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# **Minnesota Citizen Review Panels Annual Report**

Reporting Year: 2020

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## Overview of Citizen Review Panels

Citizen Review Panels (panels) are required by federal law, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act [P.L. 111-320] and state statute. [Minn. Stats., section 256.01, subd. 15] Panels provide opportunities for community members to play an integral role in ensuring the child protection system is protecting children from abuse and neglect. Minnesota has panels in Hennepin, Washington, Ramsey, Chisago, and Winona Counties. The Minnesota Department of Human Services (department) is interested in expanding Citizen Review Panels to other parts of the state.

In addition to evaluating different aspects of the child protection system in their communities, panel members also look at ways to improve the child protection system statewide. Comprised of seven to 16 citizens each, these panels represent a partnership among citizens, community agencies, county and tribal child protection systems, and the department.

This annual report provides a summary of activities and recommendations submitted by each Minnesota panel for 2020. Acknowledgments and responses from the department are included.

## Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel

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

### County report

The Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel is comprised of the following members: Peg Kolden, Joan Molenaar, Beatrice Officer, Marina Hammond, Elena Powers (resigned), and Elena Leomi. The panel supports the department and Hennepin County Children and Family Services (CFS) in implementation of the Collaborative Safety Model. Collaborative Safety is dedicated to working with human service agencies to embrace a systems approach to learning and improvement. The panel brings experience, expertise, and an outside perspective to reviewing, supporting, and improving Hennepin County child protection services.

The panel's activities in 2020 included:

- On Apr. 2-3, 2020, several panel members were trained in the Collaborative Safety Model with Hennepin County CFS employees. Joan Molenaar, Beatrice Officer, and Peg Kolden attended both days. Marina Hammond attended one of the two days.
- Panel members participated in a Debriefing/Second Story process with the assigned Hennepin County Social Work Unit supervisor for Collaborative Safety, and other designated employees of Hennepin County CFS.

- Peg Kolden and Joan Molenaar participated in two mapping sessions. Beatrice Officer participated in one mapping session.
- Panel members also participated in the mapping process as part of the Systematic Learning Event. Joan Molenaar and Peg Kolden participated in or observed four sessions. Elena Powers and Marina Hammond observed one session. Beatrice Officer participated in or observed two sessions. Members participating reported to the entire panel monthly on the process and conclusions of the Systematic Learning Process.

The panel's recommendations are:

- Hennepin County CFS needs to provide ongoing Collaborative Safety training to all panel members so all members can fully participate in reviews, mappings, etc. Not all members were able to attend the April training, therefore, are not able to fully participate.
- Ongoing discussion with Hennepin County CFS is needed to clarify the panel's role in relationship to Hennepin County's implementation of the Collaborative Safety Model. The panel would like to maximize involvement and provide insight to the process. Implementation of the Collaborative Safety Model is ongoing work with the panel; members would like to continue to be involved in the process.

The panel's goals are to:

- Receive annual reports from Hennepin County that demonstrate improvement in training, performance, services, and satisfaction with staff performance documented through data and interactive dashboards.
- Improve the panel's role in the important work of implementing the Collaborative Safety Model. This is a standing agenda item.
- Expand membership and address diversity, equity, and inclusion within the panel.

## **Acknowledgment**

Department staff is appreciative of the passion and enthusiasm of the Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel regarding the Collaborative Safety Model. It is gratifying to see the excitement and energy regarding embracement of this integral paradigm. Department staff thanks each panel member for their passion, time, and dedication to ensuring the safety and well-being of children and families.

## **Department response**

Department staff is supportive of the panel's pursuit of training and participation in Hennepin County's Collaborative Safety work. The department has also implemented this model and provided training to senior leadership. The department's Citizen Review Panel coordinator is pleased to provide support for member recruitment.

