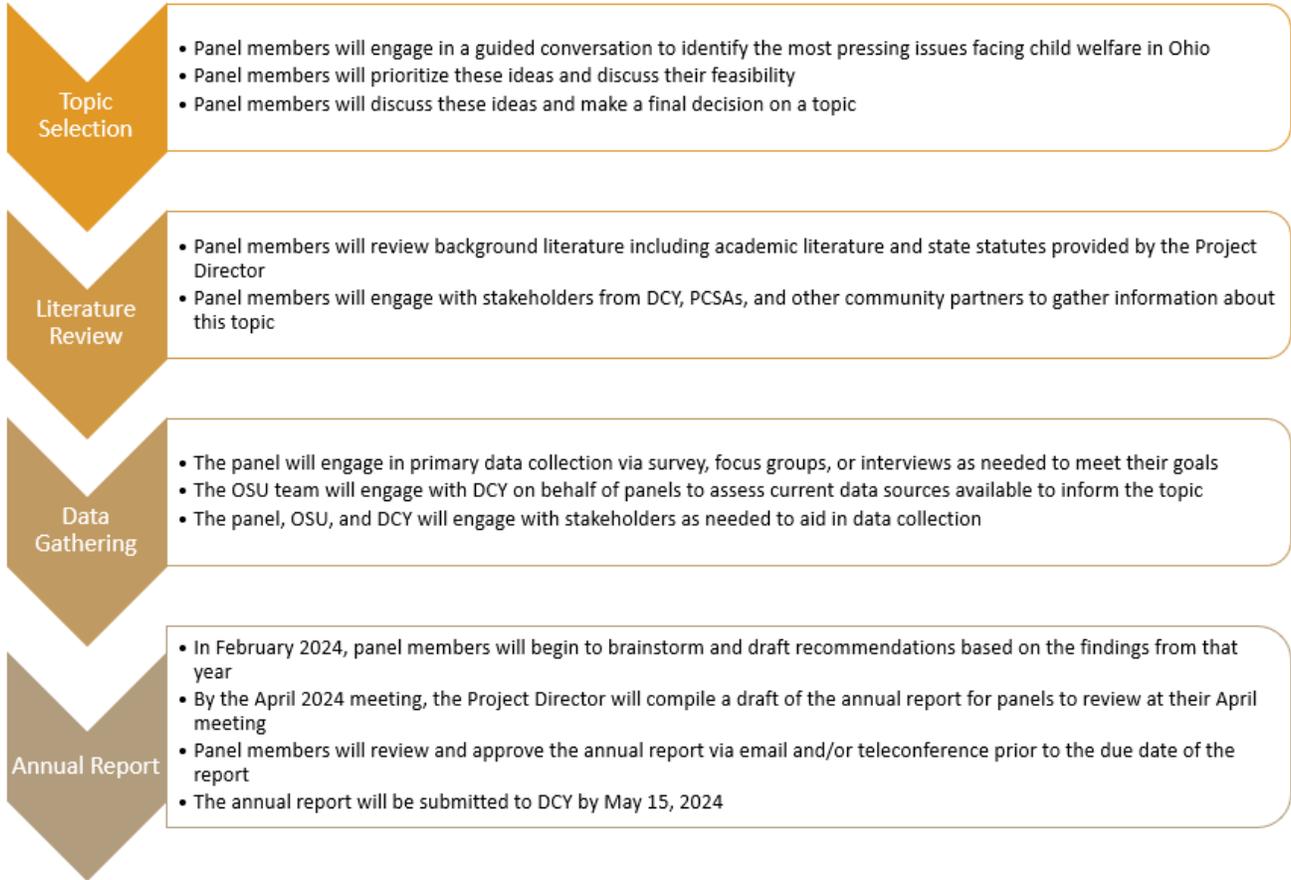
Goal Two: The Northwest Ohio CRP will create actionable and measurable recommendations to improve Ohio's ability to recognize and respond to the well-being needs of children and families involved with the child welfare system.



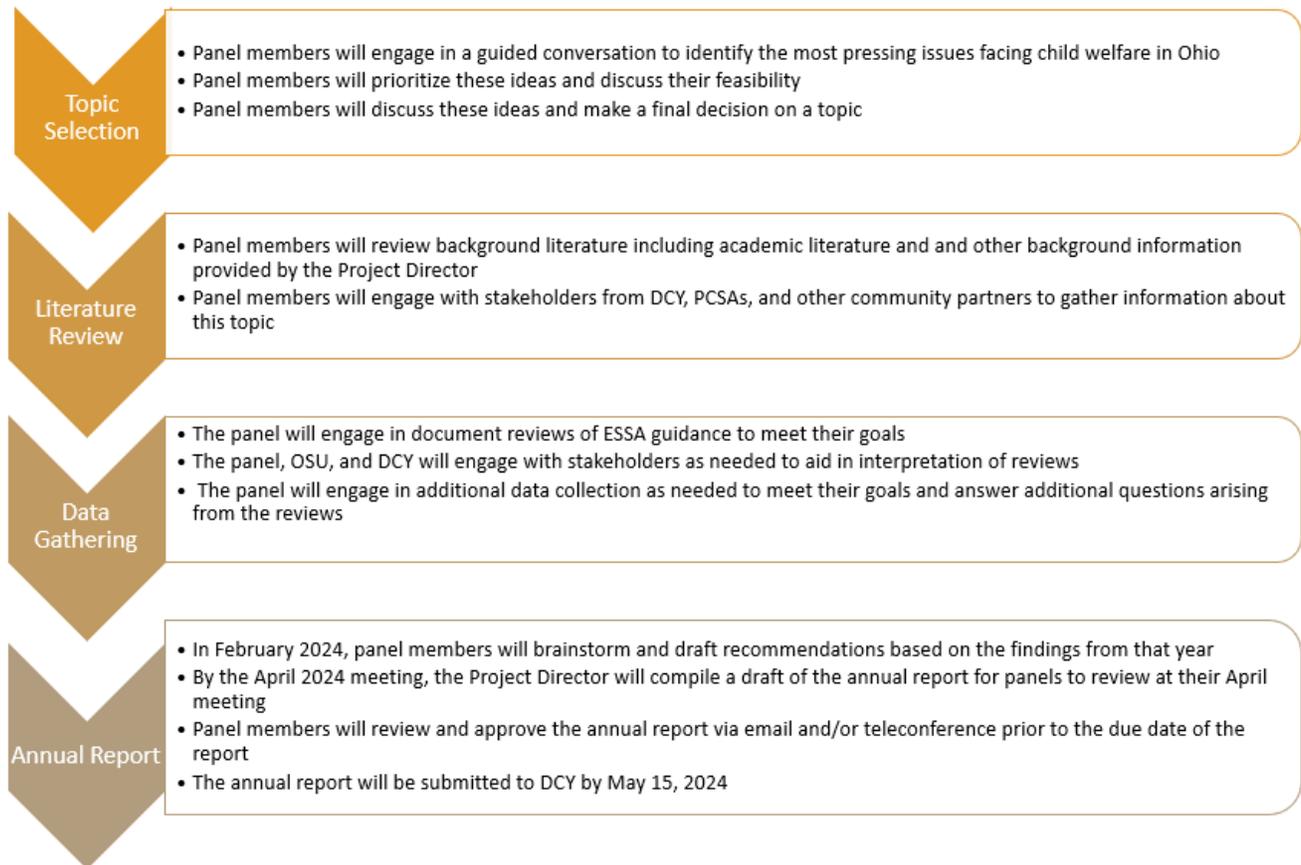
Goal Three: The Northeast Ohio CRP will create actionable and measurable recommendations to improve Ohio's support of children and families at the time of case closure by better understanding how families discharge from child welfare services.



Goal Four: The Central Ohio CRP will create actionable and measurable recommendations to improve Ohio's capacity to retain family foster homes.



Goal Five: The Southwest Ohio CRP will create actionable and measurable recommendations to improve Ohio's ability to meet children's educational well-being needs while in care.



Goal Six: The Southeast Ohio CRP will create actionable and measurable recommendations to improve Ohio's capacity to recruit family foster homes.

Topic Selection

- Panel members will engage in a guided conversation to identify the most pressing issues facing child welfare in Ohio
- Panel members will prioritize these ideas and discuss their feasibility
- Panel members will discuss these ideas and make a final decision on a topic

Literature Review

- Panel members will review background literature including academic literature and other background information provided by the Project Director
- Panel members will engage with stakeholders from DCY, PCSAs, and other community partners to gather information about this topic

Data Gathering

- The panel will engage in primary data collection via survey to all Ohio CRCs to meet their goals
- The panel, OSU, and DCY will engage with stakeholders as needed to aid in interpretation of focus group findings
- The panel will engage in additional data collection as needed to meet their goals and answer additional questions arising from the data

Annual Report

- In February 2024, panel members will brainstorm and draft recommendations based on the findings from that year
- By the April 2024 meeting, the Project Director will compile a draft of the annual report for panels to review at their April meeting
- Panel members will review and approve the annual report via email and/or teleconference prior to the due date of the report
- The annual report will be submitted to DCY by May 15, 2024

REPORT 1: NORTHWEST OHIO CRP ANNUAL REPORT

Annual CRP Activities

SCHEDULES

The Northwest Ohio CRP meets bi-monthly from August to May of each work year. The 2023–2024 work year began with the Ohio CRP Annual Strategic Planning Meeting on Thursday, May 18, 2023, which occurred via Zoom. All Ohio CRP members were invited to attend this meeting. The Annual Strategic Planning Meeting allows the Northwest Ohio CRP, in conjunction with the other panels, to learn from the other panels’ previous year of work and plan for the next year. The Northwest panel decided on a topic and created a data request for DCY at the annual meeting.

Regular meetings for the Northwest Ohio CRP began in August 2023. The panel meets bi-monthly on the first Thursday of the month from 12:00 pm to 2:00 pm via Zoom. The following is a list of all meeting dates for the panel from August 2023 to April 2024:

Table 1. Northwest Ohio CRP Regular Meeting Schedule:
Thursday, August 31, 2023
Thursday, October 5, 2023
Thursday, December 7, 2023
Thursday, February 1, 2024
Thursday, April 4, 2024

CHANGES TO PANEL MEMBERSHIP

The Northwest Ohio CRP began the work year with nine members. The panel maintained these nine members identified in the Panel Membership and Professional Affiliation section. Two of these members were relatively unengaged in the work of the panels and will not continue with the program. The Northwest Ohio CRP identified recruitment as a top priority at the beginning of the work year, and they successfully added a new member with lived experience as a kinship provider who will attend the annual strategic planning meeting in May. Moving forward, the panel would like to add an additional two members to their roster to bring their member total to ten. The panel is confident they will be able to meet this recruitment goal, with the continued flexibility of using technology, such as Zoom to attend meetings.

SUCCESSSES, CHALLENGES, AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The Northwest Ohio CRP experienced several successes, challenges, and achievements during this fiscal year. The panel reported robust and productive conversations during each CRP meeting as a major success of the work year. Despite historically lower membership numbers, the seven active panel members attended all meetings and are fully engaged in the work.

The panel experienced some challenges in the past narrowing their topic to a specific, manageable question and CRP project. Fortunately, the flexibility of the program allows

panels additional time to make decisions about larger projects. The panel has decided on an important topic, and they have many unique and creative ideas for data collection. Addressing holistic well-being from a citizen perspective is an exciting opportunity for this panel. The panel successfully carried out an IRB-approved research project that included 18 child welfare stakeholders with a variety of lived experiences with the system. The panel collected rich data that will serve as important insight for additional panel projects. This is a huge success for the Northwest Ohio CRP.

Background

The Northwest Ohio CRP focused their work on understanding how Ohio supports the well-being of youth involved with Ohio's child welfare system. For the 2023-2024 work year, the Northwest CRP undertook a primary data collection project to follow up on their introductory work from the last work year. One of the three main objectives of the child welfare system is well-being. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 makes well-being a top priority of the child welfare system in addition to safety and permanence (Barth et al., 2008). The aim of the project was to define and examine child well-being in the context of child welfare by conducting regional focus groups with key stakeholders throughout the state of Ohio. While federal child welfare professionals specifically define child well-being with markers of physical, mental health, and educational well-being, stakeholder groups such as foster families, kinship caregivers, and primary parents with past child welfare involvement may more broadly define well-being (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020).

Strengths

DCY has demonstrated their commitment to child well-being through their attention to federal child and family services review (CFSR) well-being measures and their commitment to addressing the mental health needs of youth in care through their partnership with Ohio Resilience through Integrated Systems and Excellence (OhioRISE). OhioRISE is a specialized managed care program for youth with complex behavioral health and multisystem needs. The continued partnership and data-sharing efforts with Ohio Medicaid to address the mental health and physical health needs of youth in care is imperative to this work. Additionally, DCY has consistently shown its dedication to including the Ohio CRP's feedback in changing initiatives as well. The panel feels empowered to address this topic and give a voice to families in Ohio through their work.

Data

- Literature Review

The Northwest Ohio CRP gathered information from academic sources to gain a better understanding of child well-being and how an expanded definition of well-being might be beneficial in a child welfare setting. The results of this academic literature review are detailed in the results section.

- Focus group data

Four focus groups were conducted with different child welfare stakeholder groups to better understand the role of well-being for children involved with the child welfare system. Stakeholder groups included caseworkers, primary parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents. Table 2 provides a summary of the participant demographics. Of the 18 total who participated in focus groups, seven were kinship caregivers, five were foster parents, three were primary parents, and three were child welfare caseworkers. Most participants identified as black (72.2%), with only 27.8% of the sample identifying as white. All participants were female with an average age of 42.7.

Table 2
The Descriptive Information of Focus Group Participants (N=18).

	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i> (SD)
Role		
Kinship caregiver	7 (38.9%)	
Foster parent	5 (27.8%)	
Primary parent	3 (16.7%)	
Caseworker	3 (16.7%)	
Race		
White	5 (27.8%)	
Black	13 (72.2%)	
Gender		
Female	18 (100%)	
Age		42.7 (14.2)

Additionally, participants provided some additional insight into their stakeholder role. Four kinship caregivers reported they provide care for a grandchild, and the other three provide care for a niece or nephew. All kinship caregivers have had contact with the child welfare system, and four have had multiple contacts with child welfare. Contact with the child welfare system lasted anywhere from six months to three years for this group of kinship caregivers.

The caseworkers involved in the focus groups reported working at both intake and ongoing units during their careers, and their child welfare experience ranged from 3-7 years. Two were currently working on ongoing, and one was working on intake at the time of the time of data collection.

Primary parents involved in the project reported having on average two open cases with child welfare agencies in Ohio. Each reported having only one child at the time of the open case. The length of the open cases ranged from six months to two years, and each reported only having contact with one worker during the time the case was open. Two of the primary parents reported their child was placed with a relative during the open case, and the other reported no removal during their open case.

Finally, the foster parents in this study reported an average of 7.4 years as licensed foster parents. Three of the participants reported being designated as a treatment foster home.

