

DHHS – Parent and Caregiver Citizen Review Panel
Annual Report: October 1, 2024 – September 30, 2025
Submitted: October 24, 2025

This report addresses the actions taken to satisfy the scope of services for facilitation of the Parent and Caregiver Response Citizen Review Panel (CRP) as outlined in the agreement between the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCFF). This report fulfills the annual reporting requirement of the 2024-2025 contract cycle, and includes activities undertaken to facilitate and maintain the Parent and Caregiver CRP recommendations from 2024 and implemented from Oct 1, 2024, to September 30, 2025.

Scope of Work: Provide administrative support to the Nebraska Child Abuse Prevention Treatment Act (CAPTA) Citizen Review Panel for Parent and Caregivers.

Nebraska Children provides staff support to facilitate meetings of the Parent and Caregiver CRP. This support includes arranging meeting locations, dates, times, agendas, minutes, copying and arranging for childcare when necessary.

Scope of Work: Assure that the Panel is composed of volunteer members who are broadly representative of the diversity in the state and includes members how have expertise in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect and may include adult former victims of child abuse and neglect.

Nebraska Children and Families Foundation continue to be grateful for the opportunity to administer the Caregiver Citizen Review Panel (CRP) and provide recommendations to the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). We continued the work with lived experience experts from across the state. The members were solicited from applications from across the state. After receiving around 20 applications, 12 members were chosen to participate in the panel. They represent various parts of the state and different life experiences.

Scope of Work: Provide Support for meetings that occur at least once every three months.

Starting in the summer and going through early autumn, members of the panel met to discuss issues facing parents and caregivers with the goal of providing recommendations to the Department of Health and Human Services. The group includes representatives from the education, human services, health department, community organization and residents with lived experience. They represent communities of Omaha, Papillion, Lincoln, Hastings and Elk Creek.

The group met five times starting in May 2025 and wrapped up at the end of September. The group met virtually on May 14, June 11, July 9, August 13 and September 10. The group also met on October 1 to go over the recommendations and make final edits.

The minutes for the meetings can be found in Appendix A.

Scope of Work: Assure that the CRP examines the policies and procedures and practices of the State and local agencies and where appropriate, specific cases, evaluate the extent to which the State and local child protection system agencies are effectively discharging their child protection responsibilities in accordance with state plan, the child protection standards and any other criteria that the panel considers important to ensure the protection of children, including a review of the extent to which the State and local child protective services system is coordinated with the foster care and adoption programs.

This year, the Citizen Review Panel met five times from May to September to produce recommendations for DHHS that represent our local community's voices to lift up the immediate concerns our regions have been facing about the child welfare system.

The group started with 12 members, including people with experience in foster care or juvenile justice and are currently parenting or worked with parents in their professional capacity.

The final recommendations include providing more parental support for both biological parents and foster parents, how to better deal with culture issues between caseworkers and parents, and addressing systematic issues such as coaching and training, accountability for caregivers and safe spaces for youth in crisis.

Recommendations:

Recommendation #1 – Parental support

Many parents face barriers such as a lack of affordable childcare, limited access to parenting education, insufficient mental health support, and difficulty navigating complex community resources. Without adequate support, parents, including single parents, blended families, foster and adoptive parents, and other non-traditional caregivers, struggle to balance caregiving, employment, and personal well-being, which can negatively affect children's development.

Strong parental support is directly linked to children's academic success, emotional stability, and long-term health outcomes. When parents lack resources and support, children are more likely to face developmental delays, behavioral challenges, and reduced educational attainment. Addressing these gaps strengthens families and reduces reliance on crisis interventions later.

This support can take several different forms. It could involve connecting parents with DHHS employees who have lived experience to provide peer support. Expanding the home visitation program, increasing awareness to teach skills and recognize developmental milestones, and establishing support groups supervised by DHHS for parents to build connections with others are essential goals. Support is also vital after family reunification to develop connections and ensure that recidivism does not occur.

When parents and caregivers are properly supported, they can maintain stable employment, provide consistent and nurturing care, and access resources that reduce stress within the household. This support allows families to focus more on their children's growth and development rather than on surviving day-to-day challenges. Conversely, when families lack support, children

are more likely to face developmental delays, behavioral challenges, and reduced educational attainment.

