

Nebraska Children's Commission Meeting

November 18, 2025
9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

KVC Training Room
11550 I Street, Suite 100
Omaha, NE 68137

1. Call to Order

Melissa Nance welcomed everyone and called the meeting to order at 9:09 AM. She asked attendees to introduce themselves. Roll call was taken by Adam Anderson through introductions.

a. Introductions and Roll Call

Commission Members Present (7)

Jarren Breeling
Proxy for Misty Flowers, Deborah
Dancer

Richard Hasty
Sara Hoyle
Melissa Nance

Lana Temple-Plotz
LaShawn Young

Commission Members Absent (5)

Abigail Fox
Ron Giesselmann
Felicia Nelsen
Melissa Nilges
Susan Thomas

Commission Ex-Officio Members Present (6)

Jennifer Carter
Monika Gross
Proxy for Thomas Janousek, Paige McDowell

Kari Rumbaugh
Judge Amy Schuchman
Deb VanDyke-Ries

Commission Ex-Officio Members Absent (4)

Senator Christy Armendariz
Dr. Alyssa Bish

Lane Carr
Senator Glen Meyer

Roll call was taken through introductions, and a quorum was established.

Guests in Attendance (6)

Adam Anderson, Nebraska Children's Commission
Chloe Fowler, Nebraska Children's Commission
Theresa Goley, KVC Nebraska
Patrick Griffin, Foster Care Review Office

a. Notice of Publication

Recorder for the meeting, Adam Anderson, indicated that the notice of publication for this meeting was posted on the Nebraska Public Meetings Calendar and Nebraska Children's Commission websites in accordance with the Nebraska Open Meetings Act. The publication would be kept as a permanent attachment with the meeting minutes.

b. Announcement of the placement of Open Meetings Act information

A copy of the Open Meetings Act was available for public inspection and was located at the sign-in table and on the Children's Commission Website.

2. Approval of the Agenda

It was moved by Richard Hasty and seconded by Jarren Breeling to approve the agenda as presented. There was no further discussion. Roll call vote as follows:

FOR (7):

Jarren Breeling
Proxy for Misty Flowers, Deborah
Dancer

Richard Hasty
Sara Hoyle
Melissa Nance

Lana Temple-Plotz
LaShawn Young

AGAINST (0):

ABSTAIN (0):

ABSENT (5):

Abigail Fox
Ron Giesselmann
Felicia Nelsen

Melissa Nilges
Susan Thomas

MOTION CARRIED

Note that the order of items in the minutes will not be reflective of the original agenda.

3. Chair Update

Chair Nance shared that there will continue to be efforts to work with the Governor's Office regarding membership.

4. Policy Analyst Update

Social Media Analytics: The Commission reviewed Quarter 3 analytics. The top-performing post was a "one-pager recommendation list" sent with annual reports. Facebook engagement reached nearly 30,000, and Instagram analytics showed a growth in information sources. Efforts are underway to refine tracking for Instagram analytics to better understand engagement trends on that platform. Staff and Say Hey There meet monthly to review post-performance and coordinate upcoming outreach strategies.

Social Network Analysis (SNA): Policy Analyst, Chloe Fowler gave a presentation on SNA, a mathematical method used to visualize relationships and policy influence within the legislature.

- The research utilized **UCI net** software to identify "bridges," "influencers," and "bottlenecks" in child welfare policy.
- Data included voting records (categorized by "Yes," "No," or "Present not voting") and co-sponsorships for bills related to child welfare during the legislative session.
- The analysis identified a bipartisan network, including specific visualizations for Senator Hunt (registered independent) and other legislative leaders, such as Senator Raybould.
- Application: SNA is used to identify bottlenecks and influencers in decision-making, providing a strategic visualization of how child welfare policy shifts during the legislative session.
- There is a perceived lack of institutional knowledge among some newer senators regarding the Commission's mission, highlighting a need for awareness building.

5. Approval of the Consent Agenda

- a. [August 7, 2025 Meeting Minutes](#)
- b. [Member Nomination Report](#)

It was moved by Richard Hasty and seconded by Sara Hoyle to approve the consent agenda items with changes in August 7, 2025 Minutes as discussed. There was no further discussion. Roll call vote as follows:

FOR (7):

Jarren Breeling
Proxy for Misty Flowers, Deborah
Dancer

Richard Hasty
Sara Hoyle
Melissa Nance

Lana Temple-Plotz
LaShawn Young

AGAINST (0):

ABSTAIN (0):

ABSENT (5):

Abigail Fox
Ron Giesselmann
Felicia Nelsen

Melissa Nilges
Susan Thomas

MOTION CARRIED

6. Commission Membership & Vacancies

Adam Anderson reported on efforts to address vacancies at the Commission level. He has been in contact with the Governor's office, including the Chief of Staff and Executive Assistant, to follow up on pending appointments. There was a discussion regarding the process for filling the tribal representative position. It was noted that this position (currently held by Misty Flowers) is typically a nominee of the Nebraska Indian Commission. However, it was clarified that other interested stakeholders may also apply for Commission positions directly through the Governor's constituent services.