Results

- Literature review

Child well-being has been studied across multiple domains, including health, education, economic security, and social and emotional development (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Previous research has shown that a range of factors, including poverty (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997), family structure (Amato & Keith, 1991), and parental involvement (Epstein, 2001), can impact child well-being. The role of the child welfare system in promoting child well-being has also been studied, with some research suggesting that child welfare interventions can have a positive impact on child well-being (Casey Family Programs, 2019), while others showing mixed results (Gifford, Berry, & Barth, 2000).

One of the three main objectives of the child welfare system is well-being. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 makes well-being a top priority of the child welfare system in addition to safety and permanence (Barth et al., 2008). Still, the main measures of success in child welfare have been permanence and safety. Safety and permanence reflect outcomes that are simpler to identify and quantify in child welfare policy and practice. However, evidence indicates that children who have suffered trauma may continue to have poorer well-being than children who have not experienced abuse, even when safety or permanence are supplied (e.g., Burns et al., 2004; Kortenkamp & Ehrle, 2002).

In Ohio, the child welfare system has undergone significant changes in recent years, including reforms aimed at improving the well-being of children in care (Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, 2018). Despite these efforts, there is a continued need to better understand the experiences and perspectives of children and families involved in the child welfare system (Ohio Children's Trust Fund, 2020).

- Focus group data

Four focus groups were conducted with different child welfare stakeholder groups to better understand the role of well-being for children involved with the child welfare system. Stakeholder groups included caseworkers, primary parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents. The focus group data was summarized into four themes including, (1) defining well-being, (2) evidence of well-being, (3) role in meeting well-being needs, (4) well-being services. Findings highlight similarities and differences for each group of stakeholders.

Theme 1: Defining Well-Being

Participants spoke about how they defined well-being for children involved with the child welfare system. Participants across all groups touched on the domains of the federal definition of child well-being which includes physical health, mental health, and educational needs. Each group of participants spoke about the importance of being involved in school activities, getting decent grades, and meeting learning goals. All groups touched on the importance of being sure to meet physical health care needs by attending doctor and dentist appointments.

Mental and emotional health was discussed by all groups of focus group participants. Foster parents mainly spoke about children's mental health and emotional needs being met by themselves as the caregivers and the environment they provide rather than any formal services. Kinship providers were more likely to discuss the need for more formal mental health care to address behavioral health needs they saw from children in the home. All groups discussed mental health needs in terms of the trauma children experienced during their time in care. The groups recognized the need for attention to emotional and mental health needs due to the separation of children from their families. Kinship providers summarized this by stating they could tell children were stressed out due to an increase in their challenging behaviors. A couple of these kinship providers pointed to the children's biological parents engaging in a relationship with the children for a couple months but then disappearing from their lives again as the source of stress.

In addition to the federal definition of well-being needs, kinship providers and foster parents spoke at length about stability and consistency in the home as important aspects of child well-being. They saw providing a stable and consistent home as a well-being need for these children. One kinship provider expanded on this discussion stating, "*But child well-being is being able to provide for them, make sure they have stability...*" Kinship providers and foster parents also spoke about creating a comfortable home environment for the children in their care as an important well-being need. They reported being concerned about the children's happiness in the home and feeling secure in this space. One foster parent summarized this by explaining that making children feel like they are part of a family and including them in family activities as essential to their security and happiness.

Additionally, kinship providers and foster parents advocated for the inclusion of spiritual well-being as an important piece to include in this definition. These caregiver groups reported they felt the inclusion of spiritual well-being and children feeling connected to adults and a greater power was important for healing. Similarly, a kinship provider reported they felt being sure children were taught morals and values was an important piece of meeting well-being needs.

Caseworkers and primary parents were the only groups to discuss the importance of attachment and family bonds to a child's well-being needs. One caseworker spoke about family bonds in this way,

"...we have the permanency where they have those lifelong, lasting relationships and bonds with people, and then also just even knowing where they come from, who they come from. So, I think that would be...the main description for me, because that all affects their well-being."

A primary parent also expanded on this conversation to include how their child viewed their former foster parents upon returning home. This parent reported their child was young during their time out of the home and felt some confusion around the role of all the caregivers in the child's life which affects their well-being. She explained upon reunification her child was still bonded to his previous caregiver, and she had to navigate the confusion of all the different familial attachments in her child's life.

Theme 2: Evidence of Well-Being

The second theme from the focus group data focuses on how these stakeholder groups measure or see evidence of well-being among children involved with the child welfare system. Caseworkers spoke mostly about physical evidence of well-being such as increased grades at school, better attendance at school, better hygiene and overall appearance, and reports of good sleeping and eating habits. They spoke about things they might see while on visits with a child. Caseworkers spoke about the children being willing to actively engage in conversation about school or sports and talking about new friends and interactions at school. Caseworkers advocated for seeing an overall high quality of life. One worker summarized this by saying,

“I think just how they see things...kind of like the quality of life, it just determines how they see the future, how they see where they are now, even services that they're open and willing to engage with.”

Foster parents and kinship caregivers focused their conversation on seeing the well-being of a child's demeanor in the home. Both groups described seeing well-being increase among children in their care over time by voluntarily sharing information about their day at school, talking about making new friends, willingly engaging in conversation about their feelings, or expressing genuine joy and happiness. One foster parent summarized saying,

“...once they feel more comfortable, once they feel just more acclimated to your family situation, you start to see genuine joy, genuine comfort. And things that they were maybe anxious about before or not feeling comfortable doing before, become more natural. They maybe voluntarily come and spend more time with you rather than hiding in their room.”

When asked to describe how they saw changes in well-being, foster parents and kinship caregivers focused on seeing increases in well-being as described above, whereas primary parents focused on being sensitive to potential decreases in well-being. Primary parents summarized seeing changes in well-being based on emotions like their children being angry, resentful, guarded, and overly emotional. One parent stated the following,

“So, you've got a child that appears to be angry and resentful and not wanting anything to do with the parent, but really they're just upset because they don't understand what's going on. They don't understand why their parents [are] gone. So, I think that emotional bit of it that is corresponding with all these different categories of just life in general are not really taken into consideration.”

Primary parents have limited time to spend with their children during the time they are placed out of the home. Thus, many of these reported experiences of well-being occur during visits where children could be confused about what is happening.

The caseworkers, foster parents, and primary parents discussed how well-being is measured. Caseworkers agreed that a single point-in-time measurement of well-being is not an accurate representation of child well-being. One caseworker stated,

“I think a true assessment of well-being can't necessarily happen in a snapshot.”

Foster parents similarly agreed that well-being cannot be measured with a simple checklist, and they speculated on whether the well-being of children was truly considered in case decision-making. One foster parent said,

“I understand that they have limitations on what they consider to evaluate in a case plan, but think unless something like this is objectified and mandated as part of a reunification or a case plan, I don't know that it's being considered at the caseworker level.”

A participant in the primary parent focus group stated there should also be different perspectives considered in the measurement of well-being, not just the child welfare agency. This parent stated,

“I think that she made a really good point there with taking everyone's perspective, everyone's feelings into account, because it's very easy to judge, especially when you've got a piece of paper in front of you that says, this is who this person is, and that's just all there is to it.”

Theme 3: Roles in Meeting Well-Being Needs

Participants from each group spoke about their role in meeting a child's well-being needs. Caseworkers mainly saw themselves as the tangible support for well-being needs. They stated they pay special attention to asking children, foster parents, and kinship families about their needs during visits and provide resources when possible. They reported this role often seems more important for younger children who are unable to speak for their own needs. Caseworkers emphasized their role in maintaining familial contact and relationships during the time children are placed out of the home and keeping all parties accountable. They stated they make efforts to be sure parents and children stay in contact during this time and focus on reunification. They also stated they wanted parents to focus on their own well-being during an open case. A caseworker explained they saw a parent's primary role in meeting their child's well-being needs as focusing on their reunification goals.

Similarly, primary parents saw their role in meeting their child's well-being needs as maintaining their relationship with their child. They spoke about how it is necessary to put their own feelings aside to focus on their child's needs. Primary parents were concerned with maintaining a good relationship with the substitute caregiver who was caring for their child during out-of-home placement. While this relationship with the substitute caregiver is critical for maintaining relationships between parents and children, parents reported several challenges in maintaining this attachment. One parent described the following situation,

“So, at first I thought that she was on my side because she was my cousin. She's my big cousin, so I thought that she was there to help me. But at the same time, it was like mixed emotions and mixed feelings. Like, one minute she'll be on my side, and then the next minute she'll be on their [CPS] side.”

Another primary parent shared a similar experience,

“I had a similar type of wishy-washy caregiver. I'd say she was all for the relationship one minute, and then the next minute she wasn't. There were many periods of time that I had to go without any so much as a phone call from my child or to my child. There were holidays that I had missed. There was a birthday that I missed because we were supposed to be working this plan of reunification, and she would get upset with me for something.”

Foster parents and kinship caregivers mainly saw themselves as advocates and the ultimate provider of well-being needs. They described their role at the beginning of placement in the home as learning everything they could about the child. They wanted to know the child's likes, dislikes, interests, hobbies, health needs, emotional state, and anything that could be helpful to understand and get to know the needs of the child. One foster parent described her role this way,

“I think we're probably at the front of the line for not only knowing what's in their best interests or their well-being, but advocating for it and sometimes demanding services, demanding things that you have to be a squeaky wheel with the caseworkers...with the agency.”

Foster parents specifically saw themselves as agents to empower young people to speak up for their own needs but also take responsibility for their behavior when it was needed. They found it was important to play a role in maintaining contact with the biological family and update families and child welfare agencies on all the positive things the children were doing. One foster parent stated she focuses a lot on communicating the positives with caseworkers. She said,

“That's my goal. My texts and emails, I want them to read them. So I try not to always have them be negative. But they got in this job because they want to help kids. They probably realized quickly on that this is a really tough situation, so helping them find positives too is important.”

Kinship caregivers saw themselves as being the sole provider for children's well-being needs. The overall feeling from kinship caregivers was that they received little attention or help from child welfare agencies after the placement of a relative child in their home. One kinship caregiver described their role this way,

“But, yeah, there's no financial help, there's no physical help, there's no respite help. There's nothing. And well-being comes from grandma or grandpa's or auntie's inner strength and fight and determination to save these kids from all of the circumstances that they're born under.”

Kinship caregivers described themselves as advocates, protectors, confidants, and the ultimate resource for a child's well-being needs.

Theme 4: Well-Being Services

Participants were asked about services or programming that specifically enhances or meets a child's well-being needs. All groups struggled to answer questions about programs that meet well-being needs. Caseworkers identified kinship care itself as a well-

being service given its attention to meeting a child's attachment needs. They also stated several things that maintain a child's dignity like providing suitcases during moves and resources to allow children to get their hair done or purchase prom dresses. Foster parents reported they could not identify any programming that specifically speaks to well-being. Though closely related they reported programming like independent living services that help young people think about getting a job, creating a resume, managing money, and preparing them to live autonomously could be considered well-being programs. Primary parents and kinship caregivers reported they could not think of any programming that relates to a child's well-being needs.

Conclusions

The first overarching conclusion emerging from this project on well-being is that both foster parents and kinship caregivers see themselves as the ultimate providers of well-being. While child welfare agencies and workers carry immense responsibilities for meeting well-being needs, the caregiver stakeholders perceive themselves as the ones who meet and care for children's well-being. Primary parents and caseworkers had a more difficult time conceptualizing their role in meeting child well-being needs. They mainly spoke about their role in meeting case plan goals like reunification and the importance of parents maintaining their own well-being to best support their children.

This first conclusion is immensely important given how kinship families felt completely unsupported by child welfare agencies in their efforts to meet a child's well-being needs. They reported receiving little to no support from child welfare to meet a child's needs once they received custody. They reported they would never want to see their relatives placed in foster care, so they stepped up to take care of the kids with little support from child welfare. When asked about services to help support child well-being, kinship providers stated there are none. They stated they had to find services in the community on their own to support the child's well-being.

The data suggests kinship families have major financial needs to best support child well-being. This could be the result of a lack of local funding to support kinship caregivers or the legislative barriers that preclude kinship caregivers from being eligible for social service benefits. The panel recommends DCY consider advocacy, whether through state or federal legislative partners or waiver applications, to consider options for changes to childcare subsidies, SNAP, and legal assistance programs eligibility criteria to consider child-only income for kinship caregivers.

A second major conclusion concerns the measurement of well-being by these stakeholders. Caseworkers tended to think about physical or tangible evidence of well-being like school performance and physical appearance. Caregivers in the study had more holistic views of well-being. The caregiver stakeholders tended to think about well-being in terms of a child's emotional well-being, their comfort level in the home, and their willingness to engage in conversation with the caregivers. This information is imperative to understanding a child's well-being when placed out of the home, but it appears this information is not often recorded or measured in the child welfare database. All stakeholder groups agreed that a measurement of well-being could be complex and should certainly involve the perspective of parents, young people, caregivers, and caseworkers across multiple time points.

The final conclusion relates to stakeholders' definition of well-being. Caseworkers generally had a difficult time defining well-being, and their answers closely aligned with the federal child welfare definitions of child well-being. Importantly, both caseworkers and primary parents highlighted attachment as a major well-being marker for children who are placed out of the home. These groups both acknowledged that continued contact with family with consistent communication about this process is essential for child well-being.

Kinship families and foster families touched on physical health, mental health, and educational needs as essential pieces of well-being. Furthermore, they spoke at length about the importance of consistency and stability as a major well-being need. While the idea of consistency and stability in placement is always a topic of conversation in child welfare decision-making, it is not something that is measured as an important aspect of child well-being. Caregivers spoke about seeing real change in children once they felt comfortable in their new placement and could come to expect a consistent and structured routine. This same attention should be given to the need to maintain some level of stability and consistency as the case moves toward reunification.

Recommendations

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.

The data strongly suggest well-being for children involved with child welfare expands beyond the narrow measurement of physical, mental, and educational health. Expanding the measurement framework for well-being to encompass holistic indicators, including emotional well-being, comfort in the home environment, and attachment and communication with caregivers, is essential for capturing the multidimensional nature of child well-being. Incorporating perspectives from various stakeholders such as parents, young people, caregivers, and caseworkers ensures a comprehensive understanding and enables more targeted interventions to support the well-being of children involved in the child welfare system.

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

The data suggest the number one challenge for kinship families is financial hardship. Particularly, kinship caregivers may struggle to meet basic needs such as housing, legal services, childcare, and food. The panel recommends DCY consider advocacy, whether through state or federal legislative partners or waiver applications, to consider options for changes to childcare subsidies, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and legal assistance programs eligibility criteria to consider child-only income for kinship caregivers.

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.

The data collected provides very little insight into the services and programs available to address child well-being. Undertaking a comprehensive study of the services and programs offered by local PCSAs that contribute to child well-being would allow DCY to identify effective practices, address gaps in service provision, and optimize resources to better meet the diverse needs of children under the agency's care.

REPORT 2: NORTHEAST OHIO CRP ANNUAL REPORT

Annual CRP Activities

SCHEDULES

The Northeast Ohio CRP meets bi-monthly from August to May of each work year. The 2023–2024 work year began with the Ohio CRP Annual Strategic Planning Meeting on Thursday, May 18, 2023, via Zoom. All Ohio CRP members were invited to attend this meeting. The Annual Strategic Planning Meeting allows the Northeast Ohio CRP, in conjunction with the other panels, to learn from the other panels' previous year of work and plan for the next year. The Northeast panel decided on a topic and created a data request for DCY at the annual meeting.