Expanding access to affordable childcare and parenting education, integrating mental health services for caregivers, and providing clear pathways to community resources would help families thrive. These supports enable caregivers to manage their responsibilities more effectively, strengthen family relationships, and create stable environments where children can succeed academically and socially. Over time, this reduces reliance on crisis interventions, eases the burden on schools and healthcare systems, and contributes to stronger, more resilient communities.

Recommendation #2 – Culture Issues

Foster care presents numerous challenges, one of the most profound being its potential impact on a child’s cultural identity. When children are suddenly placed in a new living environment, they often leave behind familiar community settings, schools, traditions, and places of worship. This displacement can profoundly affect their connection to cultural heritage, which is not only a part of who they are but also a source of resilience, stability, and healing.

Cultural awareness must therefore be a top priority in child welfare immediately after ensuring child safety. Protecting cultural identity is essential for safeguarding children, supporting their parents, and strengthening families. Too often, children in foster care lose connection to their traditions, language, and communities, which leads to identity struggles, low self-esteem, and feelings of isolation. Parents, too, suffer when services fail to reflect their cultural values, leaving them alienated and less willing to engage in the complex process of reunification.

The most crucial step in addressing this issue begins with leadership. We strongly recommend employing a dedicated cultural team, a group of staff who are highly trained, culturally informed, and connected with local communities. This team would ensure that culture is not treated as an afterthought, but as a guiding principle in every decision. They could guide caseworkers, prepare and train foster families, and design services for parents that reflect cultural strengths.

In addition, CPS should adopt the following strategies to ensure cultural awareness is embedded throughout the foster care system:

- Ongoing cultural competency training for foster families, caseworkers, and service providers, particularly when caring for children from different backgrounds.
- Partnerships with tribes, cultural organizations, and community leaders to help identify culturally appropriate placements and create culturally relevant parent programs.
- Engage in open dialogue and active listening with children and families to understand their traditions, language, and values.
- Community connections by linking children with cultural organizations, events, and mentors who foster belonging.

- Support for biological families so children can maintain and strengthen ties to their heritage.
- Access to culturally competent professionals, such as therapists and counselors who understand and respect cultural needs, is essential.

When cultural awareness is overlooked, children and parents alike suffer disconnection. But when culture is respected and preserved, the opposite happens: children feel grounded in who they are, parents feel seen and supported, and families are more likely to heal and reunify.

Cultural awareness is not an addition to child welfare—it is the heart of a child’s healing and a family’s success. By establishing a cultural team and embedding culture into every decision, CPS can protect children, empower parents, and create stronger outcomes for families.

Recommendation #3 – System Issues Summary

The child welfare system in Nebraska faces multiple, interconnected challenges that deeply affect children, families, and frontline workers. These issues stem from insufficient training, lack of compassion, inconsistent accountability, and inadequate resources. As a result, families often feel unheard, young people feel unsafe, and workers feel unsupported. Addressing these systemic failures is critical to creating a child welfare system that truly protects, empowers, and uplifts those it serves.

Communication and Training

Many Child Protective Services (CPS) workers often must deal with difficult conversations, utilize empathy, and engage in trauma-informed communication, but they can struggle with these skills. Training focused on empathy, maintaining boundaries, and delivering sensitive information would improve worker-family relationships and ensure parents feel heard. Also, parents often do not realize they can contact their caseworker, ask questions, or assert their rights. Workers should also be required to inform parents of their rights clearly and consistently during each stage of the case or when a status is updated.

Below are several ideas for solutions to address communication and training issues:

- **Role-Playing & Real Scenarios** – include practice sessions where staff role-play difficult conversations with parents to build skill and confidence in responding with empathy and clarity. (Quarterly, this could be part of their performance evaluations)
- **Clear Written Materials for Parents** – provide parents with easy-to-read handouts in plain language that explain their rights, the CPS process, and how to reach their worker, available in multiple languages. (Easy to read, could also create a video for those who need it)
- **Mandatory Rights Review** – at each stage of the case (intake, investigation, placement, reunification planning), workers should clearly review parents’ rights and document that this was done.