7. Office of Inspector General Annual Report / Alternative Response Report

In her detailed update to the Nebraska Children's Commission, Jennifer Carter, the Inspector General for Nebraska Child Welfare, outlined the office's primary function as a mechanism for government accountability and transparency. The office, which operates with a small staff of three investigators, has jurisdiction over the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), juvenile probation, detention centers, and private service providers. Their core mandate includes the investigation of deaths and serious injuries of children who are currently in the system or have had contact with Child and Family Services (CFS) within the previous 12 months. Carter noted that while medical-related deaths are typically not investigated, any incident where government policy or procedure could have played a preventive role undergoes a thorough review.

A significant portion of the report focused on current data and systemic challenges. In the 2024-2025 fiscal year, the office received 445 intakes, including 96 critical incidents and 161 complaints. Carter reported an uptick in child deaths (27, up from 21 the previous year), specifically noting seven cases related to unsafe sleep environments, often involving substance or alcohol use. Despite a steady stream of new cases, the office completed 11 investigations last year. Carter also addressed the "structural hurdles" created by a 2023 Attorney General's opinion that revoked the office's read-only access to the n-focus database. This change now requires the office to request documents manually, often resulting in massive, difficult-to-navigate PDFs that hinder the efficiency of their investigations.

Regarding specific facilities and programs, Carter highlighted the monitoring of Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers (YRTCs), particularly in Kearney, which has seen a significant population increase to approximately 92 youth. The office tracks a wide range of data points at these facilities, including assaults, escapes, and uses of mechanical restraints. While youth-on-staff assaults have increased, there were no reported suicide attempts for the second consecutive year. Carter also touched upon the "Alternative Response" (AR) report, revealing that many cases categorized for this voluntary, low-intervention program were actually scored as "high" or "very high risk." She recommended that the legislature implement "look-back" periods to identify patterns of family disengagement and ensure safety assessments are being conducted accurately.

The report concluded with a discussion on legislative progress and future oversight. Carter noted the positive impact of LB 298, which created a new Division of Legislative Oversight, signaling a growing interest among senators in robust government monitoring. She also discussed a specific investigative report concerning the death of a two-year-old at the hands of a parent's significant other, emphasizing the need for safety assessments to better include all individuals residing in or having regular access to a household. As the office moves forward, Carter expressed a commitment to thoroughness over speed, noting that while public reports may take time to finalize due to mandatory agency response periods, her office continues to provide regular, confidential updates to the Legislative Oversight Committee to inform the upcoming session.

8. Foster Care Review Office Annual Report

FCRO Research Analyst, Patrick Griffin presented information from the FCRO Annual Report. He shared that as of June 30, 2025, the total population of children in care stood at 4,104, representing a 1% decrease from the previous year. While children solely involved with Child and Family Services (3,360) and Probation (467) saw slight decreases, there were significant increases in multi-agency involvement. Specifically, youth dually involved with CFS and Probation rose by 19% to 142 individuals, and those involved with OJS and Probation increased by 33% to 132 youth, 128 of whom are currently placed at YRTC facilities.

Griffin showed key findings regarding placements and demographics highlighted critical areas for reform. While 82% of the 83 children in congregate care remain in Nebraska, 18% are placed as far away as Massachusetts and Utah, prompting recommendations for increased local infrastructure investment. Data also revealed a stark racial disproportionality; for example, African American children make up only 6% of the general population but are represented at more than double that rate in the system. To address this, the office recommends shifting from punitive interventions toward proactive, community-based supports funded through organizations that specifically serve communities of color.

The primary drivers for removal in Fiscal Year 2025 were identified as neglect (67%), parental drug use (48.4%), and methamphetamine use (19%). Social factors such as substandard housing and domestic violence also played significant roles, and it was noted that 60% of children were removed from single-mother households. To mitigate these entries, the office suggests addressing root causes like poverty and addiction through harm reduction and comprehensive treatment services. Stability remains a challenge, as 18.5% of children statewide—and 28% in the Eastern Service Area—have had five or more caseworkers, leading to recommendations centered on caseworker retention and mental health.

