
Minnesota Citizen Review Panels Annual Report

Reporting year 2024



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Overview of Citizen Review Panels



Mission: To ensure Minnesota's child welfare systems are protecting children and not causing harm.



Vision: Community members are powerful partners in shaping local and statewide child welfare policy and practice.

Citizen Review Panels (panels) are community advisory groups federally mandated under the [Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act \(PL 111-320\)](#) and by [Minnesota Statutes 142A.013, Subd. 10](#). Panels are comprised of volunteer community members broadly representative of the community in which the panel is established.

Panel members:

- Examine state and local child welfare agency policies and practices to evaluate the extent to which agencies are effectively discharging child protection responsibilities
- Make policy and practice recommendations for equitable, systemic improvement.

The Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) was established effective July 1, 2024, pursuant to Laws 2023, chapter 70. The state program was transferred from the Department of Human Services to the Department of Children, Youth, and Families, pursuant to Laws 2023, chapter 70, article 12, section 30. This transfer had minimal impact on the panels' work.

Established in Minnesota in 1999, panels represent a partnership among community members, local child protection agencies and the state child welfare agency. Currently, panels exist in Chisago, Hennepin and Ramsey Counties. The department would support community member-driven efforts to expand Citizen Review Panels to other areas of the state. In 2024, the panel coordinator worked with the Isanti County Human Services director to explore the creation of a panel in their community. The coordinator met multiple times with community members, human services commissioners and staff. County leadership decided not to move forward due to the current demands on child protection workers.

The panels follow the [Minnesota Open Appointments Act](#), which posts vacancies on the Minnesota Secretary of State's Office Boards and Commissions website. Recruitment for vacant seats on all three panels continued throughout the year.

This annual report provides a summary of activities and recommendations of each Minnesota panel for calendar year 2024 and the department's corresponding response. Previous [reports](#) are available online.

Chisago County Citizen Review Panel

Mission statement: To facilitate citizen participation and provide opportunities for members of the community to play an integral role in ensuring that federal, state and county child protection systems protect children from abuse and neglect and meet the permanency needs of children.

County report summary

The Citizen Review Panel (CRP) inquired and learned in depth about the issues below, and participated in numerous workshops, trainings, and community events.

Panel members engaged in extensive knowledge gathering throughout the year to increase understanding of and support for various child protection issues relevant to our county. This included presentations of how child protection makes screening decisions, multidisciplinary teams, child advocacy centers, forensic interviewing and Chisago County data.

Early in the year, after identifying that the county lacked multidisciplinary team protocols and procedures, the panel invited the executive of the Minnesota Children's Alliance (MCA) to discuss multidisciplinary team (MDT) development for child abuse investigation teams. The county was not able to accommodate the Minnesota Children's Alliance's MDT training due to various other priorities. Cassie Dibbler and Jenna Furlong from the North Start Family Advocacy Center presented on the child advocacy center (CAC) model. Their presentation highlighted the supportive role of child advocacy centers in forensic interviews, advocacy, medical exams, trauma screenings and case reviews.

One community member participated in an anti-human trafficking seminar through the Salvation Army in August 2024. The panel member was able to secure cards with tips for identifying and reporting human trafficking. The cards were shared with all four of the local police departments.

Five Chisago County Citizen Review Panel community members participated in the annual Children's Justice Act (CJA) Task Force and Citizen Review Panel Annual Retreat in August 2024 at the Mille Lacs Tribal Museum and Trading Post. The retreat provided key information on the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), new child welfare legislation and Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) reporting. Members also brainstormed goals and future projects. Heidi Ombisa Skallet and Sarah Bello from the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families also presented. Heidi Ombisa Skallet spoke to the members about the 2024 legislative session, including significant changes in child protection. The largest piece of new legislation included the Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionality Act. The act's implementation will begin in Ramsey

and Hennepin Counties on January 1, 2025, and expand statewide on January 1, 2027. Chisago County has already started investigating the impact on its caseloads. Sarah Bello presented on the work of the Child and Family Services Report (CFSR) to help members understand what the report entails, how it is conducted and how the Citizen Review Panels are part of the solution.