- Feedback Loops – create a system for parents to provide feedback on their interactions with workers (e.g., through anonymous surveys or exit interviews), which can be used to improve training. (As a simple communication app, HIPAA-compliant, of course)
- Supervisory Coaching – supervisors should regularly observe or review caseworker communications (phone calls, visits, meetings) and provide coaching on tone, clarity, and empathy. (Workers are human, too, so having others involved improves accountability)
- Cultural Competency Layer – embed cultural awareness into communication training so staff understand how different cultures may perceive authority, boundaries, and respect. (Frequent contact with cultural dept)
- Parent Navigation Support – offer optional “case navigators” or liaisons who can help parents interpret what caseworkers say, reducing miscommunication and fear.
- Consistency Across Cases – develop statewide or regional guidelines on how workers communicate rights and expectations, ensuring families receive the same information no matter who their worker is. Caseworkers should emphasize strength-based notations to celebrate the child’s accomplishments rather than just focusing on negative behaviors.
- Hope and Compassion Training – A lack of empathy within the system leaves families feeling dehumanized. Training workers in hope, compassion, and trauma-informed care is vital to changing outcomes for children and families. If the system does not treat people with dignity and foster resilience, it fails its purpose. At least four hours of required training each year in hope and compassion should be mandated statewide.

Accountability for Caregivers

Foster parents are often treated differently under the law, even when children in their care experience abuse. Too frequently, signs of physical abuse go unaddressed, leaving youth vulnerable. To build trust in the system, foster, adoptive, and biological parents must all be held to the same legal standard. Allegations of abuse or neglect should be thoroughly investigated, and consequences applied equally.

- Create a system where children in foster care have regular, confidential check-ins with an independent advocate (not their CPS worker or foster parent), so concerns about abuse can surface safely.
- Develop a secure app or hotline where children can report mistreatment directly, with automatic alerts to CPS supervisors. For the grievance process, ensure privacy for complaints to protect the young people and others who file complaints.
- When safe and appropriate, offer structured restorative meetings where biological parents and children can voice concerns about their treatment in foster care directly to CPS leadership.
- Publish anonymized data on abuse/neglect allegations in foster care, including how many are substantiated and what actions were taken. Transparency pressures the system to act reasonably.

- Instead of only caseworkers, bring in rotating third-party teams to do unannounced foster home visits and verify children’s safety.

Safe Spaces for Youth in Crisis

Detention facilities should never be used as holding spaces for children in crisis. This practice creates fear, mistrust, and discourages youth from ever reaching out for help again. Nebraska needs dedicated emergency spaces where young people can go without the threat of being criminalized or delayed by excessive paperwork. These safe spaces must prioritize meeting basic needs quickly while connecting youth to services, stability, and long-term care, rather than turning the young person into law enforcement. Services such as respite care and emergency services need to be offered outside of business hours.

Children in crisis should never be treated like criminals. Too often, when young people in foster care or experiencing homelessness seek help, they are met by law enforcement instead of compassionate staff. This response instills fear and discourages youth from reaching out again.

Here are possible solutions for this area:

- Establish 24/7 youth crisis centers statewide where young people can walk in without fear of being detained or criminalized.
- Train crisis response teams composed of social workers, youth advocates, and mental health professionals — not police — to handle emergencies.
- Create partnerships between CPS, shelters, and community-based organizations to provide immediate access to food, clothing, and safe lodging.
- Implement a “no wrong door” policy, ensuring that every agency interacting with youth in crisis connects them to services instead of rejecting or referring them elsewhere.

Conclusion

By improving worker training, enforcing accountability, creating safe emergency spaces, reforming referral processes, and addressing caseload intensity, Nebraska can build a more compassionate, effective system. Above all, prioritizing hope and dignity will help children and families feel supported rather than abandoned during their most challenging times.

Appendix A Meetings Minutes

Parent and Caregiver CRP Rolling Agenda and Minutes

September 10, 2025

Attending: Franck, Most, Arvoni, Safira, Jessica, Vanessa, Sophia, Lincoln, |Angela

Spent most of meeting working on recommendation draft

Next Steps

Everyone add to the google document

- Safira add parental alienation
- Frank and Jessica combine – Angela add communication piece – combine and make beautiful
- Everyone review system issues section to make sure priority points are addressed and more concise

August 13, 2025

Attending: Lincoln, Sophia, Arvoni, Angela, Cheyenna, Vanessa, Safira, Most, Franck

Culture – Franck, Angela, Jessica

- Recidivism: youth keep ending in same cycle for the system
- Culture is different than race
- Encompasses family structure, customs, norms, immigration
- Acknowledging that this is an issue; it's them and the bridge between DHHS and community – accountability.