Regarding permanency and transitions, Griffin shared that reunification remains the most common exit reason at 45.5%, followed by adoption at 26%. However, adoption takes the longest to finalize, with a median of 987 days in care. For older youth, less than one-third have completed the mandatory Ansell-Casey life skills assessment, with completion rates dropping below 18% in the Central Service Area. Stakeholders and speakers emphasized the profound trauma caused by system involvement, advocating for long-term treatment programs like "Family Works" that keep mothers and children together and calling for the removal of bureaucratic barriers that delay mental health evaluations and therapist training.

9. Committee Update

a. Alternative Response Committee

Discussion regarding Alternative Response occurred during the OIG Annual Report agenda item.

b. Bridge to Independence Advisory Committee

B2i Chair, Hasty provided a positive update on the Bridge to Independence (B2I) Committee, noting a significant surge in attendance and engagement during recent meetings. After previously struggling to consistently meet a quorum, the committee is now benefiting from strong participation and a renewed sense of energy. This momentum is particularly timely as the committee prepares for its official sunset on June 30th, at which point it will transition to a permanent structure under the Nebraska Children's Commission (NCC). Hasty emphasized that the NCC is committed to ensuring the B2I committee continues in a meaningful form, with finalized details regarding its future structure expected at upcoming meetings.

The core of the committee's recent work has focused on the reorganization of its workgroups. Two groups are already firmly established: the **Evaluation Workgroup**, led by Heather Wood, and the **Sustainability and Peer Workgroup**, co-led by Felipe Longoria-Shinn and Dylan Graeve. Hasty highlighted Dylan Graeve's exceptional energy and lived experience as a driving force for the sustainability group, noting that his leadership is helping to bridge the gap for other young people with lived experience who wish to participate but may not know how to get involved. A third group, originally focused on immigration, is transitioning to a **Special Populations Workgroup** with an emphasis on tribal youth. While there is strong interest in this new direction, the committee is still seeking a dedicated leader to chair this specific group.

The update also introduced an innovative community education program called **Thrive Forward: Life Skills for the Heart and Mind**. Proposed by committee member Angela Jarecki, this program is designed for foster families and youth ages 14 to 24. It utilizes weekly 90-minute sessions involving art-based activities and experiential learning to teach emotional intelligence, decision-making, boundaries, and "energetic hygiene." This curriculum aims to provide older teens with the practical and emotional tools necessary to live independently and positively. Handouts regarding the program will be made available on the committee's website.

In closing, Hasty reiterated that the current level of engagement is the highest he has seen in some time, attributing the success to a consistent emphasis on involving those with lived experience and the active, physical presence of members.

at meetings. He encouraged anyone interested in leading the Special Populations Workgroup or learning more about the B2I transition to attend the next virtual meeting scheduled for January 22nd at 10:00 a.m.

c. Foster Care Reimbursement Rate Committee

Theresa Goley provided an update on the Rate Reimbursement Committee's efforts to overhaul the Nebraska Caregiver Responsibility (NCR) tool, a project aimed at improving consistency and capturing the true complexity of youth in foster care. To ensure the tool produces reliable results regardless of who completes it, the committee conducted a pilot study comparing scores from foster care specialists, DHHS case managers, and probation officers. The initial sample of 10 youth showed high levels of consistency, with minor scoring differences attributed to wording that is now being clarified. The committee intends to expand this pilot to a sample of 50 youth, including dually adjudicated cases, to finalize a scoring system that eliminates subjective interpretation.

A major enhancement to the new tool is the integration of high-acuity levels (levels six through eight) directly into the NCR, rather than treating them as "one-off" letters of agreement (LOAs). This change aims to standardize financial support so that similar youth receive consistent funding across different agencies. The draft tool also introduces a "Youth and Caregiver" dual-scoring system, which is a departure from the current caregiver-only model. Goley emphasized that while a child's behavioral needs (the youth score) should remain relatively stagnant across different settings, the caregiver score reflects the specific responses and expertise required from the foster parent, such as specialized medical training or constant availability.

The revised NCR also includes a new section designed to capture "extra" challenges that are often omitted from the current system but are frequent barriers to placement. These include risks to the caregiver's physical safety, property damage, and blatant non-compliance—behaviors where a youth may not be violent but refuses to attend school or perform basic hygiene. Goley noted that such behaviors are "exhausting for caregivers" and must be accounted for to prevent placement disruptions. The committee has developed a comprehensive set of definitions to accompany the tool, ensuring that terms like "recent" have a clear, fixed timeline to prevent guessing during the assessment process.