Regular meetings for the Northeast Ohio CRP began in August 2023. The panel meets bi-monthly on the third Wednesday of the month from 2:00 pm to 4:00 pm via Zoom. The following is a list of all meeting dates for the panel from August 2023 to April 2024:

Table 1. Northeast Ohio CRP Regular Meeting Schedule:

Wednesday, August 23, 2023
Wednesday, October 18, 2023
Wednesday, December 20, 2023
Wednesday, February 21, 2024
Thursday, April 18, 2024

CHANGES TO PANEL MEMBERSHIP

The Northeast Ohio CRP began the work year with eight members. They maintained these members throughout the year. These eight members are identified in the Panel Membership and Professional Affiliation section. Jim Molnar was elected by the panel as the new chairperson in 2021-2022 and served as the chair throughout this work year. This panel is diligent about maintaining membership numbers, and they plan to continue their strong engagement with members to maintain their membership structure. Several members have had to disengage from the CRP at the end of the 2023-2024 work year. The panel has already recruited two members to replace the four who plan to step away. The panel plans to engage in additional member recruitment prior to the start of the 2024-2025 work year with plans to add at least four more members.

SUCCESSSES, CHALLENGES, AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Northeast Ohio CRP members identified several successes, challenges, and achievements during their work in 2023-2024. The Northeast Ohio CRP had excellent participation from members during the bi-monthly meetings. The panel identified themselves as a diverse and strong group. Jim Molnar, the elected chairperson, is credited with leading great conversation. The panel enjoyed candid conversations that showcased each of their expertise and encouraged reaching a consensus quickly.

The panel identified the lack of available data on their topic as a major challenge. Panel members are aware that primary data collection efforts are challenging and time-consuming. Despite this challenge, the panel was able to prepare and carry out an IRB-approved research project that included data collection with 18 individuals with lived experience with child welfare. This work stems from the previous year's findings and builds nicely on the previous report. The panel identifies the data collected directly from those with lived experience as a major success for the CRPs. The panel values being able to give a voice to those most affected by the child welfare system.

Background

The Northeast Ohio CRP focused their evaluation for the past two years on Ohio's support to families and monitoring of children after permanency is achieved. For the purposes of this report, the panel defined permanency as the closing of an ongoing case and reunification with the biological or kinship family. The panel has been particularly interested in understanding to which services families are referred or linked at the time of reunification and case closure to encourage family stabilization. The panel's report from 2022-2023 demonstrated a lack of available data to provide a strong picture of the case closure procedures and case closure services provided to families upon their exit from child welfare. To supplement the data from the 2022-2023 report, the Northeast Ohio CRP collaborated with the Northwest Ohio CRP to gather more data. Together, the panels conducted a series of focus groups with stakeholders across Ohio to better understand their perspective on the process of exiting child welfare services.

Strengths

Throughout the work year, the panel identified several strengths in Ohio's practice of supporting families following an interaction with the child welfare system. First, the Ohio Kinship & Adoption Navigator (OhioKAN) Program provides sophisticated service linkage for kinship families. Although there is no data regarding whether kinship families involved with child protection are utilizing this program, the reach and knowledge of the program from community members suggest it is well-utilized. The availability of this service is a major strength for kinship families when they are no longer involved with the child welfare system.

Additionally, the implementation of Ohio Resilience through Integrated Systems and Excellence (OhioRISE) provides opportunities for families to access necessary supportive services with or without child welfare involvement. OhioRISE care coordination teams provide essential, intensive in-home services for families with children involved with several youth-serving systems. Care coordination teams are designed to link and refer the necessary services for youth and families in need of stabilization. These services can be accessed regardless of child welfare involvement and could be a resource at the time a child welfare case is closed that provides continued stabilization services.

While these strengths of Ohio's practice in supporting families with child welfare involvement were identified through the Northeast Ohio CRP, it is important to note that the Northwest Ohio CRP data reported a lack of resources for kinship families, indicating potential disparities in resource availability for kinship families on a regional basis or a lack of awareness of available resources.

Data

- Literature Review

The Northeast Ohio CRP gathered information from scientific sources to gain a better understanding of the case closure process. The results of this academic literature review are detailed in the results section.

- Focus group data

Four focus groups were conducted with different child welfare stakeholder groups to better understand the role of well-being for children involved with the child welfare system. Stakeholder groups included caseworkers, primary parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents. Table 2 provides a summary of the participant demographics. Of the 18 total who participated in focus groups, seven were kinship caregivers, five were foster parents, three were primary parents, and three were child welfare caseworkers. Most participants identified as black (72.2%), with only 27.8% of the sample identifying as white. All participants were female with an average age of 42.7.

Table 2

The Descriptive Information of Focus Group Participants (N=18).

	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i> (SD)
Role		
Kinship caregiver	7 (38.9%)	
Foster parent	5 (27.8%)	
Primary parent	3 (16.7%)	
Caseworker	3 (16.7%)	
Race		
White	5 (27.8%)	
Black	13 (72.2%)	
Gender		
Female	18 (100%)	
Age		42.7 (14.2)

Additionally, participants provided some additional insight into their stakeholder role. Four kinship caregivers reported they provide care for a grandchild, and the other three provide care for a niece or nephew. All kinship caregivers have had contact with the child welfare system, and four have had multiple contacts with child welfare. Contact with the child welfare system lasted anywhere from six months to three years for this group of kinship caregivers.

The caseworkers involved in the focus groups reported working at both intake and ongoing units during their careers, and their child welfare experience ranged from 3-7 years. Two were currently working on ongoing, and one was working on intake at the time of the time of data collection.

Primary parents involved in the project reported having on average two open cases with child welfare agencies in Ohio. Each reported having only one child at the time of the open case. The length of the open cases ranged from six months to two years, and each reported only having contact with one worker during the time the case was open. Two of the primary parents reported their child was placed with a relative during the open case, and the other reported no removal during their open case.

Finally, the foster parents in this study reported an average of 7.4 years as licensed foster parents. Three of the participants reported being designated as a treatment foster home.

Results

- Literature review

It is essential for child welfare agencies to ensure services that address families' needs are delivered to families at the time of reunification and shortly thereafter to avoid a reentry into the system. Research suggests that while well-intentioned, contact with the child welfare system and continued instances of out-of-home care can cause additional trauma for children and families (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). It is important that child welfare agencies give thought and attention to the services provided for families at the time of reunification and case closure to ensure family stability. Linking the proper services for families at the time of case closure ensures their limited future contacts with the child welfare system, by providing families with the resources and information for services in case service needs arise following case closure. Linkage of proper services for reunified families can serve to empower families to seek out resources to meet their needs and exercise their knowledge of what is available to them. Existing literature sheds little light on what services are most helpful at the time of case closure, and best practices for this process are scant.

Since 2011, nationwide child welfare data suggests an increase in families returning to the attention of the child welfare system after a completed case (Davidson et al., 2019). Research suggests this may be due to inadequate service provision and assessment of family progress towards case plan goals (Davidson et al., 2019). The case closure process usually includes a mutual review of progress and an assessment of goal achievement that ultimately reduces or eliminates the risk of maltreatment. When there is a family need still apparent at case closure that is outside the scope of child welfare services, caseworkers will complete referrals for community services. Caseworkers should plan with families for a potential crisis after case closure by providing appropriate contact information and resources (DePanfilis & Salus, 2003).

Knowing when to close a case is one of the most difficult decisions for child welfare agencies, but the evidence that does exist around the case closure process has several common themes. The first is that case plan services should be goal-oriented, and child welfare agencies must have a way to measure progress with the goal of case closure (Behaert et al., 2021; Berliner et al., 2015). Similarly, case plan services must be evidence-based and consider family and neighborhood factors such as availability of services, transportation needs, and culturally appropriate services (Berliner et al., 2015; Davidson, 2019). Research has also identified the need to consider a family's experience with the child welfare system. This includes recognizing a family's ambivalence to

participate in services, utilizing motivational enhancement practices, creating trusting relationships between caseworkers and families, and engaging in collaborative practices with the community services linked in case plans (Berliner et al., 2015; Chamber et al., 2018; Davidson et al., 2019; Fuller & Zhang, 2017).

This growing body of research is essential to understanding and improving child welfare case closure services. This project will advance the knowledge by continuing to engage families and stakeholders in the conversation about how to improve services and support at case closure.

- Focus group data

Four focus groups were conducted with different child welfare stakeholder groups to better understand the case closure process and services most supportive for families at the time of closure. Stakeholder groups included caseworkers, primary parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents. The focus group data was summarized into four themes including, (1) confusion about the case closure process, (2) referral processes, (3) emotional support needs, and (4) case closure services. Findings highlight similarities and differences for each group of stakeholders.

Theme 1: Confusion about the Case Closure Process

The first theme described the case closure process from the stakeholder perspective. The overwhelming theme of case closure procedures displayed a total misunderstanding of the process and as such this theme was named, *confusion about the case closure process*. Caseworkers reported that there were specific procedures that were followed for case closure. The ongoing caseworker participants stated they generally prepare families for case closure by giving them notice when the visits from the agency would be ending. They stated this information about case closure is communicated at face-to-face in-home visits. For the intake workers, it was frequently a phone call that communicated the end or transfer of a case given those cases are only open for 30-45 days. Caseworkers reported there is generally a brief reflection of meeting case plan goals and an assessment of any additional needs at the end of the case. Caseworkers did not describe engaging any other casework partners, court personnel, or community providers in this closure process.

The information presented by foster parents and primary parents presents a very different view of case closure. Foster parents reported they felt case closure was abrupt, and they did not receive sufficient time or attention to the closure transition. One foster parent stated,

“It seems like it's abrupt. You get a little bit of a hint that we're getting near the end. And then with one of my kids, I got a call at 4:00pm and said, you need to bring them home tonight, and we hadn't packed. They didn't get a chance to say goodbye to their class. It was heart wrenching. I knew it was coming, but I didn't know that it was going to be that abrupt. So that's incredibly frustrating. This little guy was with us for a year, and we didn't get to say goodbye. We didn't get to have any kind of closure with his friends or teacher.”

Primary parents equally felt they did not receive a lot of information about case closure. One parent stated,

“I was literally told, once your case closes, you won't hear from us anymore. And I didn't hear anything...And then there was a letter in the mail stating that it was found unsubstantiated, and the case was being closed. And that was it.”

There also appeared to be confusion among parents about the goals of child welfare involvement and how families reflect on progress and move toward case closure. Another parent stated,

“I honestly thought they were trying to take my baby away from me. So, I didn't know if I was going to have an open case for years, for months, or if they were just going to come and just take my baby. So, I was definitely confused about the whole situation and how it would end.”

Theme 2: Referral Processes

The second theme, *referral processes*, described how caseworkers saw their role in service referral at the time of case closure. Workers reported that they reflect on services linked during the time the case was open and encourage families to continue engaging with those services. In other cases, caseworkers reported providing information more generally on services available in the community rather than making any specific referral for an identified need. One worker stated,

“I provide resources and self-referrals. I love the resource guide. It's my favorite thing to hand out.”

Caseworkers reported they will not keep a case open to meet some kind of tangible need if the family already demonstrated their ability to provide for basic needs.

From a different perspective, primary parents reported that while caseworkers asked about service or resource needs at case closure, they often did not follow through. In addition, primary parents often felt a tension between asking for help and the fear of prolonging their involvement with the child welfare system. Despite being asked about their needs, parents often hesitated to request assistance, perceiving it as a potential risk rather than a supportive offer. One parent shared,

”The only thing that I can say that they did give me resources for is counseling, because we did talk about my childhood trauma, and they did give me a couple numbers or whatever. And like she said, they were asking me that I need anything, and some people were telling me, use them. Tell them you need everything. But then it's like, that's like a gift of the curse, because it's like, I'll tell you, I need everything. Like, oh, well, you don't have anything to provide for her, so maybe we should keep this case open a little bit longer. So, I honestly really didn't even ask them for nothing. I just wanted them out my life.”

While this parent received counseling resources from the child welfare system, they hesitated to request further assistance due to concerns it might extend the case and their involvement with the system.

Theme 3: Emotional Support Needs

The third theme, *emotional support needs*, was derived mainly from primary parents and foster parents. Primary parents approaching case closure expressed immense fear at the time of case closure. One parent stated,

“I would say that with reunification and case closure, there are so different emotions involved in that, and I think one of the biggest ones is fear.” Another stated, *“There was so much fear for me regarding all of it when he came home. It was, am I able to do this? Do I know how to parent him? Because up to this point, I’ve been told I couldn’t. I didn’t know how to do it effectively.”*

This points to the need for emotional support among newly reunified families that appear to be missing from the parent and caseworker relationship. Coupled with the first theme of not understanding the role of child welfare agencies in supporting families, parents also felt stress about the next time they make a mistake, or their child gets hurt and ends up at the hospital. Foster parents also expressed concern about the lack of general support available to parents at reunification. One foster parent described the difficulty of parents who must maintain their own health and well-being prior to reunification and the additional stress that comes following the reunification. Parents must maintain their newly found sobriety or parenting skills but also manage the addition of the day-to-day activities of raising children who recently returned to the home.

Theme 4: Case Closure Services

The final theme named, *case closure services*, details some community services stakeholders found helpful and what seems to be missing at the time of case closure. Caseworkers described some administrative services available at their agency that assist with community support and match families with needs. They also described community-based family support services that can help families involved with social services with housing services and other general support. Caseworkers described Triple P online parenting programs as greatly beneficial for families as well as services provided by local domestic violence agencies. Foster parents and kinship providers also reported ample access to behavioral health services for children who were involved with child welfare. They attributed this to services linked during the open case that are sustained following case closure.

There was more information about services that were missing from the community upon case closure. Caseworkers spoke about fragmented and inaccessible community services like childcare subsidies and housing assistance, both of which have significant hurdles trying to simply get in contact with these agencies. Foster parents advocated for additional tangible resources for newly reunified families. As described in the first theme, parents have significant fears and stress around the reunification process, and there should be additional attention to alleviating these stressors. Kinship caregivers reported significant financial needs and childcare issues. Kinship caregivers also reflected on potential legislative solutions to meet these financial needs. Although detailed legislative solutions weren’t discussed, kinship caregivers emphasized the need for legislative changes to grant them more rights to supportive services. They advocated for ways to consider the children in their care as having zero dollars in income rather than considering

their eligibility for services based on the kinship caregiver's family income to be eligible for things like SNAP and Medicaid.

It should be noted that kinship caregivers were largely absent from the focus group conversation on the case closure process and case closure services. When asked about case closure services or the case closure process, kinship caregivers could give little insight. They reported being completely left out of the conversation with child welfare agencies and services, and they received little tangible, emotional, or educational support from child welfare agencies. This is particularly concerning given kinship providers' perspective of themselves as an essential support not only for the children in their care but also for the child welfare system. One kinship provider stated the following when talking about child welfare agencies,

“And they are using our love for our grandkids against us. They sit up here, they threaten us and everything. I was told, come get them or they're going to adopt them out.... But I had a full-time job and two other kids that I was raising, but I don't want to not see my grandkids for life. So of course, I went and kept going and kept trying to figure out what to do...Their plan was to dump and cut me loose.”