## Washington County Citizen Review Panel

**Mission statement:** Citizens partnering with child protection services, advocating to keep children safe.

### County report

The Washington County Citizen Review Panel is comprised of the following members: Jan Hayne (former chair), Pam Clifton (former secretary, former chair, resigned), Susannah Barnes, Amy Berge (resigned), Teri Bottum (resigned), Laurie Gravelle, Jody Koch (secretary), Amy Mozey, Laura LaPlante, Beth Leindecker, Kao Nou Moua, and Gail Theisen. The panel evaluates effectiveness of the county's child protection services, and enhances the quality of those services whenever possible. The panel offers recommendations regarding changes in the child protection system to both Washington County and the department. Through policy evaluation, community outreach and education, the panel's goal is to collaborate with Washington County Children's Services to keep children safe.

### Panel meetings

The panel met in person in January and February. Due to COVID-19, the March meeting was cancelled. Monthly meetings proceeded virtually April through June, and August through November. In addition to panel members, the following Washington County representatives participated:

- Nissa Knutson, Children's Services supervisor
- Sarah Amundson, division manager
- Becky Motzko, Licensing Unit supervisor
- Chris Murphy, Investigation supervisor

### Panel activities

Identified issues of concern changed dramatically with onset of the pandemic. The panel noted how COVID-19 put children more at risk for abuse and exploitation. It originally planned projects for 2020 that involved face-to-face interactions with county staff, schools, and foster families, forcing the panel to pivot to projects they could do safely within COVID-19 guidelines. They changed project plans to focus on ways to educate the community, including supporting at-risk families during the pandemic, identifying and reporting child abuse, and requesting assistance from the community. Several panel sub-groups coordinated various projects throughout the year via email and virtual meetings.

The panel had four main focus areas:

- Analyze data on re-entry rates: The panel wanted to analyze trends and offer insights that those working within the child welfare system may have overlooked regarding re-entry rates. Washington County had requested the panel's assistance in analyzing a statistically significant number of cases reopening after being closed. The project was put on hold due to COVID-19 building access restrictions, and enormity of the amount of files and paperwork to review, which was not conducive to online review.

- Cultural considerations: The panel identified the need to recruit men and people of color. Recruitment information was posted on Facebook and Twitter by Washington County, and in the Forest Lake Times in January. Washington County received inquiries from seven interested people to whom Citizen Review Panel information packets and applications were sent. Four new members joined in 2020 (two in June and two in August). The panel was successful in becoming a slightly more diverse group.
- Effectiveness of Washington County’s child protection services, including:
  - Sex trafficking: The panel felt more knowledge of the issue was needed prior to determining if they should take a more active role. Lizzy Grover and Jill Doyle, two child protection investigators skilled in sexual exploitation of youth investigations, spoke to the panel about their work in intake and investigations in Washington County. Imran Ali from the County Attorney’s Office, and Chris Murphy, investigation supervisor, also spoke to the panel about sex trafficking. The panel determined that trafficking was out of scope as a panel, but individual members could join Imran Ali in work with community groups to provide support for victims of sex trafficking.
  - Adolescent drug use/life choices: The panel had planned to develop a partnership with CONNECT Washington County to determine if they could assist with a review of current statistics and their countywide education efforts. Information would be sent to panel members so they could join meetings of interest.
  - Training for relevant stakeholders: The Children's Justice Initiative is committed to providing ongoing training to judges, attorneys, social workers, guardians ad litem, court administration, and other child protection system stakeholders in efforts to improve practice and child safety, permanency, and well-being for abused and neglected children and their families. The panel had planned to work with Children’s Services to ensure all stakeholders have consistent and relevant information. It was also considering a half-day training symposium later in 2020 with a possible panel, speakers and vendors. This is temporarily on hold.
- Increased community understanding, ownership, and investment in child protection, including:
  - Child Abuse Prevention Month: The panel had planned on targeting more libraries with Prevention Month displays, different age groups (middle school versus grade school youth), and hoped to offer some family events in April 2020. This did not happen due to the pandemic. The panel changed focus to offering education and resources to local families, requesting help from the community to transform “risk to wellness” for children, and providing resources for discussing racism with children after George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis. Articles were posted on the Washington County website and submitted to local publications. Panel members also posted them on their individual social media sites. Food shelves were contacted with the panel’s request to include [Parent Survival Tips](#) pamphlets with meal packages. A total of 1,200 pamphlets were procured from the Minnesota Chapter of Prevent Child Abuse America and Circle of Parents; stickers were added to pamphlets with the Washington County Crisis Response Unit contact information. Four county food shelves agreed to share the pamphlets with

clients, two posted the link on their website, and two did not respond. All 1,200 pamphlets were distributed and an estimated 5,700 online views.