Looking ahead, the committee aims to present a final draft with a proposed scoring system to the Rate Reimbursement Committee in January 2026. If approved by DHHS senior leadership, the tool will move into a technical implementation phase to be built into the n-focus database, followed by joint training sessions for case managers and providers. Goley acknowledged the "red tape" involved in IT updates but stressed the importance of this work for maintaining foster care capacity. As the Foster Care Rate Committee is set to sunset and transition into a subcommittee of the Children's Commission in July 2026, these recommendations will eventually be integrated into the Commission's annual report.

d. Juvenile Services Committee

Co-Chair Deb VanDyke-Ries, from the Juvenile Services Committee (JSC) provided a detailed update focusing on membership stabilization, structural changes to its partnership with the Nebraska Coalition for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ), and the progress of its specialized subcommittees. A primary focus has been ensuring a consistent quorum through intentional outreach and an assessment of active membership. With administrative assistance, the committee reviewed attendance records from the past year and conducted direct outreach to inactive members to confirm their continued interest. This personal approach has helped clarify the committee's roster and ensures that those who remain are engaged and committed to the work.

Significant changes are also underway regarding the committee's meeting structure. For several years, the JSC has held joint meetings with the NCJJ, but leadership noted that this format often leads to disengagement, as many members are not decision-makers for both entities. A meeting is scheduled for later this week to discuss the JSC "going its own way" to conduct its work independently. The goal is to separate the meetings to increase participation and focus, while still maintaining a strategic bridge between the two organizations to ensure their efforts remain aligned.

The update also highlighted the technical work of the JSC's three subcommittees. The Access to Services Subcommittee, led by Julie Smith, is pursuing a "blended funding" model to support high-acuity youth in the community. This pilot project aims to utilize a Medicaid waiver to unbundle services currently only available at YRTCs, allowing youth to receive intensive care in their own communities while leveraging federal Medicaid dollars instead of relying solely on state general funds. However, progress has recently stalled due to a lack of consistent participation from Medicaid representatives.

Additionally, the committee has established a new subcommittee focused on Virtual Planning, led by Dr. Nunez-Case, which is currently defining its scope and objectives. Finally, the Monitoring Subcommittee, led by Tammy Sacksman, is in the process of conducting a statewide tour of every facility in Nebraska, including YRTCs and detention centers. Sacksman's findings and onsite experiences will be brought back to the workgroup to inform the committee's oversight and recommendations moving forward.

e. Strengthening Families Act Committee

Chloe Fowler provided an update on the Strengthening Families Act (SFA) Committee, noting that the group is currently focused on revitalizing and launching several key workgroups. These include the Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) workgroup, which already has a designated chair, as well as a specialized workgroup focused on trafficking as mandated under the Strengthening Families Act. Additionally, the committee is establishing a family support workgroup and re-activating the "Unwilling/Safe" workgroup now that they have obtained the necessary reports and plans that were previously missing due to a filing oversight with the legislature.

A significant portion of the committee's recent work has centered on the ongoing "Normalcy" initiative, specifically regarding the annual normalcy report and plan. Fowler shared that the reporting process has been refined to better protect privacy by identifying and removing questions that could lead to the disclosure of identifiable information for individual children. Furthermore, the reporting language was altered to eliminate repetitive "copy and paste" content, ensuring that the reports and plans remain distinct and meaningful. The committee also adjusted the administrative timeline for these documents, moving the submission deadline from September 1st to June 30th.

10. DHHS Update

In her detailed update to the Nebraska Children's Commission, Camas Holder, representing Child and Family Services (CFS), highlighted significant growth in the Bridge to Independence (B2I) program and several new prevention initiatives. Through October 2025, the B2I program saw a 92% entry rate for eligible young adults leaving child welfare care, a substantial increase from the 72% seen in prior years. This success was attributed to intentional tracking and a revamped outreach strategy that includes multiple letters sent to youth and guardians six months before their 19th birthday. The program also successfully integrated 11 active probation-eligible youth. To manage this increased volume, CFS filled three new independence coordinator positions over the past year.

Regarding prevention and systemic improvements, Holder noted that the second Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) plan is back under review by federal authorities, with a goal of resubmission by the end of November. In the interim, CFS is moving forward with a "warm line" procurement process to provide an alternative to the traditional abuse and neglect hotline for families who need support but do not meet the threshold for a formal investigation. Scoring for the Request for Proposals (RFP) is currently underway, with a bidder expected to be awarded by January 2026. Additionally, a new "We Care" messaging campaign and a comprehensive two-hour mandatory reporting training curriculum are set for release in early 2026 to help professionals better distinguish between poverty-related neglect and safety risks.