- They are relying on policy to facilitate forward movement and progress; including information about child.
- Caseworkers learn about culture of children when they have cases of different cultures
- Widening educational opportunities
- Having more monitoring of the caseworkers that the work is happening
- Disproportionality
- There is a system in place that could help them.
- Need support and service for the black community

System Issues – Vanessa, Arvoni, Cheyenne

- More communication skills for the workers
- Compassion and a legit plan; youth show signs of physical abuse, but issues aren't addressed
- Issue is the youth, it's the system; often feel that doors are closed when seeking help
- When they send out referrals for child placements, the description focuses on the negative qualities; often capturing them at their worst moments
- Youth don't have a voice; they are being labeled by the system
- Hope science: hope heals and it can be taught (ReImagine Omaha)
- Ask that 2 hours of training be hope and compassion training
- Intensity/Need of cases should be considered when figuring out the caseload
- Cash payments given to 16+ and they pick where they live and pay them from ;

Parental support – Safira, Most

- Parental alienation
- Misunderstanding what it can look like;
- Parent manipulates child against the other parent; changing of memories; can lead to issues of abandonment
- How insidious it is and far reaching it can be; cult-like brainwashing

- Requires specialty therapy that is only offered one place in Omaha (reunification therapy)
- Helping Parents
- Wasn't convinced about resources for parents are going through challenges
- Provide parents with skill-building resources to work toward reunification with their children
- Resources for parents to help them their in journey
- Not satisfied with the answer

Parent and Caregiver CRP Rolling Agenda and Minutes

July 9, 2025

Attending: Lincoln, Sophia, Arvoni, Cheyenne, Most, Angela, Franck, Jessica, Vanessa

Guests: Shayla Mitteis, Jarren Breeling

Agenda: Q&A with DHHS

- CPS hiring process – are they questioned about lived experiences?
 - Usually look at qualifications. During interview process all questions are experience based. Service area determines questions. These could be personal, work, educational experiences. Questions are designed to understand skills and abilities in working with families.
 - Themes include:
 - Critical thinking, Attention to detail, Problem solving, Conflict resolution, teamwork abilities,
 - Jarren's role is different – required lived experience. She is currently the only person in a role like hers
 - Many people are drawn to the roles because of proximity to personal/lived experience. We often learn that about people once they are working.

- Is there a support group for parents who have had their children removed from the home by CPS?
 - DHHS does not provide support groups. There are groups through other agencies. Some at national level (virtual).
 - Parents with Children in Foster Care
 - Families Inspiring Families (FRON)
- Are parents provided support group info?
 - It depends if the parent requests - caseworker will also consider plan
- Is there a system to “match” caseworkers to situations where they are able to work well together? This could also be connected to having similar culture
 - Diverse staff from different cultures/backgrounds and bilingual speakers (Spanish, Arabic). Increasing in diversity
 - Multiple factors considered when assigning case. Consider what experience makes the most sense for matching (experience in substance use, mental health, etc.)
 - Challenges include not going over caseload limit and do not want to reassign cases
- What is the caseload max for CFS worker?
 - Initial assessment – quick turnaround – meets with family, identify needs, move to ongoing – 12 cases (families) max, 4 max in training
 - Ongoing – determined by children in home (1 case) or out of home (number of children out of home counts towards case count) - 17 cases max, 4 max in training
 - Statute based – must follow
- What is the current timeline for parents to make changes? 15 months
- Are some workers just choosing not to work in the evening to help with placement?
- What is worker responsibility for availability? How it is determined?
 - Varies. Depends on circumstances.
 - Initial assessment – will finish investigation after “working hours” (5pm)
 - Ongoing – usually have more time to plan. It is policy to visit in foster home or family home. Would need to be after school. Need to schedule to what works best for families.
 - Emergency situations – workers may have to stay late