Panel members dedicated a fall meeting to a deeper understanding of the CAPTA requirements by inviting Deb Farrell from the National Citizen Review Panel Advisory Council to a panel meeting. She facilitated discussion around the role of panel members, how to identify a project, and evaluating the child welfare system to make improvements.

Panel members participated in seven maltreatment reconsideration case reviews in 2024. The group met the mandated timelines for the review process. All county decisions were upheld. Panel members observed that each case review demanded a rigorous examination of investigative reports and witness testimonies. Despite the upholding of decisions, our discussions revealed subtle areas where additional support or procedural enhancements could make a significant difference. In several instances, nuances in initial investigation decisions highlighted potential gaps in communication or data collection that, if addressed, could streamline future case reviews. The panel continued to hold debriefings when reviewing difficult or emotionally challenging cases. The debriefs include staff from the county and a state coordinator to provide additional support. Debriefs are a standing agenda item after a case review.

See achievements, activities and projects completed or in progress below.

Completed:

- Co-chair Peter Grund created a [youth demographic data dashboard](#) for panel members' reference and to inform project creation. Peter also shared a [demographic presentation](#) with members.
- Members have a comprehensive understanding of the requirements of panels under CAPTA and the role members play in improving the child welfare response.

In progress:

- In parallel with our case reviews, the panel decided to initiate a targeted research project focused on the medical data of youth in out-of-home care within Chisago County and statewide. This project emerged from a growing concern over a critical service gap.
 - Data since 2021 show that only about 30% of youth entering out-of-home care in Chisago County have received either a medical exam or a child and team checkup within the required timeframe (defined as within 30 days of entering care or within the 12 months prior). In contrast, the state standard is set at 70% or above.
 - Our project will involve a comprehensive review of local and state medical data to compare performance metrics between Chisago County and statewide figures and to identify factors contributing to the shortfall.

The Chisago County Citizen Review Panel would like to request that the state provide technology assistance to expedite collaboration efforts. It has become increasingly difficult to collaborate on and complete documents and reports given technology limitations and/or restrictions. For example, a state member is not able to access draft reports via a Microsoft platform, yet not all citizen members can access documents through the Google platform. This delays completion of reports, particularly the required annual report.

The Chisago County Citizen Review Panel met bimonthly during 2024 and for most of the year. The Chisago panel was complete with seven community members for the first time in over five years. The community membership included: Deb Kerschner, Carol Schumann, Nancy Grossmann, Karen Kennedy, Peter Grund, Wendy Zitzloff (new) and Lisa Rydning (new). In addition, the panel elected Deb Kerschner and Peter Grund to serve as co-chairs for the upcoming year. One community member resigned at the end of the year, leaving one current vacancy. The panel is prioritizing filling the vacancy with notifications on the Secretary of State website, the Chisago County website and various social media and personal connections. The panel developed a flier to hang at seven public libraries and two Chisago County Health and Human Services buildings.

CRP makes the following recommendations related to the panel's work (county and/or state recommendations):

1. Request technology assistance to expedite collaboration efforts from the state. It has become increasingly difficult to collaborate on and complete documents and reports given technology limitations and/or restrictions. For example, a state member is not able to access draft reports via a Microsoft platform, yet not all citizen members can access documents through the Google platform. This delays completion of reports, particularly the required annual report.
2. Develop a robust, real-time data integration system that connects child welfare and health care providers. This system should enable the regular tracking of medical exams and child and teen checkups for youth entering out-of-home care, ensuring accountability and timely intervention in line with the state standard of 70%. In 2023, only 56% of cases statewide received an evaluation.
3. Collaborate with state and local agencies to conduct a comprehensive review of current policies and procedures related to medical care for youth in out-of-home care. Based on the findings, consider reforms that would reduce administrative delays and ensure that all eligible youth receive timely, quality medical evaluations.