Holder also addressed the transition of the relative and kinship program to internal DHHS management. As of mid-November, 103 of the 106 required staff have been hired—many from existing private providers—and are currently undergoing training in the evidence-based Arizona kinship navigation model. While the department has taken on all new kinship cases since October, the transition of existing cases from private agencies is slated for completion by February 2026. This shift has prompted some concerns from private providers regarding staffing and budget planning, leading to a commitment from CFS to meet with agency leadership in early January to coordinate the handoff.

Finally, the update covered clinical reviews and case management adjustments. Effective November 1st, referrals for family support services are now capped at six months to ensure goals remain relevant and aligned with court plans; extensions now require a second-level administrative review. The Clinical Review Team, which has been operational for a year, continues to provide intensive oversight for high-acuity youth, including those in out-of-state psychiatric residential treatment facilities. Data from the "STAR" mapping reviews showed strong outcomes, with 163 children reunified and over 300 moving toward alternative permanency. These internal clinical and mapping processes have now been fully operationalized into the department's standard supervision and case management structure.

11. Probation Update

Kari Rumbaugh from the Administrative Office of the Courts and Probation provided a comprehensive update on the implementation of LB 530, focusing specifically on juvenile justice reforms. The implementation has involved extensive outreach, including webinars and presentations to judges, attorneys, and law enforcement to ensure a unified interpretation of the law.

Juvenile Intake and Detention Reforms

A central component of the reform is the revised juvenile intake process. When law enforcement requests a detention assessment, probation officers now use a standardized tool that involves judicial review for certain high-stakes cases. Specifically, if a youth is accused of a felony or an offense involving a deadly weapon and the probation officer suggests an alternative to detention despite the youth scoring for detention, a judge must make the final decision.

Other legislative changes include making 11- and 12-year-olds eligible for detention (provided all alternatives are exhausted) and adding six new detention requirements—such as a history of absconding or multiple property crimes—to the Risk Assessment Instrument (RAI). Rumbaugh noted that while these new factors are being scored, the RAI itself has struggled with validation due to a high rate of professional "overrides" (over 40%, whereas best practice is under 10%). To address this, Probation is working with the Juvenile Justice Institute (JJI) at UNO on a short-term scoring fix and a long-term plan to develop a Nebraska-specific validated instrument over the next two to five years.

Comprehensive Supervision Probation (CSP)

LB 530 introduced a new court designation called Comprehensive Supervision Probation (CSP) for youth who are deemed not amenable to standard "graduated responses" (incentives and sanctions). These youth are supervised at the highest intensity level, comparable to reentry youth returning from YRTC facilities. The law mandates that services be prioritized for this population, though Rumbaugh acknowledged that out-of-home placements remain a challenge due to existing waitlists.

As of early November, there are 16 youth on CSP status across Nebraska, with the majority (72%) located in Douglas County. This status carries strict legal consequences: youth are generally permitted only one technical violation sanction before a motion to revoke probation must be filed. For any subsequent technical violation or any new law violation, the case must be submitted to the county attorney for a motion to revoke. Early data shows that while most CSP youth are high-risk, 17% have already received their single allowed sanction.

Budget and Facility Updates

Regarding the state budget, the judicial branch is preparing for potential cuts as requested by the Governor's office. Rumbaugh stated that they are exploring the use of internal cash funds to preserve service dollars for youth and families, but staff and service fund reductions are a real possibility for the next legislative session. Finally, she provided current census data for Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers (YRTC): 16 youth are at Hastings (girls), 92 at Kearney (boys), and 14 at the Lincoln facility. She confirmed that YRTC facilities are currently complying with requests for probation officers to have private, unmonitored meetings with youth without requiring specific court orders.

12. Public Comment

A member of the public, identified as a former social worker, provided a poignant testimony regarding her personal case in Dawson County. She alleged that an on-call worker's personal biases and lack of mental health education led to the removal of her child and placement in a neglectful environment. She challenged the Commission, stating that while "oversight" is positive, it is meaningless without "accountability" and the power to enforce actual change in local offices like the one in Lexington.

13. New Business

New Program: Deborah Dancer shared that NICWC will offer a 12-module virtual professional development series titled "Motherhood and Fatherhood is Sacred" starting next year.

14. Upcoming Meeting Planning

- a. February 10, 2026 Virtual

15. Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 1:56 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,
Adam Anderson