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# **Minnesota Citizen Review Panels Annual Report**

Reporting Year 2021

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## Overview of Citizen Review Panels

Citizen Review Panels (panels) are community advisory groups federally mandated under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act [P.L. 111-320] and by Minnesota statute. [Minn. Stats., section 256.01, subd. 15] 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 to evaluate the extent to which agencies are effectively discharging child protection responsibilities, and
- Make policy and practice recommendations for systemic improvement.

Panels represent a partnership among community members, local child protection agencies, and the state child welfare agency.

Minnesota has had panels since 1999. Currently, panels exist in Hennepin, Ramsey, Chisago, and Winona Counties. Minnesota Department of Human Services (department) staff is interested in expanding Citizen Review Panels to other areas of the state.

This annual report provides a summary of activities and recommendations of each Minnesota panel for calendar year 2021, and the department's corresponding response.

## 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 Summary

The Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel met monthly, comprised of the following community members: Peg Kolden (chair), Joan Molenaar (co-chair), Beatrice Officer, Marina Hammond, and Elena Leomi. The panel's primary activity was participating in the Collaborative Safety model, which Hennepin County Children and Family Services adopted to embrace a systems-approach to learning and improvement in child welfare practice. Panel members brought a crucial community perspective and outside view in examining the county's child protection practices.

A panel member participated in Collaborative Safety case reviews and mapping sessions monthly. The panel received 18 case referrals and reviewed 10 cases in 2021. Members provided overviews of reviewed cases at monthly meetings to share their learning with the panel.

The panel thanks Hennepin County staff Michelle Lefebvre and Kimette Almon for collaborating with the panel to ensure members had access to Collaborative Safety training, and were regularly included in case reviews, and Eduardo Soto for faithfully taking meeting minutes.

The panel's recommendations for Hennepin County are to continue:

- To provide Collaborative Safety training for panel members
- To utilize the Collaborative Safety model for case reviews
- Efforts to decrease length of time children spend in foster care

The panel's recommendations for the department are continue to:

- Support the panel as it studies, reviews, and makes recommendations for child welfare system and service improvement
- Support and assist the panel in new member recruitment
- Facilitate connections among Minnesota panels to improve communication, sharing expertise and learning opportunities

## Department Response

Department staff sincerely thanks each member of the Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel for their meaningful and valuable participation in Hennepin County's Collaborative Safety work. Department staff is pleased to provide ongoing support of the panel and increased assistance for member recruitment. The department will be exploring ways to leverage statewide and culturally diverse platforms of communication to elevate the work of Citizen Review Panels and highlight the need for new members. The department will also be facilitating a statewide virtual gathering for all Minnesota panels in 2022 to encourage communication, collaboration, and encouragement across panels.

## 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 Chisago County Citizen Review Panel met bi-monthly, comprised of the following community members: Sarah Kerkes, Deb Kerschner, Carol Schumann, and Nancy Grossmann. Its primary focus in 2021 was recruiting new members. Chisago County staff updated its website with panel information and sent this information to the Chisago County Public Health department for publication in its newsletter, and placed advertisements in local newspapers for four weeks. In addition, individual panel members placed an advertisement in the Chisago Lakes Chamber of Commerce newsletter, shared recruitment materials at an expo and local businesses, and shared panel information with their individual networks. Recruitment efforts resulted in two new members joining the panel!

Historically, panel members participated in maltreatment reconsideration case reviews. However, due to COVID protocols, members were unable to participate in 2021, but the county plans to resume panel member participation in these reviews in 2022.

The panel's recommendation for the department is to continue to support and assist it in new member recruitment.

## Department Response

Department staff applauds Chisago County Citizen Review Panel members for their tireless recruitment efforts. Department staff is pleased to provide ongoing panel support, increasing assistance for member recruitment. Staff is also exploring ways to leverage statewide and culturally diverse platforms of communication to elevate the work of Citizen Review Panels, highlighting the need for new members.

## Winona County Citizen Review Panel

**Mission statement:** 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 Summary

The Winona County Citizen Review Panel met quarterly, comprised of the following community members: Tammi Stoos (co-chair), Betsy Rowekamp (co-chair), Barb Klink (secretary), Judy Davis, and Diane Petz. Meetings included discussions regarding recruitment of new members, the purpose of Citizen Review Panels, efforts to assist Winona County Human Services, and ways to best support families throughout the community.

The panel provided financial support for a foster parent appreciation picnic and provided gift cards to long-term foster parents. As an additional gesture of appreciation, members personally donated gift cards to all Winona County child protection workers. Training opportunities and other child welfare information were shared with the panel throughout the year. Due to COVID, no panel members attended the 2021 National Citizen Review Panel Conference.