- Washington County information cards: The panel prepared information cards focusing on how community members can play a role in preventing child abuse and neglect, strengthening families from varying perspectives. Due to the pandemic, distribution of the cards is on hold.
- Pizza party: The panel was planning to change the pizza project they have done the past two years from soliciting pizza vouchers to requesting pizza restaurants host a pizza party in various county locations for foster care families. The panel felt this “thank you” would facilitate support among child foster care providers. COVID-19 yet again put the “kibosh” on this idea, so the panel began asking grocery stores to donate pizzas and/or gift certificates for foster care providers. Panel members ran into numerous logistical issues, so had to cancel this project.
- Circle of Security Training: This is a relationship-based early intervention program designed to enhance attachment and security between parents and children. The panel co-sponsored this training about trauma-focused attachment work. Partners in health care attended, as did many school district employees.

Additional panel activities included:

- Conducting new panel member orientation online.
- Panel members participated in six maltreatment reconsiderations. All were upheld.
- Various panel members attended/read/watched/were involved in:
  - Native American Parent Advisory Committee (NAPAC) and the Islamic Society of Woodbury, east metro (ISWEM)
  - Trauma Across Generations (impact of historical trauma)
  - The Zero Abuse Project (organization working to eliminate child sexual abuse)
  - Watched “Trials of Gabriel Fernandez” (a true crime documentary about a boy’s murder, trials of guardians/social workers, and system’s protection of vulnerable children)
  - Read “White Fragility” and provided feedback
  - Equity lab series in Forest Lake
  - Watched “Broken Places” documentary, and the TED Talk regarding blind removal.

As of September 2020, the panel had two new applicants, but it was decided that panel membership was sufficient, especially as virtual meetings were challenges for group cohesiveness and participation. Applicants are notified that they will be contacted in early 2021. It was decided that recruitment should continue with the understanding that new members would be brought on-board the following year. The panel planned to have a member attend local and state-level quarterly child protection case reviews.

## **Recommendations**

Because of most 2020 panel meetings being held virtually, members struggled with the following:

- Building group cohesiveness with departure and addition of members at multiple points during the year



- Managing communication, miscommunication, frustrations, negativity, and expectations for project participation
- Completing tasks and living up to commitments, and
- Attending virtual meetings, which a higher percentage of members missed.

Given the above challenges, and in consultation with county liaisons, it was decided at the November meeting to suspend operations until at least March 2021 to determine the future structure, leadership, and membership expectations.

## Acknowledgement

Department staff appreciates the Washington County Citizen Review Panel for its perseverance, particularly amidst the pandemic. The panel did a great job of pivoting projects due to unforeseen COVID-related restrictions. Despite challenges, the panel was able to make an important community impact and collaborated with local groups in child abuse prevention efforts.

## Department response

Department staff acknowledges and empathizes with the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic posed to work groups and workflows.

## 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

The Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel is comprised of the following members: Tonya Long, Tony Porter (chair), Chandra Bittmann (resigned), Hoang Murphy, John Hanna (resigned), Jeanette Jones, Toni Royaal (formerly Tieden), Steve Nelson, and Lauri Ink. The panel met monthly January through April, and July through December. In addition to members, the following Ramsey County staff participated in panel meetings:

- Alexander (Alex) Cleaveland, Children’s Intake/Investigations manager
- Kristen Jackelen, Community Engagement coordinator
- Nikki Miller, child protection case management manager
- Brian Theine, Family Support Services manager
- Lois Cheeseboro, Health and Wellness planner

The panel focused on the following topic areas:

- Experiences and struggles of older foster youth and those who have/will age out of the system

- Maintaining a presence at Child Mortality Review meetings
- Youth Sex Trafficking and Sexually Exploited Youth (SEY) project.