- Always a worker on call after 5pm. These would be for emergency situations (ex: call from the hotline) would need to go out and investigate
- Will depend on the situation. Example: Law enforcement would have to remove from home – immediate safety situation – would call and consult to create a plan (ex: wait til the next day). If law enforcement would call and say that they need CFS there, CFS goes. (this is how central/grand island responds – not aware how it works specifically in other areas)
- DHHS/CFS does not have capacity to remove children from the home. Children would be placed in custody of DHHS/CFS after law enforcement removal.
- DHHS works to not have children removed from families. Have to respond to reports received by law enforcement. Will then talk with families in depth about lives and what is going on in home to determine what is really going on as best they can.
- What is process for undocumented children and their families?
 - They are offered same services as any other family. Look at situation and determine services they need. (This is from the DHHS/CFS perspective – is different with other DHHS programs like economic assistance)
 - When a child is removed, DHHS looks at family/kin placement first. Do best to have them matched with an agency that will be able to meet their needs if there is not family/kin placement available.
 - Do you keep family's immigration status private?
 - Historically we have been most concerned with keeping family safe. There was never an issue with immigration status unless they were the perpetrators.
 - Times are different now. This may not be the case in the future.
- What is DHHS doing about the alternative placements that children are being sent? Are they safe? How are they vetted?
- When it comes to final placement decisions – what are you looking at? Who's available? Certain factors? Is the wellbeing/trauma of child considered with placement?
 - By law there is a process of who the child goes to.
 - First person to look at is non-custodial parent – must be a safe option – must look at no matter what the custodial parent says
 - Siblings/half-siblings

- Relative/Kin (kin is trusted adult that is connected to the family) – ask parents who do you know that would pass a background check that would take the children? Rely heavily on families to let DHHS know. Often have grandparent/aunt/uncle that will help
- Can utilize a program called “Family Finding” that works with families to learn more about potential relatives
- Also use Lexus nexus – can look into who they are associated with
- Use social media
- Agency
- Process to get approved
 - Pass background check
 - Suitable home
 - Be safe
- Is there interest in bringing SOUL family placements?
 - This could be considered kinship placements – this is looked as well
 - SOUL is more about child/youth choosing placement (16 and older) to exit foster care
 - There is independent living for youth – old enough to decide where to stay. Still a stipend to help pay for where they are staying.
- Multiple factors to determine if qualify for independent living
- What steps is DHHS taking to address the disproportionate number of minority children, particularly Black and Indigenous children, being placed in the foster care system, and how are you working to ensure equity in family preservation and support services?
- Thank you for this question – well thought, deep question
- Making sure that each family/youth is treated with respect in the way that they need. Given/make available services that will be effective in their family dynamic.
- Services in community that families can be referred to – especially prevention services (example: Latino youth in Lincoln, Grand Island has specific Latino community services)
- Why are minority children, especially Black and Indigenous youth, disproportionately represented in Nebraska's foster care system, and what is being done to investigate and correct the systemic issues contributing to this?

- Always open to looking at what is not working and trying to find a solution (bigger picture answer)
- Senator McKinny from Omaha is looking into this – proposed legislation to address this
- How often does it happen that children get adopted out of foster care and then end up back in the system?
- What are current percentages for reunification?
- Reunification within 12 months – 2023 61.1%, 2024 58.2%, May 2025 70.1%
- STAR model is helping – have been using within the last 6 months
 - Looks at conditions for return and working through with the family
- On public website – has all the data reports that can be divided by diversity
- Abuse/neglect happened (substantiated)
 - 2023 victim rate by race
 - <https://dhhs.ne.gov/DCFS%20Data%20and%20Reports/CAN%202023%20Annual%20Data%20Report.pdf>
- Recidivism
 - Occurrence of maltreatment – placement or reunification – federal indicator
 - Target 9.7% or less - currently at 6% in Nebraska
- What is the system doing to understand/address parental alienation? (Reunification therapy)
 - Therapy in general is looked at using if it is a service needed for that child.
 - Trying to help keep the bond with parent/child
 - Have visits in place as soon as possible (within 24 hours)
 - How many hours/days per week is in statute based on child's age
 - If there is issue between child/parent they do family therapy or parent child interactive therapy
 - Less familiar with reunification therapy – but try to get therapy needed to mend bond.
 - Goal is reunification – recommendations for what is going to help reach that goal