Department response

The department is grateful to the Chisago County panel for the longevity of its members. The new leadership has enabled panel members to distribute tasks in a different method from prior years. The co-chair's platform creation led to clear and concise tracking of work plans and tasks.

Recommendation 1: The department is working with IT on an ongoing basis to address the technology needs of the panel, enabling more efficient collaboration through platforms. The department's staff has joined workgroups to advocate for better community engagement processes and tools with external

partners. These changes have been slow, but progress has been made as the department continued to fill vacant positions during the transition from the Department of Human Services to the Department of Children, Youth, and Families.

Recommendation 2: The department is working with legislators to modernize the Social Service Information System (SSIS) to reduce the cumbersome data input process and ease the burden on child welfare professionals. The department of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) has been assisting with data pulls on medical exams. Overall, the statewide data still falls short of the federal metric goal for children in out-of-home placement receiving a medical exam within 30 days of placement or within the prior 12 months. According to Chisago County Citizen Review Panel research, this appears to be more of a staff shortage issue than an issue of children not receiving exams. Counties with procedures and adequate staff training reflect data of 70% or higher on the public dashboard. The department will look for a solutions-based approach by bringing this metric to counties' attention and inquiring if the data is correct or failing to meet requirements. This will require department communication and follow-up in Program Improvement Plans with CQI.

Recommendation 3: The department will develop a plan to inquire with counties falling short of the federal/state metric expectations to ensure all children in out-of-home placement receive medical well-being exams as part of the whole-child approach.

Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel

Mission statement: As citizen volunteers, we collaborate to understand, communicate and recommend improvement to the child protection systems, as well as engage our communities to ensure the safety and well-being of all our children and families.

County report summary

The Citizen Review Panel inquired and learned in depth about the issues below. It also participated in many workshops, trainings and community events.

In May, the panel co-chair attended the 2024 National Citizen Review Panel Conference, titled "Empowering Communities to Lead Change." In August 2024, six panel members attended the annual CRP Retreat at the Mille Lacs Indian Museum and Trading Post. The retreat included several informative presentations on the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) and legislative changes. The Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionally Act yielded the most engaged discussion among retreat attendees. Hennepin and Ramsey Counties, two of the largest counties of Minnesota, are leading the act's implementation starting January 1, 2025. The Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families presented and highlighted the importance of Citizen Review Panels. In September, the department's Child Safety and Permanency administration presented on the Family First Prevention Services Act, providing an overview of what it looks like in action at the state.

At the August 2024 retreat, panel members developed a work plan that all panel members later adopted.

Since many panel members are new, in June 2024, the panel participated in Collaborative Safety training. Panel members who have completed training will take turns participating in reviews and reporting out to the full panel starting in April 2025.

The panel developed a tracking form that will assist members with identifying trends and strengthen recommendations to the department. A Hennepin County child protection representative also presented on the Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionally Act to the panel.

The panel will continue to work on the workplan developed at the May and August 2024 retreats, focusing on paternal engagement and parent reunification after termination of parental rights (TPR). Regular updates regarding the Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionally Act are forthcoming as phases are implemented.

The Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel meets monthly. There are thirteen panel members. One panel member retired at the beginning of 2024. One member is currently on a leave of absence. Members include Heidi Theobald, Andrea Boyle, Emma Daugherty, Josefina Gerónimo, Rachel A. Morin, Charmaine Young, Kimberly Blaney, Beatrice Officer (chair), Jamal H. Mohamed, Mary Kane, Scott Hemenway (co-chair), and Allie Dischinger. There are two open seats on the panel, but applications continue to come in for consideration of appointment.

The Citizen Review Panel makes the following recommendations:

Hennepin County child protection services:

1. Continue partnering with the panel on Collaborative Safety case reviews and ongoing training opportunities.
2. Continue providing the panel with informational updates and opportunities to learn.