Conclusions

The panel noted several major conclusions from this project. The first is closely aligned with the first theme about the overall confusion for all parties at the time of case closure. Both primary parents and foster parents felt the end of cases was chaotic with limited attention to the transition of children back into their primary caregiver's home. This is particularly concerning given the findings from the Northwest Ohio CRP that highlight the importance of consistency and stability for children involved with child welfare. Family stability should be a focus at the time of case closure. Best practice suggests there should be an effort to review a family's progress during their time with child welfare and reflect on those services most helpful in the reunification process. This could provide a type of stability plan or long-term plan for families to address any future crisis. While caseworkers involved in this project perceive they are providing this important service for families, there is concern about how this is reflected statewide in practice. Caseworkers note they share resources and reflect on service needs, but primary parents and foster parents involved in this project feel they are not getting the sufficient support needed at the time of case closure. In some areas, caseworkers may lack the necessary resources or training to develop comprehensive stability plans effectively. Additionally, variability in caseworker caseloads and regional policies can lead to disparities in the quality-of-service delivery at case closure. Families in certain regions may not receive the same level of support and follow-up, potentially leaving them more vulnerable to future crises. Ensuring that all families have access to well-developed and consistently implemented stability plans is crucial for maintaining long-term family stability and preventing re-entry into the child welfare system.

The next major takeaway is about the lack of services available to families upon case closure. Coupled with a confusing end to services, the lack of emotional or tangible support for newly reunified families might be of concern. Primary parents in this project expressed their fear of reunification and felt like they did not have the emotional support

needed during this transition. The data suggest primary parents are looking for consistent and compassionate guidance, reassurance, and validation from caseworkers. These parents are seeking more than just resource referrals, they wanted understanding and genuine assistance without the fear of prolonged child welfare involvement. The panel reported on this topic last year and expressed concerns that families might need additional support at the time of reunification that could include additional support from child welfare agencies beyond reunification. While this might not be ideal for families anxious to get away from the child welfare system, the panel considers if this additional time and support could benefit family stability in the long term.

It is critical to explore the possibility of establishing a formalized process for transitioning families to preventative child welfare services, and local support agencies, fostering collaboration among service providers and focusing on stabilizing families through the integration of models that bring families together. This might include more innovative approaches including the use of peer mentors who have experienced the child welfare system and reunification or models where foster parents serve as mentors for newly reunified families. Foster parents included in this project provided several stories of their support for reunified families beyond reunification and case closure. They were not supported in any way in these ventures, and if foster parents were trained to be mentors and supported in some way to engage in these relationships this could be a strong model for long-term family stability that avoids further child welfare contact.

The final major takeaway from this project is the lack of kinship involvement in this conversation. As noted in the results, kinship caregivers had little to say about the case closure process because they felt left out of the conversation with child welfare overall. They reported receiving little to no financial or emotional support, and no information or guidance on where to get this support. Last year's report detailed the data issues involved in understanding the case closure process and how each individual PCSA navigates the use of kinship care. This continues to be an issue in answering questions about kinship caregivers who are supported by DCY and PCSAs and how their involvement with PCSAs differs across the state. Kinship caregivers are an essential part of the child welfare system and family stability for children, but they continually report being left out of the child welfare process and receive little support for their important role. The panel felt it necessary to make this a highlight and a point of advocacy for the needs of kinship caregivers.

Recommendations

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.

Anecdotally, the panel is aware of several local efforts to bring together community partners to support families once reunification is achieved. It is important to document these efforts and understand the logistics of this kind of supportive service and how to implement these statewide. DCY should be involved in finding and sharing this information and providing guidance as needed.

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.

Research suggests building relationships between foster families and biological families can strengthen reunification efforts. While some PCSAs are engaged in programming that bridges these relationships, DCY should place an effort on educating and encouraging these kinds of practices, including evidence-based programs, for all PCSAs across the state. DCY should help with the implementation of such practices as needed or requested.

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

Establishing consistent case closure practices and bolstering funding and support for kinship families post-case closure across all PCSAs is vital for ensuring continuity of care, promoting stability for children, and providing ongoing support for kinship caregivers who play a crucial role in the child welfare system.

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

The data suggests there is a disconnect between child welfare workers and caregiver stakeholders around the experiences of the case closure process. Conducting an evaluation to understand barriers to clear and consistent communication between child welfare workers and families at case closure would be beneficial for improving family engagement, fostering trust, and ensuring successful transitions out of the child welfare system, ultimately promoting positive outcomes for children and families involved.

REPORT 3: CENTRAL OHIO CRP ANNUAL REPORT

Annual CRP Activities

SCHEDULES

The Central Ohio CRP meets bi-monthly from August to May of each work year. The 2023–2024 work year began with the Ohio CRP Annual Strategic Planning Meeting on Thursday, May 18, 2023, which occurred via Zoom. All Ohio CRP members were invited to attend this meeting. The Annual Strategic Planning Meeting allows the Central Ohio CRP, in conjunction with the other panels, to learn from the other panels’ previous year of work and plan for the next year. The Central panel decided on a topic and created a data request for DCY at the annual meeting.

Regular meetings for the Central Ohio CRP began in August 2023. The panel meets bi-monthly on the second Thursday of the month from 1:00–3:00 pm via Zoom. The following is a list of all meeting dates for the panel from August 2023 to April 2024:

Table 1. Central Ohio CRP Meeting Schedule:
Thursday, August 31, 2023
Thursday, October 12, 2023
Thursday, December 14, 2023
Tuesday, February 27, 2024
Thursday, April 11, 2024

CHANGES TO PANEL MEMBERSHIP

The Central Ohio CRP began the work year with 12 members and maintained this membership throughout the work year. A core group of CRP members has consistently participated on this panel, and its members have committed themselves to the ongoing recruitment of new members. The panel will lose two members at the end of this work year who lacked in engagement with panel activities. The combination of veteran members and newer members has generated new and exciting ideas.

SUCCESSSES, CHALLENGES, AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The Central Ohio CRP identified the completion of a one-year project that was able to yield recommendations as a major success. The panel utilized several different avenues to learn about the topic and completed a great deal of work in just five meetings. The new group of panel members was engaged throughout the entire process and provided new ways of thinking about the topic. Veteran members along with new members identified this as a great achievement.

Background

The Central Ohio CRP focused their evaluation on the retention of foster families in Ohio for the 2023–2024 work year. The panel pointed out that, the retention of foster families, despite the issue being a pervasive problem in the state of Ohio, often receives less

attention, compared to recruitment of new families. Members discussed their personal experiences with the lack of attention to foster home retention and expressed interest in examining how DCY and PCSAs have invested resources to address this issue. The panel sought to understand the current retention practices utilized by the state and provide suggestions for innovative approaches to improvement.

Note that the Southeast CRP focused on recruitment of foster families and the Central CRP focused on retention of foster families. The panels collaborated on some data review efforts, and as a result, some information contained within each report is repeated in the other.

Strengths

Ohio's child welfare system has made significant strides in its attention to the retention of foster families, bolstered by increased financial investments and heightened awareness of the pressing need. With greater resources at their disposal, the system has been able to provide opportunities for local agencies to engage in several retention strategies. Through a combination of financial backing and widespread awareness initiatives, Ohio's child welfare system continues to strengthen its foundation, striving to meet the ever-growing demand for safe and loving homes for children in need.

Data

- Literature Review

The Central Ohio CRP gathered information from academic sources to gain a better understanding of what is nationally known about foster parent retention. The results of this academic literature review are detailed in the results section.

- Review of the Ohio 2023 Annual Progress and Services Report

The 2023 Annual Progress and Services Report provides details on the \$5 million allocation for the recruitment and retention of foster parents in the 2022-2023 fiscal years. The amended Substitute House Bill 100 of the 134th General Assembly (HB 110) included an allocation of funding to DCY to support statewide efforts for recruitment and retention of foster caregivers. The final amounts allocated for this purpose were \$5 million in State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2022 and 2023. The Central Ohio CRP focused on the retention (versus recruitment) of foster families. Details of the panel's main takeaways from the report are in the results section of this report.

- Presentation from two staff of DCY on The Adoption and Resource Home Recruitment and Assessment Program

To learn about the details of the Adoption and Resource Home Recruitment and Assessment Program, the panel met with two staff of DCY who presented on The Adoption and Resource Home Recruitment and Assessment Program on December 14, 2023 via Zoom. The key panel takeaways from this meeting are included in the results section.

- Ohio Children’s Alliance (OCA) Survey Results

In February 2022 the Ohio Child Care Resource & Referral Association (OCCRRA) distributed a survey to current, former, and potential foster parents at public and private foster care and adoption agencies throughout the state of Ohio. The survey was developed in partnership with OCA and intended to capture experiences and opinions on foster parent recruitment, training, and retention. The survey was open for four weeks and received 386 responses in total. The majority (71%) of total respondents come from five of Ohio’s largest cities and their suburbs—Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, and Toledo. Ohio’s rural and Appalachian regions are underrepresented in the survey. This survey provided valuable insight directly from foster parents on the topic of retention. The survey results most important for this CRP project are highlighted in the results section.

- DCY Data

The SACWIS team at DCY provided the panel with data on this topic as requested by the CRP on September 30, 2023. The panel requested the following:

- Mean and range for the length of currently licensed families in Ohio
- Length of time licensed families retain their license by agency (PCSA, private network, and/or managed care) (mean, range)
- Number and type (age of children accepted, level of care, etc.) of placements accepted before exit or licensing lapse

An overview of the data is included in the results section.

Results

- Literature review

From 2013 to 2018, there was an upward trend in the number of youths entering care, but this trend reversed in 2018 and has been declining since (Administration for Children, Youth, and Families et al., 2024). Despite the downward trend, an alarming number of youths are still being placed in foster care. In the fiscal year 2022, an estimated 369,000 youths in the United States were placed in foster care (Administration for Children, Youth, and Families et al., 2024). In the state of Ohio, approximately 15,000 youths were in foster care (Administration for Children, Youth, and Families & Children’s Bureau, 2023). Of these youths, 56% (n = 8,355) were placed in non-relative foster family homes (Administration for Children, Youth, and Families & Children’s Bureau, 2023). However, the total number of licensed foster homes in the state, regardless of whether they were relative or non-relative, was 7,349, pointing to the need for recruiting and retaining foster families (Who Cares: A national count of foster homes and families, n.d.). Although both foster family recruitment and retention are essential in addressing this issue, the Central Ohio CRP concentrated its efforts on the retention of foster families in Ohio.

Given the high rate of youths entering foster care every year, foster families are important as they are an essential source that can provide a safe, stable, and nurturing environment for youths who are experiencing many challenging adverse experiences in their lives (Berger et al., 2009; Geiger et al., 2013). Foster families play an important role as the

primary resource for youths in care, working to fulfill their needs as well as supporting their permanency goals. Despite the necessity for good-quality foster families, the process of recruiting and retaining such families remains a significant challenge within the child welfare system (Whenan et al., 2009). For example, the rate of foster family turnover is substantially high throughout the United States, often attaining annual 30 to 50% turnover rates each year (Yordy, 2022). Utilizing administrative data from three states (i.e., New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon), one study found that the overall median length of foster parenting lasted from 8 to 14 months, shorter than the foster care experiences of many youths (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007). The frequency of foster families leaving the system can result in numerous placements for children in the child welfare system, thereby impeding the continuity and stability of care and re-traumatizing youths who have already experienced trauma due to being separated from their biological parents (Williams et al., 2023). A qualitative study conducted with adults with foster care experience during their childhood found that these individuals perceived frequent placement moves as significant losses, resulting in adverse emotional damage that hindered their ability to trust people and form and maintain interpersonal relationships (Unrau et al., 2008). The high turnover rate of foster families is linked with negative effects not only on the youths in care but also on the child welfare system itself. The constant need to recruit, train, and prepare new foster parents with the appropriate capacity and tools places a considerable burden on the system (Hanlon et al., 2021).

There are numerous reasons for the high turnover rates among foster families. A systematic review of factors affecting foster parent retention identified five common elements linked to foster parent retention (i.e., relationship to the child welfare system, material resources, personal attributes, training, peer support) (Hanlon et al., 2021). Specifically, the most common factor was the foster parents' relationship with the child welfare system and agency workers. Foster parents receiving support from child welfare workers were more likely to serve their role as foster parents for a longer time (Cherry & Orme, 2013). At the same time, a quarter of foster parents decided to discontinue their role as foster parents due to negative experiences with the child welfare worker, lack of support when needed, and a feeling of not being respected or recognized by the child welfare agency (Ahn et al., 2017). Financial resources, such as the foster family's income level or financial support from the child welfare agency (e.g., transportation support, health care service support), were also found to be a factor related to foster parent retention (Hanlon et al., 2021). Additionally, studies suggest that the level of preparedness as a foster parent, through training on various topics related to foster parenting offered by child welfare agencies, is associated with foster parent retention (Rhodes et al., 2001).

While numerous studies have studied factors associated with foster family retention and have provided broad recommendations for improving foster family retention (e.g., Geiger et al., 2013, Hanlon et al., 2021, Randle et al., 2017, Rhodes et al., 2003), few have focused specifically on the contextual challenges and opportunities within the State of Ohio. The Central Ohio's CRP discussion for this year is therefore important, aiming to tailor these general insights to address state-specific issues effectively. This research is essential for developing strategies that not only mitigate high turnover rates of foster

families but also enhance the support systems for foster families across the state, ensuring a more stable and nurturing environment for children in their care.

- Review of the Ohio 2023 Annual Progress and Services Report

The panel noted in the progress report few if any retention efforts were aimed statewide but were mainly focused on recruitment. Recruitment methods included the development and maintenance of a statewide website for recruitment created in May 2019. In addition, the state has focused efforts on increasing their social media presence following the development of the website. Prior to the creation of the website, potential focus parents would need to contact a local PCSA or private licensing agency to learn more about the process and responsibilities. Developing a statewide website with one place to visit for more information allows a social media campaign to be more effective.

The progress report detailed that DCY is exploring a collaboration with the National Council for Adoption (NCFA) on a cross-comparative research project to determine differences in recruitment and retention practices. There have been no updates on this project since it was placed on hold in 2020. The panel is very interested in any developments regarding this project.