- What do you (DHHS) believe in the problem area? What do you need help with?
 - It's an opinion question, so it's hard (can't give personal opinion)
 - The department tries hard to identify the issues and work to improve it (how CRP and STAR model came about) We are revisiting how assessments look and what we use to determine family's needs/safety/risk
- If you're on the central registry (abuse/neglect) - how do I get removed/help others get removed
 - Request an expungement – link on website under central registry – form on website or email/print form
 - They will want to see how you have addressed the concerns that placed you on the registry (therapy, counseling, any subsequent investigations, etc.)
 - If denied, they tell you what they would like to see for you to be able to be removed.
 - Being removed is always an option – you have to be able to show that the action that placed you on the registry is no longer a concern.
 - You could also file an appeal if denied if you feel they made the wrong determination
 - Can request expungement as many times as you'd like
- What are your opinions of tribal courts? Why do you think there is such a disconnect?
 - There is a program that works with the tribes, families, tribal court, members
 - Tribal court is it's own entity – operated under tribal governed by things they already put in place
 - Do not know all in's and outs of tribal court
 - If tribal court intervenes, it leaves state of Nebraska court and goes to tribal court.
- What is the content of the training? Are there cultural competency aspects? How important is it to current staff to have that knowledge?
 - Teach about cultural diversity and thinking differently
 - Recognize that every family is unique and has different needs
- Are caseworkers making living wages?
 - Starting pay is \$25.60 an hour

- Culture
 - Foster parents have to sign in contract that child's culture will be maintained
 - Caseworkers would support cultural connections for children
 - It doesn't always work how it is supposed to, but work very hard to educate and make sure that caseworkers are aware of all different cultures and how to navigate

Debrief

- Some questions felt they were not answered completely/tip-toed around
- Wanted to talk more about statutes
- Systematic challenges not addressed – but we can still make recommendations

Next Steps

- In August, determine what are the 3-4 recommendations?
- In August, assign who will write recommendations
- Will review/revise recommendations in September

Links

<https://dhhs.ne.gov/DCFS%20Data%20and%20Reports/CAN%202023%20Annual%20Data%20Report.pdf>

<https://dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/Abuse-and-Neglect-Central-Registry.aspx>

June 11, 2025

Attending: Lincoln, Sophia, Krisa, Most, Vanessa, Safira, Jessica, Franck, Creighton, Arvoni, Angela

Agenda:

Introductions: Name, Community, What is your drink of choice if you're hanging out in the summertime?

Meeting #2 – Goal: Find 3-4 themes and determine experts we would like to hear from at next meeting to help shape our recommendations

What themes have you noticed?

- Continued support for biological parents
 - Follow up with parents working toward reunification and those that have lost rights even 1-2 years out
 - There seems to be more of a focus on foster parents than biological parents
 - Needs to work more with parents before removing from home – do more to help the parents
- Consistency
 - With caseworkers – familiar faces
 - Expectations stay consistent
 -
- Quick to make decisions rather than working with biological parent to resolve issues
 - A lot of kids were mistreated in foster care system and not enough investigation into what was happening
 - It doesn't feel like caseworkers want to reunify families
 - Need longer than 15 months to make changes needed for reunification (housing, long term treatment options)
- Accountability
 - Lack of accountability for DHHS/workers/
 - Workers not having full understanding before making a determination
 - Not knowing who to go to when you don't feel someone is being held accountable
- Need to be aware of resources available to help parents
 - Have option to work on self (parent) first
 - Age range for guardianship transferred to family is 8
- Build a better rapport between tribal courts and DHHS/CPS
- Consider relative or immediate family member before other placement
 - Provide training and other resources to relative

- Would this be different than a kinship placement? Could it be evolved? Someone available to help child navigate all the things...
- Expanding kinship beyond blood relation (coach, teacher, neighbor, etc.) was brought [SOUL Family Permanency Option - The Annie E. Casey Foundation](#) (from 2021 – rolled out in 2023 nationally – not in Nebraska yet)
- When a parent has the rights terminated, rest of the family is punished when they want to support, stay in relationship with child, (not allowed)
- Culture is huge! It's a big issue. It's causing harm
- Caseworkers need to understand that they are not there to represent their personal ideologies.

Are there any questions to clarify after reading previous recommendations?

- Krisa would like them emailed -
- Attach as PDF for Creighton
- What is the follow up after recommendations?
- Yes, after we submit recommendations, we set up a meeting to have a conversation about the recommendations
- They will then provide a response within 6 months (ranging from acknowledgement of receipt to how they are being addressed)
- x

Summarize

- Support for biological parents
- Accountability
- Fairness/Accuracy/Gathering all the information

Questions

- CPS hiring process – are they questioned about lived experiences?
- Is there a support group for parents who have had their children removed from the home by CPS?