Department response

The perseverance of the Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel inspires the department, which responds as follows to the panel's recommendations:

Recommendation 1: The department will work with Hennepin County to continue providing support and incorporation of the new Collaborative Safety model with the panel. Each month, one panel member will be invited to work alongside Hennepin County staff and present the information back to panel members. The panel and department staff developed a tracking sheet to share panel member feedback and capture themes. The tracking sheet identifies themes to inform next year's annual report and make stronger recommendations to the department.

Recommendation 2: The department will continue to share updates from the department and wider partner agencies such as the Court Justice Initiative, Children’s Justice Act Task Force, and Ramsey and Chisago Counties’ Citizen Review Panels. The department has communicated with Hennepin County administration to provide a response and reaffirm the commitment to the work of the panel. The department and the county will share updates and bring in speakers to provide informational presentations.

Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel

Mission statement: Provide opportunities for citizens to play an integral role in ensuring the child protection system is protecting children from abuse and neglect and ensuring a nurturing home environment.

County report summary

The Citizen Review Panel inquired and learned in depth about the issues below. It also participated in workshops, trainings and community events.

One member attended the 2024 National Citizens Review Panel Conference in San Diego, California. The department contracted with Dr. Apolinário-Wilcoxon to facilitate restorative meetings that included the department, community members and Ramsey County staff. Most of the panel members attended the annual retreat for panels and the Children’s Justice Act Task Force. Presentations included staff from the department on Minnesota child welfare data, and partnership roles for the community and the county.

The Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel meets monthly. There are eight panel members. Members include Tonya Long (co-chair), Ankit Sood (co-chair), Beth Salzl, Casey Acord, Kat Ruth-Leigh, Molly Evans, Naida Medicine Crow, and Rachel Johnson. There are six open seats on the panel, but applications continue to come in for consideration of appointment. Achievements, activities and projects completed or in process: Get CRP restarted after a pause. Recruit and retain members.

Outcomes or desired outcomes of achievements or projects listed above: Increased membership, got publicity out about CRPs, Secretary of State application process is up and running, and more applications have been received. The panel seeks more diversity. The panel is reviewing data, meeting with Ramsey County and receiving updates from Ramsey County to select next year’s project.

Areas for additional support from the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families:

- Increase training and educational opportunities for new members, virtually or in person
- Receive help with recruiting new members
- Receive updates on child welfare legislation and the new agency

- Share information on resources, training/education, webinars, virtual trainings and meetings that are free or low cost.

If vacancies, please share the recruitment plan to fill them: Continue with publicity at community events. The panel is working on sending letters to families that have closed CRP cases. Recruit members at community events and resource fairs.

The Citizen Review Panel makes the following recommendations:

1. Publicity on getting information about CRPs to the community to help with recruitment.
2. More CRPs statewide, especially near Tribal reservations.

Department response

The department appreciates the Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel's efforts to rebuild the panel membership and continue staff support in working towards its mission. Per panel recommendations, the department responds as follows:

Recommendation 1: The department has collaborated with the Department of Human Services to repost the vacant seats on their social media. The department has had limited communications staff positions during the transition from the Department of Human Services to the Department of Children, Youth, and Families. The department panel coordinator will continue to work with the department to make requests to post vacancies on social media or other potential external communications. The department provides funding to the panel, which may be used to pay for recruitment or advertisements in publications. The panel made a request to Ramsey County communications to request vacant seats be shared on its social media channels. A template from other counties and approved department language were shared to support content development.

Recommendation 2: The department's staff conducted outreach with Tribal nations, specifically at the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) Joint Advisory Council in late 2023. A presentation was provided to the advisory group to seek out any interest from Tribal Nations. Conversations were held with the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community and the Fond du Lac Tribe. No other Tribes have sought out support from the department to develop Citizen Review Panels. The department welcomes ongoing conversations and supports any Tribal Nation that wants to develop a Citizen Review Panel.