Local efforts at retention include DCY offering funds as a grant opportunity to support public and private children's services agencies in their efforts to retain foster caregivers, prioritizing funds to develop and implement new services or activities to support the treatment of foster caregivers. DCY outlines retention strategies that might include the following:

- Develop/implement or enhance/expand a peer-to-peer mentorship program for foster caregivers.
- Develop/implement or enhance/expand other supports for foster caregivers, including support groups/social media groups.
- Develop, purchase, or enhance trauma training for foster caregivers and/or for agency staff.
- Develop/implement the use of a trauma-informed treatment model.
- Offer incentives to foster caregivers who recertify and have had at least one placement in their current certification period (or additional criteria established).
- Offer incentives to family foster caregivers who become certified as treatment foster caregivers.
- Offer incentives to foster caregivers who foster teens or large sibling groups.
- Develop or enhance/expand foster caregiver recognition activities that could include community businesses offering free or discounted services to foster caregivers and youth.
- Develop/implement or enhance/expand an agency 24/7 crisis prevention/intervention program to support foster families to prevent crisis or to offer support during times of crisis.
- Become a Nationally Accredited foster care agency.
- Other retention activities are detailed in an agency's application for funding and approved by DCY.

- The progress report stated the following: “Increased efforts must be placed on foster parent retention, as national data trends show that nearly half of all foster parents stop fostering during their first year” (Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, 2022, p.155).
- Presentation from two staff with the Ohio Department of Children and Youth presented on The Adoption and Resource Home Recruitment and Assessment Program

Two DCY staff provided an overview of The Adoption and Resource Home Recruitment and Assessment Program. They described the initiative aims to support regional and state-wide efforts in recruiting adoption and resource homes, encompassing foster and kinship care. It seeks to assist various agencies, including PCSAs, private child placing agencies (PCPAs), private noncustodial agencies (PNAs), and Title IV-E Juvenile Courts, in securing suitable homes for children residing in out-of-home placements. Moreover, the plan includes addressing potential workforce shortages through the establishment of a regional pool of certified Tier I and Tier II Assessors.

Several key vendors are involved in this endeavor, including Adopt America Network (AAN), OCA, and Ohio Child Care Resource & Referral Hubs. These hubs play a crucial role in providing multifaceted support, including the development of recruitment event materials, attendance at such events, planning, and follow-up. They also help families at various stages of readiness for becoming foster parents by educating them on the home study process, conducting pre-screening checks, and providing navigation through pre-service training and ongoing support.

Part of the strategy involves an Adoption and Resource Home Marketing and Recruitment Campaign led by the OCA. The campaign's objectives include driving traffic to the “It Takes Heart Ohio” website, incorporating campaign materials, and increasing qualified family applicants to meet Ohio's needs. Additionally, the campaign aims to establish and manage necessary marketing infrastructure, continuously develop strategies, and effectively communicate with potential recruits.

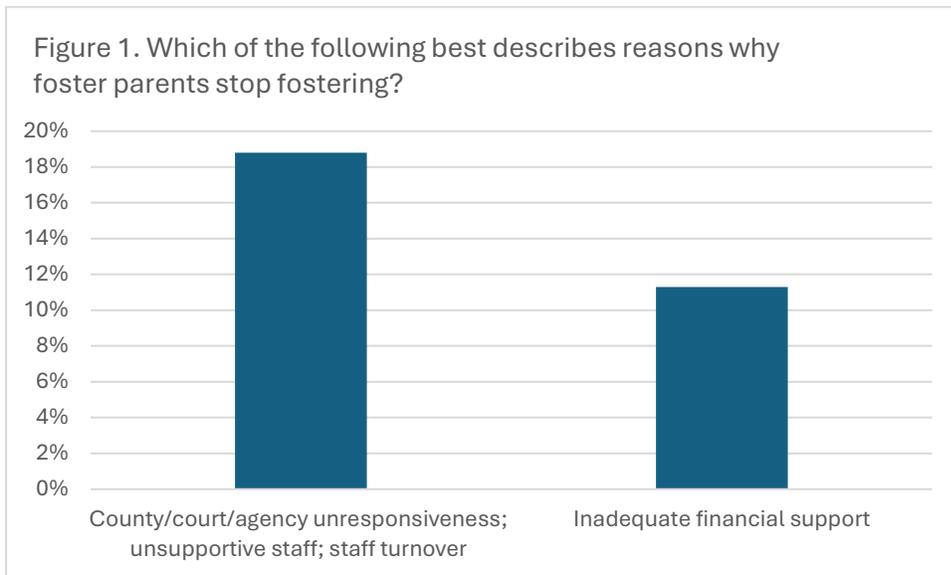
As part of the data request, the panel received the campaign materials referenced by DCY in their presentation. These are available for use by PCSAs, PCPAs, and PNAs across the state. These provide consistency in messaging across the state and the website for those interested in becoming foster parents. There is no available information on how widespread the use of these materials is by the local agencies involved in recruiting.

The presentation leaned heavily on the recruitment strategies for foster families rather than retention. DCY staff stated retention would be the focus of The Adoption and Resource Home Recruitment and Assessment Programming in the coming years.

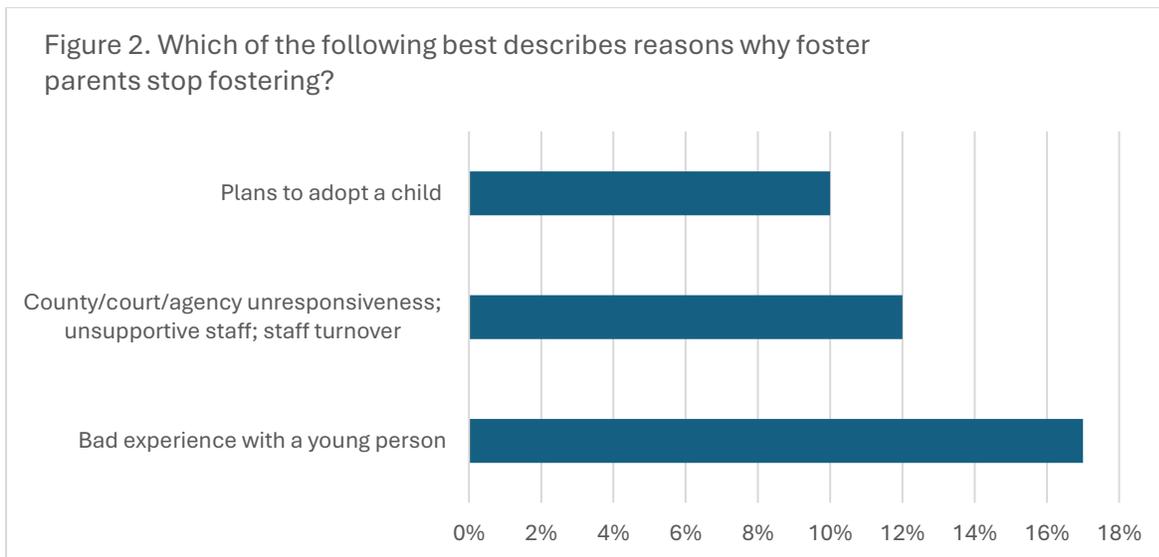
- OCA Survey Results

The OCA Survey included the following question, “Which of the following best describes reasons why foster parents stop fostering?” Figure 1 displays the main findings from the foster parent survey. Results suggest that 18.8% of foster parents reported

county/court/agency unresponsiveness or unsupportive staff and staff turnover were the main reasons for exit from fostering. Another 11.3% reported inadequate financial support as the cause of exiting foster care.



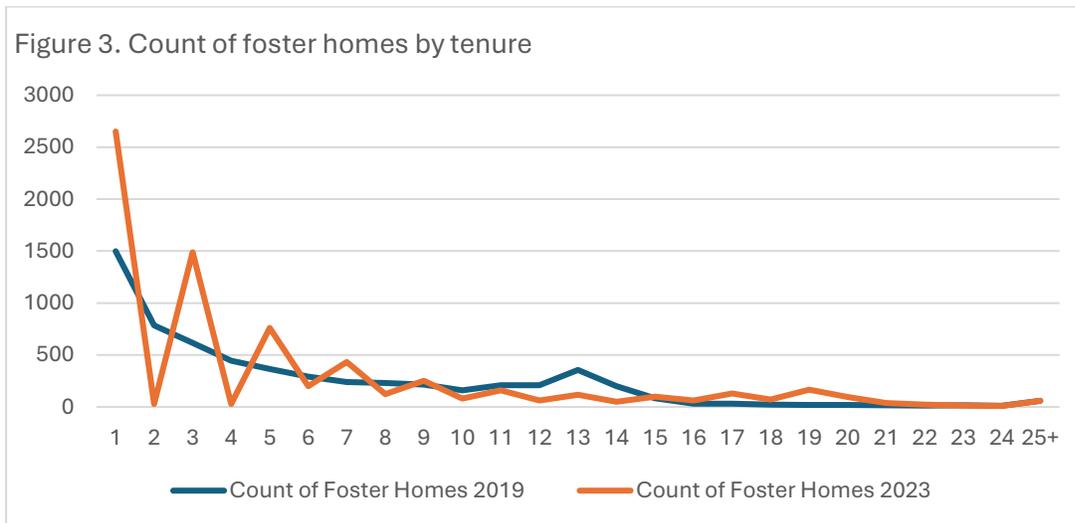
The survey included responses from licensing agencies on the same question. Figure 2 displays these main findings.



Results suggest agency staff stated foster parents who had a bad experience with a young person were the main reason for exiting foster caregiving (16.9%). Similarly, agency staff stated county/court/agency unresponsiveness or unsupportive staff and staff turnover were a cause of exit as well (12.2%). Agency responses also suggested that families exit because they plan to adopt a child (10.1%). The key finding from the survey as described by OCA was there needs to be a bigger effort to understand retention of foster parents in Ohio.

- DCY Data

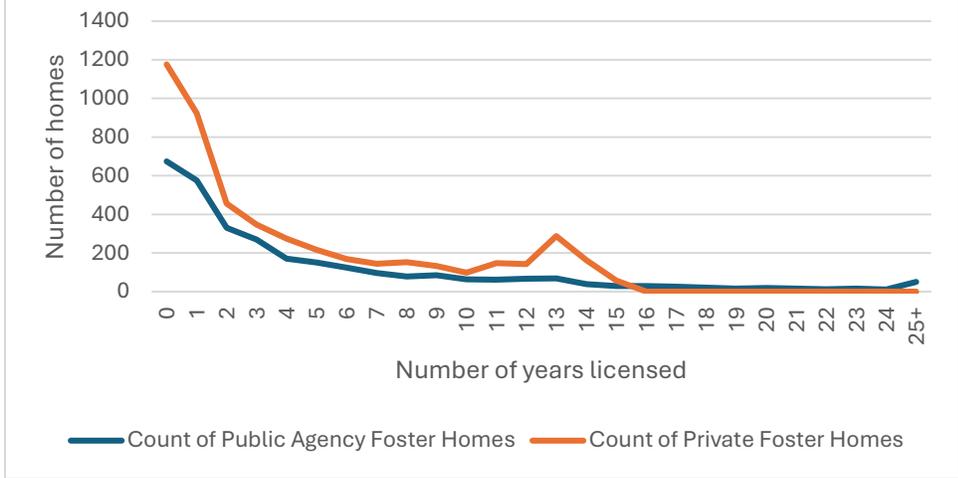
The SACWIS team provided the panels with data to inform the retention of foster families in Ohio. Given staffing limitations at DCY’s SACWIS data team, the panel received additional data about foster parent recruitment in 2019 and in 2023 but not all the years in between. This data represents a point-in-time count of data on January 1, 2019, and January 1, 2024. Figure 3 shows the count of licensed foster homes by their tenure in 2019 and 2023.



The panel met with the SACWIS team to ensure the data provided was accurate. The general trends for both 2019 and 2023 suggest the population of licensed foster homes in Ohio tends to be licensed for less than 10 years, and few families remain licensed for long periods of time. In 2019, only 18.3% of all licensed foster homes were licensed for 10 years or more, and in 2023 it was only 17.3%. There are potentially many reasons for this trend. The panel noted concern that recruitment messaging that encourages people to come to foster care for the sole purpose of adoption or growing their families could be a reason for a quick exit from fostering. It is also possible new foster families were unprepared for the demands and were unable to continue the journey. On the more positive side, it is possible those who foster end up with a child who comes to the permanent custody of a PCSA and the family makes the decision to adopt. After adopting, foster families may be unable to take in additional children for foster placements due to space or resource limitations. The panel acknowledged the importance of understanding these more nuanced trends through a well-resourced research project.

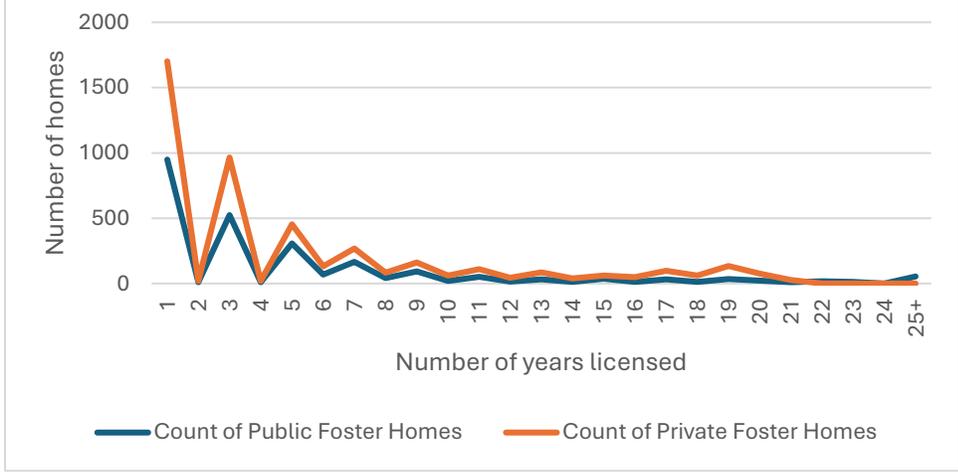
Figure 4 provides a visual of the number of homes licensed by public agencies and private agencies and their tenure.

Figure 4. Count of public versus private homes by tenure in 2019



The data suggests that more newly licensed foster homes were partnering with private networks in 2019 compared to public agencies. Many of the longer-tenured foster families are licensed with PCSAs. In 2019, 7% of foster families licensed with PCSAs served 16 years or longer compared to under 2% of privately licensed families serving the same time. Figure 5 provides a look at this same trend in 2023. The data suggests newer tenured foster families are more often affiliated with private networks compared to public agencies.

Figure 5. Count of public versus private homes by tenure in 2023



DCY was unable to provide any insight on the number and type (age, level, etc.) of placements accepted before exit or licensing lapse. Beyond general trends in tenure for the total population of foster parents, DCY could not provide insight into many of the questions the panel had about retention.

Conclusions

The Central Ohio CRP highlights several major conclusions from their 2023-2024 work year. First, there is generally a lack of data to understand some of the more nuanced challenges in foster family retention. Without an in-depth analysis of the reasons why Ohio's foster families stop fostering within 1-2 years of licensure, we cannot make conclusions about the root causes. The panel is aware of the resource limitations of the Ohio SACWIS teams in analyzing the vast data available to them to help drive retention initiatives. This is further compounded by the complex network of licensing entities in Ohio. This makes consistent data collection and analysis on this topic difficult.

Second this panel would like there to be an in-depth analysis of existing data to better understand foster family retention in Ohio. Grant awardees of the retention funding from the 2022-2023 fiscal years were required to evaluate their retention strategies successes. Compiling this kind of information can provide a better picture of the local efforts at retention and their successes.