- Is there a system to “match” caseworkers to situations where they are able to work well together?
- This could also be connected to having similar culture
- What is the current timeline for parents to make changes? 15 months
- Are some workers just choosing not to work in the evening to help with placement?
- What is process for undocumented children and their families?
- What are current percentages for reunification?
- What is the system doing to understand/address parental alienation? (Reunification therapy)
- What do you (DHHS) believe in the problem area? What do you need help with?
- What are your opinions of tribal courts? Why do you think there is such a disconnect?
- Why are minority children, especially Black and Indigenous youth, disproportionately represented in Nebraska's foster care system, and what is being done to investigate and correct the systemic issues contributing to this?
- What steps is DHHS taking to address the disproportionate number of minority children, particularly Black and Indigenous children, being placed in the foster care system, and how are you working to ensure equity in family preservation and support services?
- What is the content of the training? Are there cultural competency aspects? How important is it to current staff to have that knowledge?
- When it comes to final placement decisions – what are you looking at? Who’s available? Certain factors? Is the wellbeing/trauma of child considered with placement?
- What is DHHS doing about the alternative placements that children are being sent? Are they safe? How are they vetted?
- How often does it happen that children get adopted out of foster care and then end up back in the system?
- Are caseworkers making living wages?
- How many cases are caseworkers allowed to have?

Next Steps:

- Will meet with DHHS next month (July 9, 6 pm CT)
- Plan to stay an additional 30 minutes to debrief
- Complete stipend request - \$100 for today's meeting

May 14, 2025

Attending: Lincoln, Sophia, Angela, Cheyenne, Franck, Safira, Creighton, Jessica, Most, Arvoni, Vanessa

Agenda:

Introductions

Overview of Citizen Review Panel

- Lincoln shared overview document (EMAIL)
- NCFE has contract with DHHS to conduct panels each year to make recommendations to improve system
- GOAL by end of meetings: provide 2-4 recommendations to DHHS on what they can do better to better serve parents/caregivers
- No wrong recommendations
- Will provide stipends – Lincoln will provide link
- Childcare stipends are also available if needed – contact Lincoln if this is a need for you
- What it will look like moving forward
 - Monthly meetings over the next 5 months
 - Can create a survey if we want broader information
 - Review data from survey, decide on issues and select experts
 - Hear from experts and further data review
 - Write and review final recommendations (divide into smaller groups)
 - Submit to DHHS by end of September

- Meeting to discuss questions from DHHS
- Follow up meeting to discuss response from DHHS
- Lincoln can share an example of what has been submitted in the past (EMAIL)
- Financial literacy for foster parents (5 paragraphs)
- Offer mental health supports and check in's for foster families (4 paragraphs)
- Vacation time and workload management for caseworkers (4 paragraphs)

Discussion/Brainstorming

- What about this opportunity appealed to you?
 - Good previous experience working with Nebraska Children. Have had long and drawn out process with DHHS. Child was removed from home and been through multiple caseworkers. Ended with a guardianship with parents. Set a new precedent for age acceptance for guardianship.
 - Have been on both sides of CPS/DHHS. Active addiction in 2011, got children back after 5-6 years. Relapsed. Back in system and I knew they needed better. In foster care for a long time and adopted out. Son exposed to learning how to sell drugs by grandma. Daughters adopted out to someone that has evidence of abuse. Also have been foster mom.
 - Grew up in system. Aged out. Had children removed from custody 2 years ago after shot with a shotgun due to domestic violence situation. Juvenile justice system experience. Have worked with many organizations to try improve the system.
 - Experience with system came from domestic violence. A lot of parental alienation. Experienced many system failures. Parental alienation is not understood enough. Need more information/education about the healing process.
 - Work as a respite provider for foster care kids. Have been doing it with immigrant/refugee kids and native Nebraskan kids. Understand how important it is to have trained workforce. When doing respite you have to understand working with kids and working with families. Also additional cultural component when working with refugee/immigrant families.
 - Work experience. Help parents and we won't have to separate kids from their families. Work in communities where families may not understand the system here.
 - Foster and adoptive parent. When originally starting as foster parents, weren't given information needed to help care for the child. (ex: teenager ran away within an hour to go see pregnant girlfriend – didn't know he had a pregnant girlfriend) work in HeadStart. It

seems like there is one extreme or another. We call and call and call for help and can't get any or they immediately remove the kids. Feel like we are unable to help the parents because they don't want the families to