The panel conducted three maltreatment reconsideration case reviews in 2021, bringing a crucial community perspective to examining Winona County's child protection practices. These extensive case reviews are a valuable contribution the panel makes to Winona County. Members reviewed maltreatment investigation reports, conducted interviews, and examined evidence. The panel concluded that all three maltreatment determinations should be upheld.

Panel members acknowledged the far-reaching, lasting impact that stressors in 2021 had on families. The panel plans to grapple with these issues and is committed to having hard conversations, challenging biases, and being transparent with concerns, while building on successes.

There continues to be ongoing discussion regarding roles, responsibilities, and beneficial outcomes of the panel's work. Although membership has decreased, its members remain committed to "ensuring we can be the best we can be prior to recruiting additional members." Members hope to increase their numbers, including diverse representation.

Panel members will continue to learn about and are eager to see how Minnesota implements the Family First Prevention Services Act in upcoming months and years. They are optimistic about the outcomes and affect that this legislation will have.

The panel thanks Winona County staff Jonathan Loomis for his support and partnership. The panel looks forward to a continued positive and productive working relationship in 2022.

The panel's annual report was presented to the Winona County Board of Commissioners, copies were submitted to Winona County Human Services, and the Minnesota Department of Human Services.

The panel's recommendation for the department is to continue to support and assist in new member recruitment.

## Department Response

Department staff sincerely appreciates the personal dedication and generosity of the Winona County Citizen Review Panel. The panel continues to provide valuable perspectives and input to Winona County Human Services. Staff also thanks the panel for their collaborative partnership. As the panel continues to discuss their role and purpose, and recruiting new members, department staff will provide ongoing support and guidance. Staff will also be exploring ways to leverage statewide and culturally diverse platforms of communication to elevate the work of Citizen Review Panels, highlighting the need for new members.

## 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 Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel met monthly, comprised of the following community members: Tony Porter (chair), Tonya Long, Lauri Ink, Hoang Murphy (resigned), Steve Nelson (resigned), and Toni Royaal (resigned). Meetings included updates from Ramsey County staff, state staff, and discussions regarding recruitment, county and state policies, and panel projects.

The panel focused on creating a survey for Ramsey County youth in foster care in 2021. The survey goal is to explore experiences, diverse identities, and well-being of youth in care, and to identify ways Ramsey County Human Services and its partners can best support them. The panel initially identified a third-party organization to conduct the survey, but ultimately decided to work with Ramsey County Human Services to implement it. The survey continues to be in planning and development.

In addition to the survey project, the panel has engaged in recruitment conversations, hosting a community outreach event in November 2021. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continues to pose challenges.

Panel members assisted with interviewing a new Ramsey County Indian Child Welfare Act manager, and participated in Ramsey's Transforming Systems Together efforts.

The county agency did not request the panel to conduct any maltreatment reconsiderations or child fatality case reviews in 2021. This may be resumed in 2022.

The panel's recommendations for Ramsey County Human Services are to provide:

1. Compensation to panel members for meeting attendance and project work time
2. A consistent Ramsey County staff person/subject matter expert to attend panel meetings, rather than rotate meeting attendance among four or five staff
3. Clear requests to the panel on what the county agency needs

The panel's recommendations for the department are:

1. Be clear on what the department expects from panels
2. Treat panels as partners and not "property of the state"; make decisions about panels in collaboration with panel members
3. Provide strong recruitment support for all Citizen Review Panels in Minnesota

## **Department Response**

Department staff thanks the Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel for its perseverance and ongoing work, particularly despite dwindling membership. Department staff values the opportunity to collaborate with the panel to evaluate local and state child welfare policy and practice. Department staff sought a collaborative relationship with active panel members by communicating openly, providing opportunities for discussion and feedback, and inviting participation in visioning for panels statewide.

Department staff, using feedback from panel leadership statewide, created new ongoing roundtable meetings in 2021 for panel leadership statewide to increase communication, collaboration, and mutual support amongst panels. Again with feedback from panel members and leadership, department staff will host an all-state panel gathering in 2022 to increase communication and collaboration, providing opportunities for feedback and generating ideas. A primary goal is to continue to cultivate collaborative partnerships with panel members.

Department staff is pleased to provide increased assistance for panel member recruitment. Staff will be exploring ways to leverage statewide and culturally diverse platforms of communication to elevate the work of Citizen Review Panels, highlighting the need for new members.

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