Finally, the panel concludes that there is an unclear picture of the best practices in retention of foster families. DCY laid out several strategies for retention in their progress report that grant awardees were able to select from to receive funding. None of these strategies outlined by DCY as a retention strategy addressed communication and collaboration issues between child welfare agencies and foster parents. This was the most frequently cited reason for exit from fostering in the OCA survey to foster parents in Ohio. The academic literature also suggests difficulty navigating the child welfare system as a strong predictor of exiting from foster care. This represents a major disconnect between DCY's perception of retention strategies with those reported by foster parents and the academic literature at large.

Recommendations

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

Researching the retention of foster families using qualitative and quantitative data is essential for learning effective retention strategies. Advanced research methods are needed to best understand the facilitators and barriers to retention. DCY might revisit the idea of collaborating with the National Council for Adoption (NCFA) on the potential for a cross-comparative research project to determine differences in recruitment and retention practices.

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

Grant awardees of funding through the 2022-2023 state budget were required to track their recruitment and retention efforts. DCY should consider providing some consistent measures to carry out these evaluation efforts. This would allow DCY to compare the successes of recruitment and retention strategies across the state.

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

Conducting exit interviews with departing foster parents and recording their reasons for leaving is crucial for identifying recurring issues, improving support structures, and enhancing retention efforts within the foster care system.

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

Strained communication and collaboration between child welfare agencies and foster parents is a highly cited reason for foster parents' exit from fostering. Best practices in foster parent retention as reflected in the statewide recruitment and retention materials should be edited to address strategies to improve communication and collaboration between these partners.

REPORT 4: SOUTHWEST OHIO CRP ANNUAL REPORT

Annual CRP Activities

SCHEDULES

The Southwest Ohio CRP meets bi-monthly from August to May of each work year. The 2023-2024 work year began with the Ohio CRP Annual Strategic Planning Meeting on Thursday, May 18, 2023, which occurred via Zoom. All Ohio CRP members were invited to attend this meeting. The Annual Strategic Planning Meeting allows the Southwest Ohio CRP, in conjunction with the other panels, to learn from the other panels' previous year of work and plan for the next year. The Southwest panel decided on a topic, created a data request for DCY, and developed an additional plan for data collection at the annual meeting.

Regular meetings for the Southwest Ohio CRP began in August 2023. The panel meets bi-monthly on the fourth Thursday of the month from 12:00–2:00 pm via Zoom. The following is a list of all meeting dates for the panel from August 2023 to April 2024:

Table 1. Southwest Ohio CRP Regular Meeting Schedule:

Thursday, August 24, 2023
Thursday, October 26, 2023
Thursday, December 21, 2023
Thursday, February 22, 2024
Thursday, April 25, 2024

CHANGES TO PANEL MEMBERSHIP

The Southwest Ohio CRP began the work year with eight members and ended the year with the same eight members who are listed in the Panel Membership and Professional Affiliation section. The Southwest Ohio CRP is diligent about maintaining membership numbers. Two members will leave the panel at the end of the work year. This panel will elect new leadership, and they hope to add four more members before the next work year. They have already recruited two new members who will attend the annual strategic planning meeting in May of 2024.

SUCSESSES, CHALLENGES, AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The Southwest CRP regularly demonstrates their commitment to the CRPs and their evaluation projects, and they are confident in their results. This panel followed up on their previous two-year survey project to better engage with their survey results and understand the findings in the context of Ohio's current child welfare practices. The panel's commitment to the educational needs of youth in care is admirable, and the panel continues to bring much-needed conversation and advocacy to these needs.

Membership retention is a major success for this panel. Sustained membership and consistent leadership have allowed this panel to take on bigger and more rigorous evaluation projects. The panel will be electing new leadership in the 2024-2025 work year,

but the sustained membership of other panel members will ensure this transition is successful. The Southwest CRP has created a reputation for themselves for taking on well-being topics specifically surrounding educational services and mental health services for children who touch the child welfare system. This is an excellent achievement for this panel.

Background

For the past three years, the Southwest Ohio CRP has focused on Ohio's ability to provide uninterrupted, stable, and high-quality education for children placed in residential care facilities. This topic was inspired by panel members' work with children in their communities. The panel chose this topic as they identified the lack of adequate education services for children in out-of-home care as an important concern. Over the period 2021-2023, the panel conducted an academic literature review to better understand the educational needs of youth placed in out-of-home care and conducted a survey to residential facilities in Ohio to learn about their educational settings and barriers to providing these services. The 2022-2023 annual CRP report provides an overview of the data collected on this topic and recommendations for improvement.

In the 2023-2024 work year, the Southwest Ohio CRP followed up their survey findings to examine the current guidance available to school districts and PCSAs to facilitate consistent educational services for children in care. Specifically, the panel was interested in how Ohio child welfare agencies and stakeholders use state guidance to carry out their obligations to children and families through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Strengths

Through the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) and Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA), DCY can address the educational needs of youth involved with child welfare. PCSAO released some guidance about ESSA for counties and community partners signifying the need for considering this important topic.

Additionally, several DCY community partners, including the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), have shown an interest in the panel's report findings. These partners have an interest in better serving the needs of children and recognize changes must be made. The panel places high value on being involved in detailing the gaps in services and being part of the conversation around solutions.

Data

- Literature Review

The Southwest Ohio CRP gathered information from academic sources and other publicly available information to gain a better understanding of ESSA and the educational needs of youth placed in residential care facilities. The results of this academic literature review are detailed in the results section.

- Overview of the ESSA guidance document

The Southwest Ohio CRP engaged in a document review of the "Every Student Succeeds Act: Ensuring Educational Stability for Children in Foster Care in Ohio" developed in

November 2016 as a joint effort between the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services and the Ohio Department of Education. The panel provided several conclusions about the utility of this document detailed in the results section of this report.

- Interview with staff, Intersystem Program Administrator for the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Office of Families and Children

The CRP project manager engaged in an interview with a DCY staff. The panel was most interested in the DCY priorities around ESSA and addressing the educational needs of children placed out of the home or needing more intensive levels of behavioral health care. The details of this interview are provided in the results section.

- OhioRISE Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (PRTF) Program Manual

Upon suggestion from DCY, the panel reviewed the new PRTF program manuals for guidance around education for children placed in a PRTF. This manual provides several helpful guidelines that could be beneficial guidance for all residential facilities in Ohio. The details of this information are provided in the results section.

Results

- Literature Review

More than 40,000 youth in the United States are currently placed in a residential care setting (Covington et al., 2023). Children living in residential care settings have been removed from their primary caregivers, and many have undergone several previous out-of-home placements. Young adults placed in out-of-home care often have a disrupted past with incidences of abuse, neglect, and exposure to violence (Hussey & Guo, 2002). These youth often have a co-occurring diagnosis, including substance use, and behavioral and emotional disturbances. Although these problems are diverse, externalizing symptoms are most common (Scholte & Van der Ploeg, 2002).

Many adolescents in residential care are in need of higher levels of behavioral healthcare and often require specialized attention and services (Ryan et al., 2008). The needs of these children are often more than what a traditional public school setting can offer (Griller Clark & Mathur, 2015). For instance, youth exposed to complex or multiple traumas often require intensive therapy that neighborhood schools cannot provide (Griller Clark & Mathur, 2015). Most young people who transition to residential facilities also have an existing individualized education plan (IEP), which often indicates a need for more complex educational services (Ochoa et al., 2021).

Placement out of the home is associated with poorer educational outcomes (Goodkind et al., 2013). The quality of services between facilities differs and affects children's outcomes (Goodkind et al., 2013). Children in these settings may be exposed to numerous risks, teachers may not be equally trained across placements, and educational services may differ (Sawyer et al., 2007; Vig et al., 2005). For example, children in foster care show a variety of academic difficulties including weaker academic achievement, behavioral problems in school settings (e.g., externalizing behaviors, internalizing symptoms), and dropping out of school (Zetlin et al., 2005). One of the factors that contribute to the numerous educational challenges faced by youths in care is the frequent residential

mobility and subsequent school transfers that these youths typically encounter, which can lead to difficulties in adjusting to a new school environment, losing previous school credits, and having delays in the enrollment process (Eckenrode et al., 1995; Kelly, 1999; Leiter & Johnsen, 1994). Furthermore, research indicates that caseworkers often have numerous other responsibilities related to the care of youth, which can lead to educational needs being overlooked (Jackson, 1994). It is essential to closely monitor educational progress to ensure that these youths are not placed in subpar school programs, learning difficulties are not unrecognized, and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are not delayed (Altshuler, 1997; Ayasse, 1995; Emerson & Lovitt, 2003).

Despite the vast literature on residential facilities, there is a dearth of research into how children in residential care settings experience their education while at these placements (Flowers et al., 2011). The panel's focus for this year is intended to increase our understanding of how children placed in residential facilities acquire their education and transition out of these programs once they are discharged from the facility. This research thus has important implications in uncovering the gaps in knowledge that exist within residential placements, which contribute to the adverse outcomes mentioned above.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) aims to offer all children an equitable opportunity to receive high-quality education, with the goal of closing educational achievement gaps (Sokol, 2015). ESSA includes a range of new provisions that can be used to advance equity throughout the nation's schools for racial/ethnically minoritized students, students in low-income families, English learners, students with special needs, students experiencing homelessness, and students in out-of-home care (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). The below outlines the four principles developed to advance equity in education setting (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016):

- ESSA sets expectations for states to create standards and assessments that enhance students' higher-order thinking skills (e.g., critical thinking and problem-solving). ESSA also provides resources for professional development to help teachers and school leaders effectively teach and assess these skills. The focus is on using such assessments to drive continuous improvement rather than punitive measures.
- ESSA mandates that states employ various measures to assess the progress of students and schools, including for specific subgroups of students. These measures encompass student outcomes (e.g., graduation rates, test scores) as well as indicators of learning opportunities (e.g., teacher access to quality professional development, and reduction of disproportionate disciplinary practices). This approach aims to highlight educational inequities and suboptimal learning environments, facilitating targeted actions to bridge the educational opportunity gap.
- ESSA addresses resource disparities among schools by requiring states to disclose actual per-pupil expenditures on school report cards, promoting transparency in the distribution of state and local funds. Additionally, ESSA introduces a new funding pilot for up to 50 districts that innovatively allocate funds based on student needs, providing more resources for students who are at-risk (e.g., homeless or foster youth), students from low-income families, or English learners.

- ESSA emphasizes the implementation of evidence-based interventions to augment overall academic achievement and specifically support and improve poor-functioning schools.

Aside from the above general provisions to address educational opportunity gaps for marginalized groups of students, ESSA also specifically addresses the educational needs of children in the child welfare system. Specific to youths in care, a key provision of ESSA ensures that foster youths can stay in their current school or enroll immediately elsewhere if it's in their best interest (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). ESSA also mandates the quick transfer of school records and reports on foster youth graduation rates and allows districts more flexibility in directing federal funds to support these students (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). Further, all state education agencies have identified Points of Contact (POCs), with many also establishing POCs within state child welfare agencies to enhance collaboration between education and child welfare services in support of foster children (McNaught & Peeler, 2017). States like New York and Maryland have proactively issued joint guidance, hosted webinars, and organized regional meetings to ensure the effective implementation of ESSA provisions (McNaught & Peeler, 2017). Additionally, there is a significant emphasis on training these POCs and developing practical tools such as best-interest decision templates and transportation procedures to facilitate school stability for foster youth (McNaught & Peeler, 2017). ESSA also mandates disaggregated data reporting on foster children's educational outcomes, highlighting the need for effective monitoring and data accuracy to assess the success of these provisions (McNaught & Peeler, 2017).

- Overview of the ESSA guidance document

The current guidance document published in 2016 lacks the specific attention needed to tackle known problem areas, such as record and data sharing. Despite efforts to improve systems, there's a noticeable gap in the comprehensive integration of data-sharing mechanisms between schools and child welfare agencies. This shortfall not only inhibits efficient communication between relevant stakeholders but also hampers the ability to track and address critical issues effectively. The Southwest Ohio CRP survey results from 2022-2023 suggest records and data sharing continue to be problematic, yet the guidance document provides little support for navigating this barrier.

Moreover, the existing document falls short of providing utility for everyday use by professionals in schools and child welfare. Professionals often encounter barriers when attempting to navigate the system, hampering their ability to deliver timely and effective support to vulnerable children and families. The document includes an overabundance of technical terms and lacks readability for frontline workers. This not only alienates stakeholders who may not be familiar with technical terminology but also undermines transparency and understanding within the child welfare community.

An additional concern is the failure to incorporate the perspectives of all partners involved with child welfare. The voices of youth, parents, foster parents, residential facilities, and other key stakeholders are not adequately represented in the current document. This

omission overlooks valuable insights and experiences that could inform more holistic and effective guidance.

Furthermore, the guidance includes several outdated points of contact. Without accurate and up-to-date contact information for relevant agencies and professionals, the coordination of services and resources becomes increasingly challenging, leading to potential gaps in support for children and families in need.

Critically, there is a glaring absence of provisions for how data will be collected to assess Ohio's performance in meeting children's educational needs. There is no comprehensive data collection strategy to assess how Ohio is doing in meeting the educational needs of children in care.

The current document also offers limited guidance for educational decisions beyond compliance with ESSA. While the panel is aware this document is specific to ESSA, there are many situations where educational needs or issues fall outside of ESSA, and schools and child welfare systems need guidance on these issues. Further, there is no notice of where to get additional information. The narrow focus on ESSA in terms of education neglects the broader educational needs of children involved in the child welfare system, potentially hindering their academic success and long-term well-being.

- Interview with staff, Intersystem Program Administrator for the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, Office of Families and Children

The Ohio CRP project manager interviewed DCY staff regarding ESSA. One staff stated that she alongside another staff from ODE, has been a pivotal figure in ESSA-related initiatives in Ohio. Following the completion of a guidance document in 2016, they both assumed responsibilities for ESSA provisions, initiating efforts to disseminate and explain its significance across the state. However, they've encountered challenges in fostering tangible change due to workforce turnover in child welfare and education. Attention to awareness of ESSA provisions and the support available through DCY and ODE will continue to be essential priorities of these staff given the continued concern about workforce turnover. Disparities in resources, particularly evident in major metropolitan areas like Hamilton and Franklin Counties, further complicate efforts, with data sharing and educational programs often more accessible in these regions.

Recognizing the ongoing need for education on ESSA among professionals, the two staff have undertaken various outreach endeavors, including presentations at conferences, lunch-and-learns, and the creation of YouTube videos. They perceive this educational outreach as their main priority, necessitating constant attention and reinforcement. Plans to update the 2016 guidance document are underway, with considerations for long-term solutions and the utilization of ODE's resource page for dissemination. One staff stated the request to update the guidance document was initiated by the change in child welfare administration with the move from ODJFS to DCY.

In their day-to-day work, the two staff address case-specific inquiries and provide technical assistance, with a focus on facilitating relationships between school districts and PCSAs. They advocate for foster care liaisons in all districts but express concerns about whether students are aware of these resources. Additionally, they strive to meet both

general educational needs and ESSA-specific requirements, often connecting professionals with specialists or local educational service centers to address gaps.