The panel's activities included:

- January: Ramsey County leadership allowed the panel to participate in maltreatment re-determinations. Its request to participate in these reviews had previously been denied. County leadership responded to the panel's 2019 recommendations regarding SEY, and shared an anti-trafficking brochure county staff created. County staff also developed an initial screening tool to be included in its resource brochure. All departments in Ramsey County will be trained to use this tool.
- February: Tony Porter shared that the Augsburg Native Film series was featuring "Blood Memory" on Feb. 19, 2020. On Feb. 21, 2020, panel members Tony Porter, John Hanna, and Jill Gunderson-Gernes (former member), attended the Legislative Task Force hearing on Child Protection.
- March: Alex Cleaveland presented information on the SEY screening tool. This was the last in-person meeting of 2020 due to COVID-19.
- April: This was the first Zoom virtual meeting due to COVID-19. Alex Cleaveland and Brian Theine reported a significant decrease in child welfare cases. Panel member's participation in maltreatment re-determinations was put on hold. The panel discussed Ramsey County's redesign of services. Food assistance was identified as a critical need in the community. The panel agreed to provide funds from the 2019-2020 fiscal year to families involved in the Parent Support Outreach Program (PSOP).
- May: no meeting
- June: no meeting
- July: Nikki Miller reported there will be changes to the Ramsey County Youth Engagement Program (YEP), as well as All Children Excel (ACE) to prevent delinquency or court involvement. She took over managing the PSOP program to do more preventative work. Hoang Murphy raised concern for older youth in foster care or those who are aging out soon, due to the increased stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic. The panel agreed to write a letter of support for older youth in foster care requesting the department address issues facing these youth during the pandemic. John Hanna resigned due to health issues. He was instrumental in work with the SEY project and recommendations. Some panel members attended the department's Trafficking webinar on July 30.
- August: Lois Cheeseboro shared that she had been working with Kim Cleminson to map out the child welfare/child protection process, asking panel members for feedback. Devin Gilchrist, supervisor of the department's African American Child Well-Being unit, presented information about his task force. Family First Prevention Services Act will begin in October 2021; creation of the African American Child Well-Being Task Force is a different approach by the department to decrease disparities and connect with more families in a positive way. Hoang Murphy provided the panel with a draft letter regarding concerns with older youth and those aging out of care. Because part of foster care for older youth may include they work a minimum of 20 hours per

week to stay in foster care, the panel asked to have this waived during the COVID-19 pandemic, and Ramsey County to allow youth to stay in foster care and not age out during a pandemic. The panel also urged direct assistance to these youth and suggested that CARES Act money could be used to assist these youth/young adults. The panel will review the letter, approve it, and bring it before the Ramsey County CAC for approval.

