

# Fostering Hope in Child Welfare: Working Together to Create Lasting Improvements for Children and Families in Kansas

*By Justice Melissa Taylor Standridge, Kansas Supreme Court*

For those who don't know me, I have an enthusiastic personality. Certain issues energize me. And I'll tell you, there's not much that gets me more energized than helping families and children who are struggling.

In my personal life, I've been a foster and adoptive parent for over 20 years. As a lawyer, I provided hundreds of pro bono hours representing birth parents, foster parents, and adoptive parents. As a former Court of Appeals judge and current Supreme Court justice, I have applied Kansas child welfare laws in just shy of 100 child welfare cases.

Based on these experiences, I jumped at the chance this past January to spearhead a three-branch initiative, the goal of which is to create lasting improvements for children and families who are at risk of entering or who have already entered the child welfare system. In this article, I'm going to focus on two projects currently underway: the 2024 Kansas Child Welfare Summit and the launch of three pilot family treatment courts. Before sharing the details, let's start with some basics about child welfare in our state.

## Defining Child Welfare

When we refer to the child welfare system, we are not referring to a single entity but instead to a broad framework that encompasses a host of services and interventions aimed at strengthening families and keeping children safe. Public agencies — like the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) and the Kansas Department for Aging and Disability Services (KDADS) — contract and collaborate with private child welfare agencies and community-based organizations to provide services to families. These services include in-home family preservation services, foster care, residential treatment, physical and mental health care, substance use treatment, parenting skill classes, domestic violence services, employment assistance, and financial or

housing assistance. The overarching goal of the child welfare system is to protect children by keeping them safe and provide them with the care, education, and emotional support necessary for healthy development and to provide support and services to families in crisis.

Foster care, which is one specific component of child welfare, is the temporary placement of children who have been removed from their homes because of safety concerns. Safe and dependable foster care is critical to any child welfare system, but far more can be done upstream to better support families and children so that foster care is not the default solution.

## The 2024 Kansas Child Welfare Summit

The summit is a three-branch collaborative to explore some of the key challenges in the child welfare system and discuss potential solutions. In fact, the idea for the summit itself is a notable example of how collaboration among the three branches of government benefits Kansas. In her State of the Judiciary address to the Legislature this past January, Chief Justice Marla Luckert talked about the success of the April 2022 Mental Health Summit. At the Mental Health Summit, judicial, legislative, and executive branch representatives at state and local levels came together to hear from experts, work on plans, and create a framework for ongoing conversations about how to improve the response to mental health needs in our state. Chief Justice Luckert noted that, more than a year later, the working groups continue to develop and implement reforms, including specialized dockets to meet the unique needs of those with behavioral health issues.

After the address, Sen. Molly Baumgardner, Louisburg, asked Chief Justice Luckert if the judiciary was open to working with the Legislature and the executive branch to improve the

child welfare system. Because judges and court staff play a key role in the child welfare system, Sen. Baumgardner believed court insight into the challenges facing families and children in child welfare cases would greatly benefit efforts undertaken by both the executive and legislative branches. After Chief Justice Luckert told me about this conversation, I immediately volunteered to lead the charge, and the 2024 Child Welfare Summit was born.

What I've learned since January is that organizing a statewide collaborative summit is an enormous undertaking. The day after enthusiastically committing to spearhead this endeavor, I spent hours conducting research on how to proceed, becoming energized and overwhelmed at the same time. So, I called Amy Raymond, chief of trial court services in the Office of Judicial Administration (OJA), and Lana Goetz, a trial court services program specialist who, among other duties, is an administrator of the Supreme Court Task Force on Permanency Planning. The three of us immediately acknowledged that collaborating with a broad range of child welfare partners was vital to planning a successful summit, so we put together a statewide summit committee. It's a big group — 22 members along with eight OJA staff and an attorney who serves as special counsel to the chief justice. The committee is made up of:

- A Supreme Court justice
- Two child in need of care (CINC) county judges
- Three legislators
- Several DCF representatives (prevention, protection, foster care, family support, independent living)
- A KDADS representative
- A court appointed special advocate (CASA)
- A CINC prosecutor
- A representative from the Kansas Department of Education
- A guardian ad litem (GAL)
- A parent attorney (including one tribal parent attorney)
- Individuals with lived expertise (former foster youth, birth parent, foster parent)
- A representative from the Capacity Building Center for Courts

The committee has met monthly since June. As a result of these meetings, our plan for the summit is to bring together — in one place — the legal community, public and private child welfare partners, child welfare experts, and children and families with lived expertise to brainstorm and formulate innovative approaches to:

- support and facilitate effective collaboration between child welfare partners;
- establish a procedure to ensure children, families, and child welfare partners understand the role each child welfare partner plays in the process;

- value the voices of children and families with lived expertise in case planning;
- engage resource parents and kinship caregivers to support children and their birth parents;
- achieve timely permanency, including reunification, kinship care, guardianship, and adoption;
- overcome racial disproportionality and inequities;
- recruit, retain, and assure the well-being of child welfare partners (including attorneys); and
- access mental health, behavioral health, and other critical resources for families and children.