Despite the existence of an ESSA state plan for data reporting, there's no mandated reporting for best determination decisions to federal child welfare professionals, highlighting a potential area for improvement. The two staff report prioritizing youth and family engagement, maintaining collaborative relationships with organizations like the Ohio Youth Advisory Board (OYAB) and Partners for Ohio's Families (PFOF) to incorporate diverse perspectives into planning processes.

Looking ahead to 2024, the two staff aim to expand avenues for the presentation of ESSA guidance, update the guidance document from the 2016 version, engage with OYAB through the process, and research educational programming in different out-of-home care settings. The two staff plan to carry out a project like the Southwest Ohio CRP's survey efforts from the 2022-2023 work year. The CRP was elated to share their survey results and other survey distribution materials with the two staff. However, limited resources pose a major challenge, underscoring the need for increased funding to support their ongoing efforts. One staff reported they work on ESSA-related information as one part of their many job duties. While they are both very passionate about this work, their bandwidth to move these initiatives forward is limited.

- OhioRISE Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities (PRTF) Program Manual

Under recommendation from DCY staff, the panel reviewed several program documents from the PRFT committee's work. Education PRTF providers are expected to facilitate the ongoing provision of an appropriate educational program as required under federal and state education law. When applying to become a PRTF provider, the PRTF will be expected to provide educational programming and services as described in the provider application. The program manual goes on to describe the requirements to meet student needs based on the type of educational programming the facility will provide; whether that's with a local school district, an ESC, a public charter or community school, or a nonpublic charter program. The manual also states youth must have access to career technical education. Establishing communication protocols and processes for student transition should happen at the point of acceptance of a child into a PRTF is required. All providers must commit to providing accurate documentation to the educational entity providing services to facilitate the educational process for students in their care.

While this information was available publicly given the new license status of PRTFs, it is unknown if children's residential centers (CRCs) or group homes across Ohio are also provided similar guidance and standards for their educational programming. Several of the items mentioned in these PRTF requirements are known challenges for CRCs based on the Southwest Ohio CRP survey from 2022-2023 including access to career and technical education, communication protocols, and documentation. There is no database from which to understand the nature of educational programs of CRCs and group homes in Ohio. CRCs can contract with local school districts or utilize their own charter school programs, but there is no database to reference to better understand which CRCs utilize which kind of educational programming. This information is essential to evaluate the facilitators and barriers to stable educational programming for these vulnerable youth.

Conclusions

Following the large data collection effort of the Southwest Panel from 2021-2023, the panel explored the available guidance for child welfare agencies and their partners to best support the educational needs of children involved with child welfare. The major conclusions identified here build off the panel's previous work on this topic.

First, although helpful, there are several shortfalls within the ESSA guidance document. The current ESSA guidance document lacks specificity in addressing crucial areas, such as record and data sharing between schools and child welfare agencies. Additionally, the document is not user-friendly for frontline workers, containing excessive jargon and lacking readability. The guidance document contains outdated points of contact, making coordination of services challenging. The panel is aware there is an effort underway to update this document, and members wanted to be sure these concerns were noted in the editing of the guidance.

Second, beyond ESSA guidance, there are not many informational resources to support challenges regarding navigating educational needs that fall outside this narrow focus. The guidance document primarily focuses on compliance with ESSA, neglecting broader educational needs and issues that may fall outside its scope. DCY reported receiving several calls for assistance that fall outside ESSA but are closely related. In the updating of the guidance on ensuring educational success for students in foster care, there should be attention paid to supporting providers and partners who need to access additional help.

Third, there continues to be a concern about the lack of data surrounding this topic. Child welfare agencies are not required to collect information about academic achievements or educational stability among children involved with the child welfare system, including those in residential care settings. Ohio lacks any database to understand how students in foster care are receiving their education whether with a local school district or a charter school, or if their IEP services are being met. DCY plans to engage in a survey project to collect information about the educational programming in CRCs and group homes, but it appears there should be a more systemic way to collect and access this information given the importance of this issue and known challenges in meeting these needs. The absence of provisions for comprehensive data collection to assess Ohio's performance in meeting children's educational needs is a significant oversight.

Finally, the challenges in resource availability must be noted. Despite efforts by key figures to disseminate ESSA-related information and update the guidance document, challenges persist due to limited bandwidth resources. While major metropolitan areas are known to have engaged with local school districts to address several records and data challenges, smaller counties with fewer resources continue to struggle with these issues. With very few state employees dedicated to this work movement initiatives to address system-wide changes around education are immensely difficult.

Recommendations

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.

Including user-friendly versions of ESSA guidance tailored to front-line staff such as child welfare caseworkers and teachers is imperative for ensuring the effective implementation of ESSA policies. These versions should comprehensively address the specific duties and responsibilities of each group, enhancing clarity and facilitating the seamless application of ESSA policies in diverse educational settings.

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).

Dedicating additional staff resources to support key individuals bridging the gap between the DCY and ODE is essential for fostering collaboration. These individuals serve as crucial liaisons between departments, ensuring alignment of strategies, efficient communication, and coordinated efforts to address educational needs comprehensively. Increasing support for them will enhance interdepartmental cohesion, leading to more effective solutions and better outcomes for PCSAs and students in need of support.

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.

Creating a database to catalog the educational programming of all CRCs, group homes, and PRTFs will enable DCY and policymakers to identify gaps and areas for improvement. It can facilitate coordination and collaboration among stakeholders by providing a platform for sharing best practices and resources. This catalog can ensure transparency and accountability in educational programming, allowing for better monitoring and evaluation of the educational outcomes of the children served by these facilities.

REPORT 5: SOUTHEAST OHIO CRP ANNUAL REPORT

Annual CRP Activities

SCHEDULES

The Southeast Ohio CRP meets bi-monthly from August to May of each work year. The 2023–2024 work year began with the Ohio CRP Annual Strategic Planning Meeting on Thursday, May 18, 2023, via Zoom. All Ohio CRP members were invited to attend this meeting. The Annual Strategic Planning Meeting allows the Southeast Ohio CRP, in conjunction with the other panels, to learn from the other panels’ previous year of work and plan for the next year. The Southeast panel decided on a topic, created a data request for DCY, and developed an additional plan for data collection at the annual meeting.

Regular meetings for the Southeast Ohio CRP began in August 2023. The panel meets bi-monthly on the second Tuesday of the month from 12:00–2:00 pm via Zoom. The following is a list of all meeting dates for the panel from August 2023 to April 2024:

Table 1. Southeast Ohio CRP Regular Meeting Schedule:
Tuesday, August 22, 2023
Tuesday, October 3, 2023
Tuesday, December 5, 2023
Tuesday, February 6, 2024
Tuesday, April 2, 2024

CHANGES TO PANEL MEMBERSHIP

The Southeast Ohio CRP began the work year with eight members and maintained all members throughout the year. Since March, one new member joined for the 2024-2025 year, and the panel hopes to recruit at least three more. The Southeast Ohio CRP identified recruiting and retaining CRP members and electing a new, strong leader as a top priority moving forward.

SUCCESSSES, CHALLENGES, AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Panel members identified their ability to engage with the current topic using their professional and personal experiences as a success. The diverse group of panel members have vast experiences with the recruitment of foster families and the problems stemming from a lack of available foster homes. These experiences allowed the panels to have robust conversations about the topic and strong perspectives when reviewing DCY data. Available data continues to be a problem with this topic. There are many ways in which to interpret the quantitative data provided by DCY, and without additional data collection, it can be difficult to make conclusions about the numbers. Despite this challenge, the panel is really pleased with the results of their report.

Background

The Southeast Ohio CRP focused their evaluation on the recruitment of foster families in Ohio for the 2023–2024. The panel identified the recruitment of foster families as a pressing issue throughout the state of Ohio, but also as a problem greatly affecting the

Southeastern parts of Ohio in which this panel is located. Members were able to discuss their personal experiences with the lack of foster homes available in their region of the state and were interested in how DCY and PCSAs have invested resources to address this issue. The panel examined the effectiveness of the current recruitment practices utilized by the state and provided suggestions for innovative approaches to improvement.

Note that the Southeast CRP focused on recruitment of foster families and the Central CRP focused on retention of foster families. The panels collaborated on some data review efforts, and as a result, some information contained within each report is repeated in the other.

Strengths

Ohio's child welfare system has made significant strides in its recruitment of foster families, bolstered by increased financial investments and heightened awareness of the pressing need. With greater resources at their disposal, the system has been able to provide opportunities for local agencies to engage in several recruitment strategies. Through a combination of financial backing and widespread awareness initiatives, Ohio's child welfare system continues to strengthen its foundation, striving to meet the ever-growing demand for safe and loving homes for children in need.

Data

- Literature Review

The Southeast Ohio CRP gathered information from academic sources to gain a better understanding of what is nationally known about foster parent recruitment. The results of this academic literature review are detailed in the results section.

- Review of the Ohio 2023 Annual Progress and Services Report

The 2023 Annual Progress and Services Report provides details on the \$5 million allocation for the recruitment and retention of foster parents in the 2022-2023 fiscal years. The amended Substitute House Bill 100 of the 134th General Assembly (HB 110) included an allocation of funding to ODJFS to support statewide efforts for the recruitment and retention of foster caregivers. The final amounts allocated for this purpose were \$5 million in State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2022 and 2023. The panel reviewed this report for details on the state's plan for the *recruitment* of foster families [note: the Central Ohio CRP was focused on the *retention* of foster families]. Details of the panel's main takeaways from the report are in the results section of this report.

- Presentation from two staff from the Ohio Department of Children and Youth presented on The Adoption and Resource Home Recruitment and Assessment Program

The panel met with the two staff from DCY who presented on The Adoption and Resource Home Recruitment and Assessment Program on December 5, 2023, via Zoom. The panel learned about the details of the Adoption and Resource Home Recruitment and Assessment Program. The key panel takeaways from this meeting are included in the results section.

- DCY Data of Foster Families

The SACWIS team at DCY provided the panel with data on this topic as requested by the CRP on September 30, 2023. The panel requested the following:

- Number of new foster families recruited each year for the past five years.
- Demographics of these newly licensed families (location, age, gender, family structure, race, ages accepted, treatment designation).

An overview of the data is included in the results section.

Results

- Literature Review

According to the Administration for Children, Youth, and Families et al. (2024), an estimated 369,000 children in the United States were in the foster care system in 2022. In the state of Ohio, approximately 15,000 children were placed in foster care, with more than half (56%; $n = 8,355$) placed in non-relative foster homes (Administration for Children, Youth, and Families & Children's Bureau, 2023). Despite the large number of children requiring foster placement, the total number of licensed foster homes in Ohio (i.e., both relative and non-relative foster homes) was only around 7,300 (Who Cares: A national count of foster homes and families, n.d.). This suggests a need for more foster homes available for these children.

Foster families provide temporary substitute care for children who are unable to receive appropriate care at home (Baum et al., 2001). Despite the potential trauma that children in foster care may have already experienced in their homes, as well as the stress and trauma associated with the move to a foster home, foster parents have the potential to provide these children with a safe environment and opportunities to form meaningful relationships (Berger et al., 2009). Considering the limited number of foster homes available for children in need, it is crucial to explore the factors that hinder or motivate individuals to become foster parents.

The recruitment of foster families is impeded by various obstacles, such as a negative public opinion of foster care, the intricacy of addressing the requirements of foster youth, and the limited ability to provide adequate care for children due to societal factors (e.g. rising housing expenses, the need for two-income families) (Baum et al., 2001). Moreover, certain families indicated that foster parent training generated unfavorable perceptions towards foster parenting (Choice et al., 2000), and the extensive licensing procedure and administrative complexities acted as barriers (Baum et al., 2001). Additionally, concerns about the behavioral and emotional difficulties of foster children (Baum et al., 2001; Choice et al., 2000) and negative interactions with child welfare agencies, including a lack of support and recognition for foster parents (Choice et al., 2000) were reported as key barriers to the recruitment of foster families. Child welfare agencies also cited foster families' reluctance to provide care for children with specific needs or ages as a barrier to recruitment (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2002).

Motivations for individuals to serve as foster parents include both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic motivations, such as a desire to love, care for, and support and help children in need (López López & del Valle, 2016; Rodger et al., 2006), were more frequently reported by foster parents, compared to extrinsic motivations such as the desire to expand one's family (Metcalf & Sanders, 2012) and financial incentives (Howell-Moroney, 2014).

- Review of the Ohio 2023 Annual Progress and Services Report

The panel noted several recruitment efforts aimed statewide in the progress report. This includes the development and maintenance of a statewide website for recruitment created in May 2019 at <https://fosterandadopt.ifs.ohio.gov>. In addition, the state has focused efforts on increasing their social media presence following the development of the website. Prior to the creation of the website, potential foster parents would need to contact a local PCSA or private licensing agency to learn more about the process and responsibilities. Developing a statewide website with one place to visit for more information allows a social media campaign to be more effective.

The report also details that DCY is exploring a collaboration with the National Council for Adoption (NCFCA) on a cross-comparative research project to determine differences in recruitment and retention practices. There have been no updates on this project since it was placed on hold in 2020 due to COVID-19. The panel is very interested in any developments on this project.

Local efforts at recruitment include DCY offering funds as a grant opportunity to support public and private children's services agencies' efforts to recruit foster caregivers, prioritizing funds to develop and implement new services or activities to support the treatment of foster caregivers. DCY recruitment strategies might include the following:

- Develop/implement or enhance/expand a targeted recruitment strategy aimed at recruiting families able to foster harder-to-place youth and/or treatment-level youth.
 - Hire staff responsible for recruiting foster caregivers.
 - Hire staff to guide and support foster care applicants, from initial inquiry through certification, to increase the number of foster caregivers who complete the process to become certified.
 - Provide incentives to existing foster caregivers who refer others who become certified foster caregivers and take placement of at least one youth for a minimum period of time.
 - Other recruitment activities
- Presentation from two staff with the Ohio Department of Children and Youth presented on The Adoption and Resource Home Recruitment and Assessment Program

DCY staff provided an overview of The Adoption and Resource Home Recruitment and Assessment Program. They described the initiative aims to support regional and state-

wide efforts in recruiting adoption and resource homes, encompassing foster and kinship care. It seeks to assist various agencies, including public children service agencies (PCSAs), private child placing agencies (PCPAs), private noncustodial agencies (PNAs), and Title IV-E Juvenile Courts, in securing suitable homes for children residing in out-of-home placements. Moreover, the plan includes addressing potential workforce shortages through the establishment of a regional pool of certified Tier I and Tier II Assessors.