- Have been on both sides. Children taken due to poor choices. Quite severe because of what both I and my kids went through. Have been a foster parent for grandchildren in a successful way has been healing. Want to be here to understand and learn what is really going on
- Thinking of DHHS involvement, what is one thing you wish you could tell the department or a worker either before your experience or after your experience?
- Passed bill for seclusion for minors in Nebraska – detrimental to mental/emotional state. The aging out process/knowing basic life skills was really hard
- Stop changing the goals once they are set. For example, reunification plan. Move the target once original goals are completed. A lot of judgements are made on who you used to be. Not allowed to make progress. Not allowed to become who you are since then. Need to feel more open to people's ability to change
- Felt very judged by caseworkers, therapists, people encountered. A lot of inconsistencies. Tone/body language. They keep you where you are and don't let you progress. Often felt like they were fighting against me helping them see where I was coming from because I had been labeled the bad person. Felt impossible to break through idea that was me.
- Do training in hope science. Hope heals. Guides caseworkers to teach that hope. Bolster staff with tools to promote hope.
- The professionals set the tone – bear the burden of how they are perceived
- When DHHS is doing their hiring process – those that work on the front lines – need to have a lot of empathy. Be more trauma informed. (ex: caseworker was saying it's too bad the girls don't have a mom when doing visit with grandmother serving as foster parent) Don't cause more heartache or trauma for kids that are already experiencing hard things.
- 100% agree with above comments.
- Allow/make sure children finish school. Heartbreaking to have 7 kids in foster care system and only 2 finish high school. They were in court appointments/guardian ad litem felt more important. Mind over matter is important to teach. Put things in perspective so kids are going to school.
- DHHS should give parents a second chance. People have made poor decisions, but should be able to redeem themselves. Have a clear pathway for parents to display good behavior

to convince DHHS. Have a comprehensive approach. Human service should come with a sense of humanity.

- Kids are already traumatized. Can be more traumatized with foster parents. Focus more on supporting parents and employment needs and childcare.
- Feels like when DHHS places children in homes that they need to do more background checks. Was molested/raped in foster placement and no one cared (foster mom, caseworker, judge) ended up running away. Feels like foster parents are in it for the money. How can you place kids in abusive homes?
- Kids were removed from unsafe home due to neglect. Didn't check on who they were being placed with and that place ended up being worse. Regulations for kinship homes are limited.
- DHHS workers should make sure that parents understand what they are talking about. Parents may pretend to understand so people don't think they are dumb. They are doing their job of telling the parents without ensuring they actually understand.
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- If you had the magic wand – make DHHS operate in it's most efficient, productive manner
- A lot more reunification going on
- The moment your children leave your home they are finding places to adopt out children
- Reunification is especially hard for fathers
- More support before child is removed. Bring help to the home. Have a mentor type program for adults so they can help navigate system and know where resources are specifically for them
- Should be lived experience expert that comes in with DHHS/caseworker to advocate for family to balance power. Allowing one person to make a decision for a family blows my mind.
- Parents are often making mistakes because they don't know. Give them opportunities to learn
- Keeping kids in the system – too many gets just get lost in the system. Kids just go missing
- Focus on the family as a unit. Kids removed as individuals, not as a family. Assistance is given to foster parents and not parents. Learn more about the story of why the parents got to the point of making the decision that involved DHHS.

- When you're raised in a toxic environment, that is what love looks like. Have to guide and teach. Are those conversations taken into the home?
- How limited/prescriptive is the interaction with DHHS/family? Have it be more personalized.
- Not everyone learns sitting in a classroom. Need to learn in ways that are appropriate for the individual
- Offer a basic skills class
- Have opportunity to learn how to do things
- There is also an awareness gap
- Support is available 24/7
- Have more than one well check if there are concerns. More investigation.
- Accountability to those that make false reports and/or don't do their jobs (police, caseworkers, etc.)
- Plenty of resources to support parents
- Kids have mental health support

Next Steps

- Review minutes and see if there are any themes emerging
- Complete the [stipend form](#)
- Complete a W-9 if you haven't filled one out with NCFE before
- Complete the [advisor agreement](#)