The collaboration component of the summit is the most essential piece to creating lasting improvements in the child welfare system. Child welfare involves a wide variety of complex matters, including legal issues, social work, health care, education, and mental health. Collaborative efforts promote innovation by bringing together diverse ideas and pooling resources and expertise. This can lead to the development of new strategies, programs, and policies that better serve children and families. And collaboration encourages accountability. When multiple disciplines are involved, there is a built-in system of checks and balances to ensure that decisions and actions are in the best interest of the children.

The committee determined one way to effectively facilitate our collaborative approach at the summit is to have local child welfare teams from each judicial district attend together. Ideally, each team will include at least one:

- CINC judge
- CINC prosecutor
- Parent attorney
- GAL
- Local/regional DCF
- Local/regional contracting case worker and supervisor
- CASA representative, if applicable
- Citizen Review Board member, if applicable
- Local law enforcement officer

Using strategies and best practices discussed at the summit, combined with their knowledge of the specific needs of their local communities, each team will be given designated time during the summit to design a local action plan with specific strategies and practices that will strengthen families and improve outcomes for children.

Of course, participation at the summit will extend beyond judicial district teams to include as many child welfare partners as possible. But in-person attendance may be limited by venue size. So if you are interested in receiving registration information when it becomes available, please send an email to [tcs@kscourts.org](mailto:tcs@kscourts.org).

## Family Treatment Courts

Another integral part of the three-branch child welfare initiative is the family treatment court (FTC). In the complex landscape of child welfare, FTCs have emerged as a unique and vital resource for addressing the intricate needs of families grappling with substance abuse who are at risk of entering or who have already entered the child welfare system.

### *FTC Purpose*

The purpose of an FTC “is to protect the safety and well-being of children while giving parents the tools they need to become sober, responsible caregivers. To accomplish this, the court draws together an interdisciplinary team that works collaboratively to assess the family’s situation and to devise a comprehensive case plan that addresses the needs of both the children and the parents. In this way, the court team provides children with quick access to permanency and offers parents a viable chance to achieve sobriety, provide a safe and nurturing home, and hold their families together.”<sup>1</sup>

### *FTC Program*

So how does it work? “Family Treatment Courts combine the goals recognized within traditional child protection court processes (timeliness, safety, permanency, and well-being of children) with the principles found in adult drug court, such as screening and early identification, incentives and sanctions, substance use disorder treatment, a non-adversarial team approach, mental health treatment, frequent drug and alcohol testing, and medication-assisted treatment (MAT). When implemented with fidelity and guided by best practices, FTCs have been proven to develop cross-system collaborative policies and practices that lead to improved outcomes for children and families.”<sup>2</sup>

### *FTC Power*

“The power of an FTC lies in its collaborative, family-centered approach. No single agency has the skill or capacity to meet all family members’ needs, so professionals from multiple service systems work together with children, parents, and other family members to leverage community resources that may help the family achieve its treatment and reunification goals, as well as if needed to obtain employment, reliable transportation, and safe and affordable housing. FTCs operate at the intersection of multiple service providers: the court; the child protection agency; substance use disorder and mental health treatment systems; and related health, educational, and social service systems. Collaborative casework for individual families is supported by strong cross-systems relationships, communication protocols, and a formal governance structure.”<sup>3</sup>

After learning about FTCs and the positive outcomes for children and families participating in them, I started

spreading the word among our Kansas judges. Three judges immediately volunteered to pilot an FTC in Kansas: Chief Judge Nicholas St. Peter in Cowley County, Chief Judge Amy Harth in Miami County, and Judge Douglas Jones in Lyon County. And we are working closely with DCF Deputy Secretary Tanya Keys and KDADS Commissioner Andy Brown to get these pilot courts up and running. A very big thank you to the five of them, as well as Statewide Specialty Courts Program Manager Dawn Huddleston, who is our staff liaison and advisor. Our FTC committee meets monthly, and we recently had the opportunity to travel to Wapello, Iowa, to observe a staffing and a court docket at a nationally recognized model FTC. To say we were inspired is an understatement.

## Conclusion

The child welfare system in Kansas faces many challenges and there is no single solution or quick fix to these challenges. But collaboration in dialogue and in developing and implementing action plans is a crucial first step for the Kansas child welfare system to fulfill its role effectively and provide children with the stability and care they need. Although I’ve highlighted the 2024 Kansas Child Welfare Summit and family treatment courts in this article as programs we currently are working on, we envision them not as short-term goals but as catalysts to start creating lasting improvements in the child welfare system. ♦



*Justice Melissa Taylor Standridge was appointed to the Kansas Supreme Court in 2020 after serving nearly 13 years on the Court of Appeals. She previously was a private practice attorney and counsel to two federal judges.*

## References

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