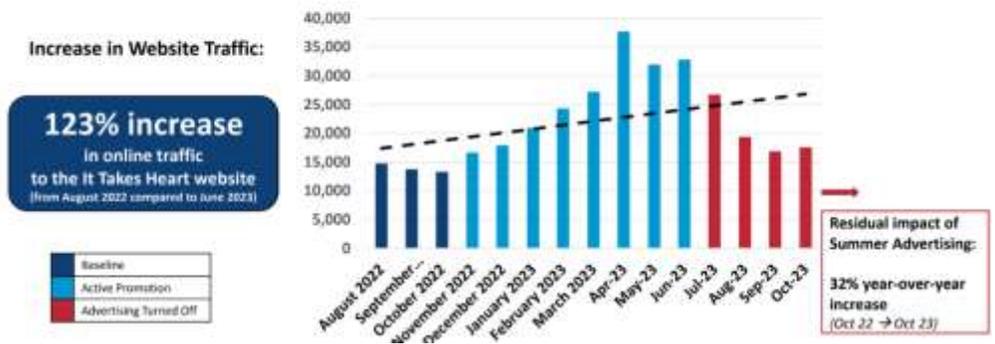
Several key vendors are involved in this endeavor, including Adopt America Network (AAN), OCA, and The Ohio Child Care Resource & Referral Hubs. These hubs play a crucial role in providing multifaceted support, including the development of recruitment event materials, attendance at events, planning, and follow-up. They also help families at various stages of readiness for becoming foster parents by educating them on the home study process, conducting pre-screening checks, and providing navigation through pre-service training and ongoing support.

Part of the strategy involves an Adoption and Resource Home Marketing and Recruitment Campaign led by the OCA. The campaign's objectives include driving traffic to the "It Takes Heart Ohio" website, incorporating campaign materials, and increasing qualified family applicants to meet Ohio's needs. Additionally, the campaign aims to establish and manage necessary marketing infrastructure, continuously develop strategies, and effectively communicate with potential recruits.

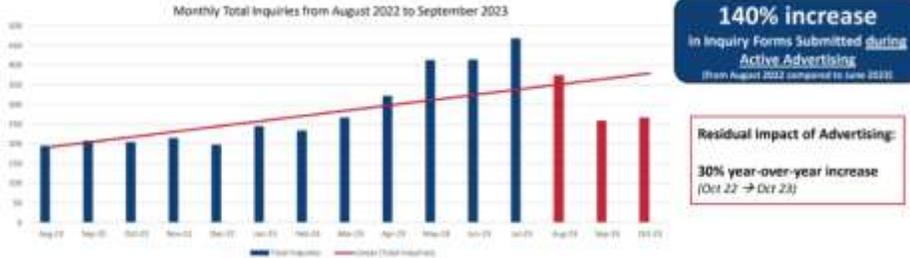
As part of the data request, the panel received the campaign materials referenced by DCY in their presentation. These are available for use by PCSAs, PCPAs, and PNAs across the state. These provide consistency in messaging across the state and the website for those interested in becoming foster parents. There is no available information on how widespread the use of these materials is by the local agencies involved in recruiting.

The evaluation of these recruitment materials' successes is ongoing by DCY and their vendors. The two staff were able to provide a couple of graphics on the most recent data website traffic. The following data was provided..

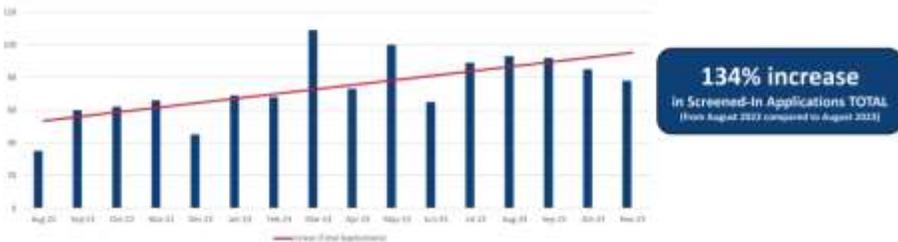
Number of Online Visitors from August 2022 to July 2023



Inquiry Forms Submitted from the website



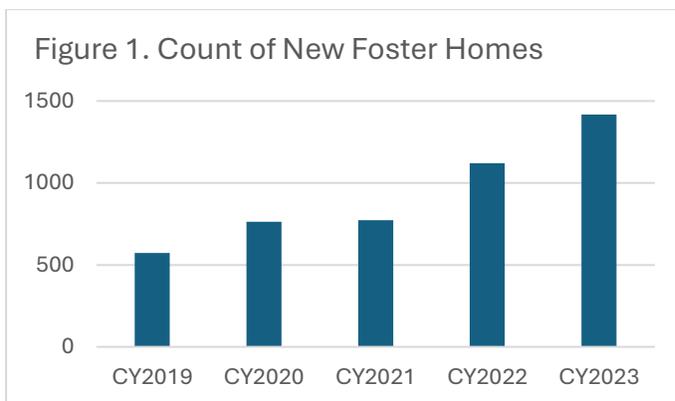
Screened in Foster Care Applications in Ohio SACWIS



The data suggests an increase in individuals visiting the “It Takes Heart” website in addition to an increase in the number of individuals submitting an inquiry to learn more about becoming a foster parent. The SACWIS data suggests there is also an increase in the number of screened-in foster parent applications from 2022 to 2023. DCY notes this increase in SACWIS applications is likely not related to the website traffic given the amount of time it takes from inquiry to completion of the training requirements to be a foster parent. They are continuing to evaluate this information.

- DCY Data

The SACWIS team provided the panels with data to inform the recruitment of foster families in Ohio. Figure 1 provides an overview of the number of new homes licensed each year from 2019-2023.

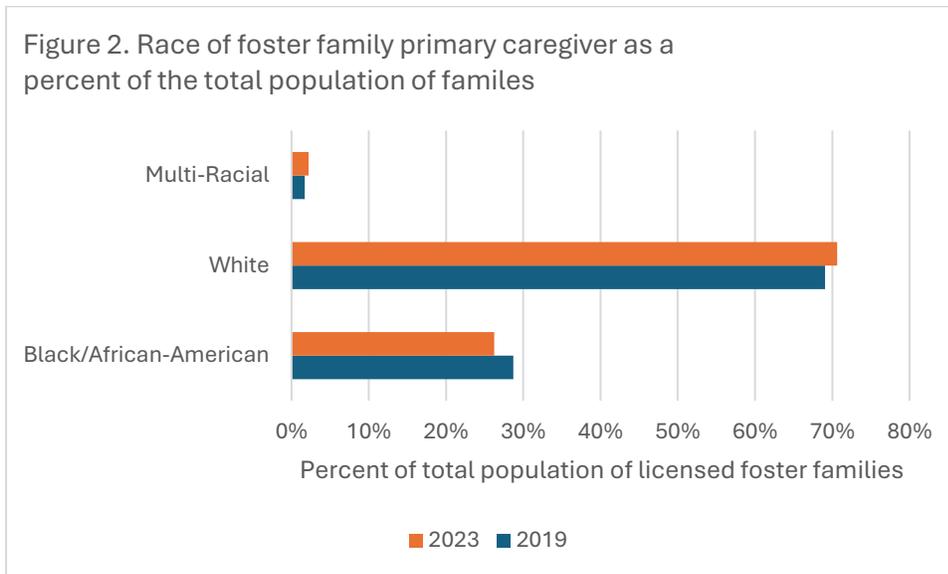


These numbers suggest a significant increase in the number of new homes licensed in 2022 and 2023 around the time of the state investments in foster parent recruitment.

However, these should be interpreted considering the comparison years of 2019-2021 which could be influenced by COVID-19.

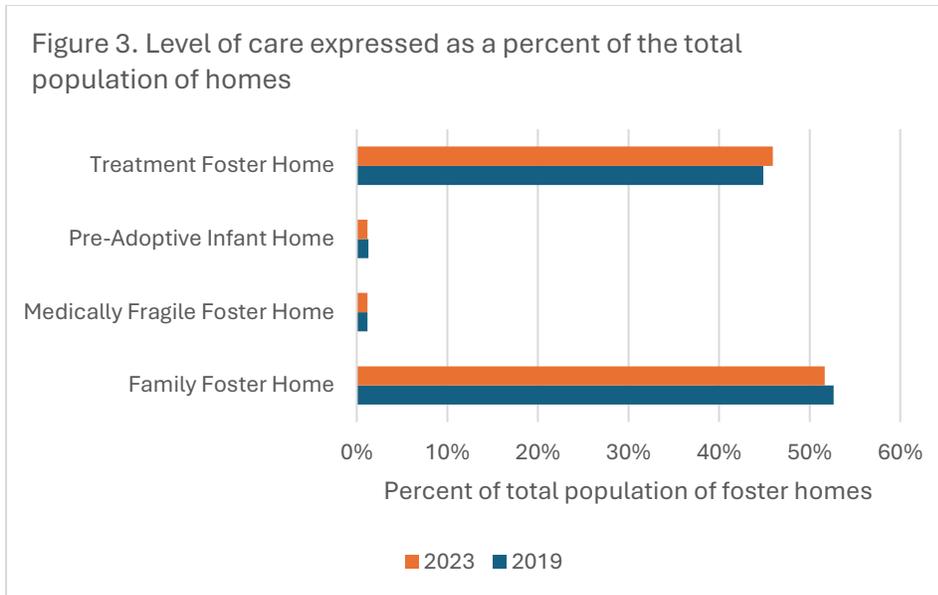
Given staffing limitations at DCY's SACWIS data team, the panel received additional data about foster parent recruitment in 2019 and in 2023 but not all the years in between. This data represents a point-in-time count of data on January 1, 2019, and January 1, 2024.

Figure 2 provides a look at the race of licensed foster families in Ohio in 2019 and 2023. Efforts to address disproportionality in Ohio's child welfare system include the deliberate effort to recruit more foster families of color.



While the total number of licensed foster families is lower in 2023 (7,261) than in 2019 (8,009) when expressed as a percent of the total population, black foster families still make up only 26% of the total population of foster families in Ohio in 2023. In 2019, black families made up 29% of licensed foster families in Ohio. Additionally, according to a recent report by DCY, 14% of the state's population of children is black, yet black children make up 36% of the Ohio foster care population (ChiByDesign, 2020). While we cannot assess a year-by-year trend with this data, there does not appear to be a difference in the number of black foster families from 2019 to 2023.

With continued efforts to maintain the least restrictive environment for children needing more intensive behavioral health services, Ohio has enhanced its efforts in recruiting and training treatment foster homes. DCY provided data on the type of license foster families held in 2019 and 2023. Figure 3 provides this data which suggests there are more treatment foster homes available by total population in 2023 than in 2019.



As of January 1, 2024, there were 3595 licensed treatment foster homes in Ohio. Utilizing the DCY data dashboard, 2819 children were placed in treatment foster homes on the same date. This suggests Ohio has available treatment foster homes to meet these needs, yet we do not know any information about how many homes remain licensed but are not currently taking placements for a variety of reasons. The total population of foster homes was 7261 on January 1, 2024, and at the same time, there were 14,785 children in out-of-home care. While the numbers suggest Ohio may be able to meet placement needs, PCSAs continue to report a placement crisis and a lack of available homes. This suggests the need for additional research, potentially using both qualitative and quantitative data, to understand this problem.

Conclusions

Given the significance of recruiting foster families to provide adequate and suitable foster homes for children in need, the focus of the Southeast Ohio CRP on the evaluation of foster family recruitment is crucial. This research is important for developing tailored recruitment strategies that not only address the immediate shortage of foster homes but also cultivate a more supportive and sustainable fostering environment, taking into account the needs and motivations of foster families. Such efforts are essential to ensure that all children in the foster care system have access to safe and nurturing homes, as well as to ensure that foster families have positive experiences by providing them with the necessary support and resources.

The Southeast CRP highlights several major conclusions from their 2023-2024 work year. First, there is generally a lack of data to understand some of the more nuanced challenges in foster family recruitment. The panel is aware of the resource limitations of the Ohio SACWIS teams in analyzing the vast data available to them to help drive recruitment initiatives. This is further compounded by the complex network of licensing entities in Ohio. This makes consistent data collection and analysis on this topic difficult.

Despite the numbers in Ohio suggesting we have the capacity to meet placement needs, PCSAs continue to report significant challenges in the placement of children in substitute homes. We must consider learning more about the motivations of new foster parents, their expectations for the work, and their reasons for not taking placements. We need to know more about the support available to them and why the numbers suggest families are gravitating towards private entities compared to PCSAs. Additionally, little is known about the effectiveness of efforts to recruit more foster families of color. Given the amount of money invested in the recruitment of foster families, it is imperative to know more about the strategies that work best in recruiting foster families of color and supporting newly licensed families, including families of color.

The second conclusion closely related to the first, is the opportunity to analyze already existing data to better understand foster family recruitment in Ohio. DCY has already partnered with several vendors who are responsible for recruitment activities and evaluation. Additionally, grant awardees of the recruitment and retention funding from the 2022-2023 fiscal years were required to provide evaluation of their recruitment strategies successes. Compiling this kind of information can provide a better picture of the local efforts at recruitment and their successes.

Finally, taken together with the academic literature and the current Ohio data, there is an unclear picture of the best practices in recruiting foster families. Despite this, one strategy we know to be effective is word of mouth (Casey Family Programs, 2014). The CRPs spoke at length about the possibility of letting foster parents do this kind of recruiting work with proper incentives. Rather than assuming foster parents will share their stories or asking them to volunteer at events to share their successes, the CRPs would encourage Ohio to think about truly incentivizing this work. Ohio should lean into those strategies known to be effective in recruiting families and then focus resources on supporting newly licensed foster homes in their first couple years of placements. Foster families have the lived experience to talk about the successes and the very real challenges and expectations of this important work. Elevating foster parents to a more formal role in recruitment and early retention with proper incentives could be a strong strategy to professionalize this role and encourage success.

Recommendations

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

Researching the recruitment of foster families using qualitative and quantitative data is essential for developing targeted strategies for recruitment and improving the effectiveness of those strategies. An advanced research approach is needed to best understand the barriers to recruitment. DCY might resume their exploration of collaboration with the National Council for Adoption (NCFA) on the potential for a cross-comparative research project to determine differences in recruitment and retention practices.

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.

Grant awardees of funding through the 2022-2023 state budget were required to track their recruitment and retention efforts. DCY should consider providing some consistent measures to carry out these evaluation efforts. This would allow DCY to compare the successes of recruitment and retention strategies across the state.

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

Word of mouth continues to be one of the strongest strategies for foster parent recruitment. DCY should consider ways to enhance this strategy by incentivizing foster parent associations to engage in referral recruitment.

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

Conducting exit interviews with departing foster parents and recording their reasons for leaving is crucial for identifying recurring issues, improving support structures, and enhancing recruitment efforts within the foster care system.

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

Developing innovative strategies to recruit foster families of color, including Black foster families, is essential for promoting diversity within the foster care system, addressing disparities, and ensuring culturally responsive care for children from minoritized and marginalized communities.

MOVING FORWARD

All five Ohio CRPs met virtually via Zoom conference for their annual strategic planning session on Wednesday, May 29, 2024. During this meeting, members chose topics for the new work year and created a strategic plan to reach their goals for 2024–2025. They brainstormed the types of data they will need for their evaluation. The data request will be submitted to DCY by September 30, 2024, to allow the state time to gather the information. The annual meeting also served as a wrap-up for the 2023–2024 work year. All panels can choose new topics for the 2024-2025 work year. The annual meeting provides the panels with the opportunity to discuss the successes and challenges of this year’s evaluation with panel members from other parts of the state.

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