



CUSTODY TO TRANSITION

20 ANNUAL 26 REPORT

Prepared by

*Kansas Custody to Transition
Citizen Review Panel*



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Kansas Citizen Review Panel Overview

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The Custody to Transition Kansas Citizen Review Panel (CTT CRP) remains one of the three federally recognized Citizen Review Panels (CRPs) in Kansas, operating under the mandates of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). CAPTA, a foundational federal statute addressing child abuse and neglect, provides states with critical funding to support prevention, assessment, investigation, prosecution, and treatment efforts. It also offers grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations to support innovative demonstration projects. The CTT CRP continues to align its work with CAPTA's requirements and mission.

The panel is pleased to present its 2026 Annual Report, reflecting activities and progress made from June 1, 2025, through May 31, 2026. This report highlights the panel's ongoing commitment to collaboration, continuous improvement, and meaningful engagement with partners across the child welfare system. The CTT CRP continues to prioritize the integration of perspectives from individuals with lived experience, child welfare professionals, and community stakeholders to ensure that its recommendations reflect the diverse realities of Kansas families.

The panel draws on its collective expertise to evaluate the child welfare system from the point a child enters custody through their transition out of care. This work includes reviewing policies and practices within the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF), sharing resources and information during meetings, and examining statewide trends that impact children, youth, and families. Through this collaborative approach, the CTT CRP contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the system and identifies opportunities for improvement.

For Kansas, this work provides:

- Opportunities to assess and review relevant data about children in care and their outcomes after leaving care
- A network of individuals who understand the needs and challenges of the child protection system
- A focus on trends and key issues affecting Kansas families, children, and older youth
- A statewide perspective strengthened by diverse panel membership
- Reduced isolation among organizations and individuals working to support families
- A network of panel members committed to educating the public about the child protection system

Panel Function

The CTT CRP continues to benefit from the involvement of diverse members whose backgrounds and expertise strengthen the quality of the panel's assessments. To support continuity and deepen members' understanding of CAPTA requirements, the panel continues to offer a 30-minute orientation session for every new member, and upon request for any existing member. This orientation provides essential context, clarifies expectations, and ensures that all members are equipped to participate fully.

Panel coordinators also continued to implement a comprehensive email campaign to support recruitment. Customizable templates allow for consistent, professional outreach and streamline communication with prospective members. This approach ensures that all candidates receive clear, accurate information about the panel's mission, expectations, and opportunities for involvement.

To strengthen engagement and ensure members remain informed, the CRP Coordinator continues to develop and distribute CRP newsletters. These newsletters highlight achievements, share important updates, provide reminders, and offer training opportunities relevant to panel members. By maintaining consistent communication, the newsletters help foster a sense of community and ensure that all members have the resources they need to participate effectively.

**Please see Newsletter in Appendix A.*

To support long-term planning, the panel continues to participate in Joint Strategic Planning Retreats held in February. These retreats bring together both the Intake to Petition (ITP) and Custody to Transition (CTT) panels for shared learning, collaborative goal-setting, and in-depth discussion of progress and priorities. This joint structure strengthens alignment across panels and promotes a unified approach to improving Kansas' child welfare system.

Throughout 2026, the CTT CRP has continued to meet remotely, recognizing that virtual meetings increase accessibility and support consistent participation across the state. The panel maintained its bi-monthly meeting schedule. Additionally, the panel refined its meeting agenda to strengthen connection and improve workflow. Each meeting now includes:

- ➔ Intentional connection time at the beginning of each meeting, allowing members to build rapport and engage informally.
- ➔ Dedicated work time during the meeting for members to collaborate on tasks, draft recommendations, or review materials in real time.

This updated structure has contributed to more productive meetings and has supported steady progress on panel priorities.

Panel Membership

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Member Category	Current Member	Organization
Kansas Child Advocate	Kerrie Lonard	Kansas Office of the Child Advocate
Child Welfare State Agency	Docia Small	DCF, Topeka
Child Welfare State Agency	Sydney Dringman	DCF
Child Welfare Contractor, Chairperson	Darla Nelson-Metzger	Families Together Inc.
Staff Attorney	Leslie Johnson	St. Francis Ministries
Child Welfare Contractor	Brandy Tofel	TFI
Child Welfare Contractor	Stephanie Pfannenstiel	FAST Family Resource Specialist, Families Together
Person Supporting Youth Education	Malissa Martin	Communities in Schools of Mid America Spark Wheel
Lived Experience Leader, Chair elect	Alexandria Ware	Culture Creations Inc., Wichita
Health Care Professional	Danielle Horton	Child Abuse Pediatricians, Children's Mercy, Kansas City
Health Care Professional	Emily Killough	Child Abuse Pediatricians, Children's Mercy
Mental Health Advocate	Jennifer Anguiano	Director of Sunflower CASA, Manhattan
Office of Judicial Administration	Dante Scroggins	OJA
Works with Children in Care	Kim Gerstenkorn	Executive Director of CASA Sedgwick County
Tribal Representative	Sheena Halverstadt	CASA Supervisor, Forensic Interviewer, ICWA Specialist
Works with Children in Care	Angela Windham	Ember Hope Education Liaison
Works with Children in Care	Tara Wallace	Lighthouse Therapeutic Community Outreach Foundation
Works with Children in Care	Lindsay Smith	Family Prevention/ Radical Life Inc./ Executive Director
Works with Homeless Youth	Linda Long	USD 261
Works with Homeless Youth	April Todd	Director at Pony Express Partnership for Children, Inc. (PEPC), Marysville
Advisory Member	Sara Hortenstine	KS Child Death Review Board
CRP Coordinator	Savannah Withrow	Mainstream Nonprofit Solutions
CRP Support	LynTia Gwess	Mainstream Nonprofit Solutions

Meeting Overviews

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Summary of August 15, 2025 Meeting

The Kansas Citizen Review Panel held a joint retreat to strengthen collaboration between the Custody to Transition (CTT) and Intake to Petition (ITP) panels, review annual reports, and set strategic priorities for the upcoming year. The meeting focused on enhancing engagement through interactive activities, rotating leadership roles, and integrating small group work into agendas. Key discussions included voting on new panel leadership, revising meeting schedules, and updating the panel handbook to reflect expectations and responsibilities.