- September: Nikki Miller reported that Ramsey County acknowledged receipt of the panel's 2019 Annual Report and the county's response will be forthcoming. She also reported that as part of the panel's work, Ramsey County has developed a protocol Sexually Exploited Youth (SEY) Development Team, a grant regarding Safe Harbor. County agencies have been working since the Reboot meeting to develop their SEY protocols. The county is on track to host a series of DRAFT protocols review and input meetings in October; the panel was invited to participate. Mary Doyle, from the department, shared a press release sent out regarding "Thriving Families, Safer Children: A National Commitment to Well-Being," which focuses on moving from traditional, reactive child protection systems to those designed to support child and family well-being, preventing child maltreatment and unnecessary family separation. She also reported that department staff is working to increase the age of children that can be involved in the Parent Support Outreach Program (PSOP).
- October: Mary Doyle shared operating procedures for Citizen Review Panels in Minnesota. She stated that these differ from the Ramsey County CAC bylaws. When there is a difference, the panel has typically adhered to Ramsey County bylaws, but not always. Doyle also reported that the department is working on diversity, both in terms of systems and individuals. Some panel members attended Ramsey County's SEY webinar on October 27 from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
- November: Brian Theine gave a presentation about Ramsey County's extended foster care. Panel member Hoang Murphy presented Foster Advocates Foster Youth COVID-19 Impact report. Azra Thakur, from Ramsey County, presented data the panel had requested about child protection cases and trends during COVID-19. The panel will follow up with Thakur in February or March 2021 to receive a full year of the data. Panel members continued to be updated on the county's efforts to find housing for homeless individuals and families. Proposed sites are Bethesda Hospital and Luther Seminary. Some Panel members attended a public town hall meeting regarding the Bethesda Hospital site on November 17. Tony Porter and Jill Gunderson-Gernes attended a webinar highlighting the work that New York City Administration for Children's Services is doing to survey foster youth, the annual NYC Foster Youth Survey. New York's focus was "Experiences and Well-Being of Sexual and Gender Diverse Youth in Foster Care in New York City – Disproportionately and Disparities."
- December: Nikki Miller reported that Ramsey County has tried hard to keep face-to-face contact with children and families whenever safely possible. She said that more families were being referred to PSOP, and that cases were down slightly. The additional housing site, Carondelet, was discussed; the homeless count in St. Paul is still around 300, despite county efforts. Tony Porter discussed findings from the NYC Administration for Children's Services annual foster youth survey. This prompted more discussion about encouraging the department to collect more than minimum data required about older youth, in particular SOGIE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression) data, as well as personal pronouns and preferred name, which will require an update to the Social Service Information System (SSIS).

## Recommendations

The panel recommends the following for Ramsey County Social Services and requests an update from county staff regarding recommendations:

- Waive the 20 hours of work per week minimum for youth in extended foster care during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many businesses were closed during the pandemic or operating with a greatly reduced workforce.
- Allow youth to continue to stay in foster care during the pandemic and not age out.
- Provide additional direct financial assistance to youth in extended foster care and those in jeopardy of aging out of care, possibly through CARES Act funds.

The panel recommends the following for the Minnesota Department of Human Services and requests an update regarding recommendations:

- Waive the 20 hours of work per week minimum for youth in extended foster care during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Issue a statewide moratorium on youth aging out of care during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Provide additional direct financial assistance to youth in extended foster care and those in jeopardy of aging out of care during the COVID-19 pandemic, possibly through CARES Act funds.
- Update SSIS to include fields for SOGIE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression) data entry, e.g., fields for personal pronouns and preferred name, to support and validate LGBTQ2S+ youth in care and LGBTQ2S+ families in Minnesota.

The panel will focus on the following for 2021:

- The Child Mortality Review Panel subcommittee will develop a schedule of who attends reviews, and a form to use for collecting information to provide future recommendations.
- Work on a foster youth survey project.
- Continue to monitor changes in policies and procedures within the child protection system in Minnesota through information received by the Minnesota Legislative Task Force on Child Protection.
- Continue to pursue the possibility of participating in requests for re-determination of a finding of child maltreatment in Ramsey County.
- Would like responses to its recommendations from the department and Ramsey County, and hope for opportunities for panel members to provide assistance on issues regarding child protection in Ramsey County.
- The Ramsey County Children's Services Review Panel continues to recruit additional panel members with a goal of having a diverse membership reflective of the demographics of the county, and the individuals served through Ramsey County Social Services.

## Acknowledgement

Department staff is appreciative of the diligent work by the Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel. The panel had many accomplishments amidst a challenging year. The panel's focused interest in and passionate advocacy for youth in extended foster care is noteworthy.

## Department response

The department implemented several policy changes to support foster youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following federal guidance on [Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act](#), it directed county agencies and American Indian Child Welfare Initiative tribes to facilitate youth to remain in or re-enter foster care if they previously aged out of care, or no longer met eligibility requirements during the public health emergency. This guidance was published in [bulletin 21-68-11](#).

The Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act also provided \$400 million in additional appropriations nationally for the John H. Chafee Foster Care program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (the Chafee program) for fiscal year 2021, of which \$50 million was reserved for the Education and Training Vouchers (ETV) program. Minnesota received \$6.7 million for the supplemental Chafee allocation, of which \$2.5 million was allocated to county agencies for the Successful Transition to Adulthood for Youth (STAY) program. These supplemental funds could be used for direct financial assistance, meeting basic needs, housing, education, and employment supports. Information is in [bulletin 21-68-15](#).

Department staff understands the importance of an inclusive and supportive environment; it prioritized making changes in the Social Service Information System to include fields for additional personal identifiers, such as sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pronouns, and preferred name.

## Chisago County Citizen Review Panel

**Mission statement:** To provide an opportunity for citizens to play a role in ensuring children are protected from abuse and neglect; and encourage and help build nurturing homes for children in our communities.

### County report

The Chisago County Citizen Review Panel (panel) is comprised of Todd McMurray, Christine Johnson, Karlene Smith, Deb Kerschner, Sarah Kerkes, and Cheryl Jelinek (resigned). The panel normally meets monthly, but had to reduce meetings in 2020 due to COVID, and allow time for county-based internal pandemic planning. The panel met five times in 2020.

Panel activities focused on recruitment. Chisago County updated its website with newly distributed information about citizen review panels provided by the department. Materials were displayed at local libraries and various businesses. Fliers were also distributed to local social service providers, shopping

areas and churches. Some materials were purchased from a national distributor, and panel members compiled others using existing information and images. A recruitment ad was published in a local newspaper. In October 2020, the panel welcomed Deb Kerschner as a new member. It also participated in three maltreatment re-determinations. Other planned activities were limited due to the pandemic.

Looking forward, panel members hope to implement changes once COVID restrictions allow groups to move forward. The Chisago County Citizen Review Panel will continue to focus on member recruitment strategies, while fostering ideas from group members to ensure safety of children in the county. Setting this foundation for success will assist the panel in providing the community with resources for reunification of families and nurturing households for children.

## **Acknowledgement**

Department staff thanks members of the Chisago County Citizen Review Panel, applauding their perseverance with recruitment amidst the pandemic. The department also wishes to acknowledge panel members for their participation in maltreatment reconsiderations, which represents a significant contribution to the county agency.

## **Department response**

Department staff encourages the panel to continue pursuing recruitment, and strengthening retention efforts of members. The department's Citizen Review Panel coordinator is happy to support these ongoing efforts.

## **Winona County Citizen Review Panel**

**Mission:** Promote and support the continuous improvement of a child protection system that will provide safety, permanency and well-being for all children in Winona County.

## **County report**

The Winona County Citizen Review Panel (panel) is comprised of Tammi Stoos (co-chair), Betsy Rowekamp (co-chair), Mary Hewett (former secretary, resigned), Barb Klink (secretary), Sonia Hanson (resigned), Judy Davis and Diane Petz. Ongoing discussions regarding recruitment efforts continue at each meeting.

## **Panel meetings**

The panel held in-person meetings in January and February and then switched to virtual monthly meetings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The panel did not meet in July or December. Members continue to be encouraged to be active in other community meetings to broaden the panel's perspective on other community groups that have child protection issues of concern.

## **Panel activities**

The 2019 Annual Report was not presented to the Winona County Board of Commissioners due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Copies of the report were submitted to Winona County Human Services and the Minnesota Department of Human Services.

The panel provided gift cards to youth in extended foster care and to relative foster parents to assist them during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a gesture of appreciation, gift cards were also given to all child protection workers. Panel members donated the gifts.

The panel conducts maltreatment re-determination reviews, as requested, by the Winona County Child Protection unit. There were no requests for re-determinations in 2020. Members usually attend the National Citizen Review Panel Conference. However, it was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Recommendations**

Citizen Review Panels involve community members in ensuring that the child protection system works well and protects children from abuse and neglect. Members review and evaluate various aspects of child protection systems at the state level and in their communities. The Winona County panel is concerned about the restrictions on staff overtime throughout the year, and turnover of staff and administration. This places enormous stress on current staff and agency leadership at a time when the numbers of investigations and children in placement continue to rise. Panel members hope that these positions remain filled.

Panel members remain concerned about the numbers and costs of out-of-home placements in Winona County. The panel continues to monitor trends locally as they compare to state and national out-of-home placement trends. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic created barriers to work and all daily life activities throughout the world; this was no different in Winona County. The panel understands the importance of the child protection system, but during these especially stressful times, it wants to find ways to support the agency and families as much as possible.

Panel members understand stressors throughout 2020 impacted families in a variety of ways: Children home from school, unemployment, chemical usage, mental health needs, domestic violence, etc. Members understand that they will continue to see these effects, likely, for years to come. They plan to grapple with these issues and are committed to having hard conversations, to challenge unhelpful thinking and biases, and to be transparent with concerns while building on areas finding success.

In addition to out-of-home placement, there have been ongoing discussions to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the Citizen Review Panel in Winona County. Discussions regarding the effectiveness and benefits of the panel continue to occur with a hope to have clarity and a specific mission in 2021. Panel membership has dwindled in numbers and while this is a concern, it is committed to ensuring they can be the best they can be prior to recruiting additional members. As they grapple with this and move forward, they hope to increase in numbers and diversity to best represent the Winona community.

## Looking ahead

The panel continues to learn about and is eager to see how Minnesota handles the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) in the upcoming months and years. They are optimistic that policies will ensure safety for families, timely permanency for children, and well-being goals are being met for the most vulnerable. The panel will continue to get updates, in addition to reading and listening to information individually and sharing information regularly regarding FFPSA. The panel appreciates information provided regularly from the department panel coordinator, Mary Doyle, and have found her input to be of utmost importance for this and many other system-related topics. They understand she is retiring and, though she will be missed, the panel looks forward to new energy, ideas and insights.

The Winona County Citizen Review Panel plans to continue to participate on committees that address issues regarding child protection and safety of Winona County children and families. They will continue to keep the citizens of Winona County aware of the work of the panel and continue to recruit new members as an ongoing process, working to have diverse representation of county citizens on the panel.

In addition to clarifying the panel's roles and responsibilities over the next year, the panel will continue to work closely with Winona County Child Protection Services to provide oversight and support in a variety of ways within their scope as a Citizen Review Panel.

## Acknowledgements

Winona County Citizen Review Panel members greatly appreciate the guidance and support of Mary Doyle, Minnesota Department of Human Services, and Jonathan Loomis, Winona County Department of Human Services. The panel looks forward to a continued positive and productive relationship in 2021.

## Acknowledgement

Department staff is appreciative of the dedication and generosity of the Winona County Citizen Review Panel. Panel members went above and beyond by making personal donations to give gift cards to youth in extended foster care, relative foster parents, and all county child protection workers to provide support and show appreciation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Department staff is thankful for the panel's thoughtful analysis of Winona County's child protection system and looks forward to seeing its recommendations for systemic improvement.

## Department response

Department staff concurs with the panel's concerns about, and the number and cost of out-of-home placements. These concerns are reflected across the state and country. It is well known that [high caseloads and workloads are a leading factor in caseworker retention](#). In 2021, the department will be conducting an extensive review of caseworker caseloads in partnership with an external research agency. This will include multiple focus groups with caseworkers statewide.

The department maintains [publicly accessible dashboards](#) that show out-of-home placement data across the state. Dashboards also show statewide performance data, agency detailed performance data,



progress to date for the current calendar year, and trends over time. These dashboards may be a helpful resource for the panel as they continue to address child protection issues.

As the panel engages in conversations with Winona County social service staff about their purpose and role, and opportunities for recruitment, the department's panel coordinator is eager to support ongoing efforts.

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