The CTT panel emphasized continuity of mental health care for adolescents, recommending structured referral processes, expanded provider access, and targeted training for professionals. It also proposed incentivizing mental health provider participation and exploring alternative support models. The ITP panel prioritized protective factors, advocating for improved intake processes, expanded service connections, and enhanced provider training. Both panels identified systemic gaps in referral pathways, capacity challenges, and the need for cross-agency collaboration. Strategic planning breakout sessions outlined measurable goals, including policy reviews, engagement with DCF on mental health practices, and inviting subject matter experts to future meetings. The retreat concluded with actionable steps to improve meeting effectiveness and advance recommendations aligned with CAPTA compliance and child welfare system improvements.

Summary of October 10, 2025 Meeting

The Kansas Citizen Review Panel (Custody to Transition) convened virtually to review CAPTA compliance, discuss systemic challenges, and plan actionable steps for improving child welfare outcomes. Key topics included updates on therapeutic family foster homes, continuity of care, and mental health service delivery. Sydney Dringman reported over 100 approved therapeutic homes statewide, with plans to share detailed data and placement standards. The panel addressed gaps in medication transfer tracking, overnight placements, and unmet mental health needs, emphasizing the disconnect between policy and practice. Breakout groups proposed expanding the Kansas Care model to mental health services and exploring direct reimbursement for private providers to alleviate capacity issues. The meeting concluded with assigned action items focused on data transparency, funding strategies, and inviting subject matter experts to future sessions.

Summary of December 5, 2025 Meeting

The Kansas Citizen Review Panel met virtually to advance discussions on therapeutic foster care, mental health service continuity, and systemic improvements. Sydney Dringman presented updated data showing 114 approved therapeutic family foster homes, with 97 youth placed across 67 homes, highlighting regional disparities and inconsistencies in applying placement standards. The panel examined barriers to fidelity in service delivery, demographic gaps, and strategies to reduce congregate care reliance. Tara Wallace introduced the Kansas Care model expansion proposal, focusing on continuity of mental health care during placement disruptions and legislative funding options for private providers. Rebecca Turner provided insights into federal mental health outcome measures and challenges in service provision, including youth declining services. Breakout sessions prioritized funding advocacy, data analysis, and addressing McIntyre settlement benchmarks. Action items were assigned to support informed recommendations for systemic improvements in 2026.

Summary of February 13, 2026 Meeting

The Joint Meeting focused on strengthening panel effectiveness through education, coordination, and planning. Members reviewed their legal responsibilities under CAPTA, discussed funding strategies, and shared opportunities for training and community engagement. After this the panel heard a presentation on 1800 CHILDREN from Michelle Reichardt and were given the opportunity for discussion and questions. After this the panel broke out into their prospective panels. This group focused on developing recommendations for an annual report, particularly around placement stability and access to mental health services. They reviewed past goals, discussed current initiatives, and explored ideas for improving coordination between agencies.

Summary of April , 2026 Meeting

The Kansas CRP Custody to Transition Panel met on April 3, 2026, to review the FY26 Annual Report and refine recommendations focused on youth in foster care. The panel emphasized improving access to sustainable mental health services beyond Medicaid and consolidating resources to better support youth ages 14 and older as they prepare for adulthood. The meeting concluded with agreement on final goals and next steps to complete and submit the Annual Report.

Work of the CTT CRP

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This section summarizes the panel’s activities during the reporting period and describes efforts to advance the goals established in August 2025. It documents priority areas identified by panel members, system-level challenges observed, and key insights informing ongoing oversight. The information presented is intended to support federal, state, and local stakeholders in strengthening child welfare practice, enhancing cross-system collaboration, and improving equitable access to services that promote the safety, permanency, and well-being of Kansas children and families.

Throughout the year, the panel engaged in structured and intentional strategic planning to support its oversight responsibilities. This approach ensured that deliberations were aligned with shared objectives, grounded in data and lived experience, and responsive to emerging system needs. During the 2025 session, the panel conducted coordinated strategic planning, data review, and system analysis to inform recommendations for the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) and to support continuous quality improvement efforts across the child welfare system.

The panel’s activities during the reporting period were guided by three primary focus areas:

Improving placement stability for children and youth in foster care

Advancing targeted policy and practice improvements to address systemic barriers

Strengthening cross-system collaboration among child welfare, behavioral health, education, and related service sectors

These priorities informed the panel’s review of system performance, service utilization, and continuity of care for children and youth in DCF custody.

Review of System Performance and Continuity of Care

During the reporting period, the Kansas CTT CRP evaluated system performance with an emphasis on continuity of care, access to mental health services, placement stability, and utilization of therapeutic family foster homes (TFFH). Panel members reviewed DCF’s written responses to prior recommendations and engaged in substantive discussions to assess progress, identify persistent gaps, and clarify areas requiring additional attention.

Panel discussions acknowledged the ongoing work related to the Appleseed litigation, including the presence of multiple workgroups focused on achieving improved outcomes consistent with settlement requirements. While recognizing the importance of these efforts and the potential for system improvements generated through those processes, the panel identified the litigation as contextual to its work rather than a primary driver of recommendations during this reporting period.

Therapeutic Family Foster Homes (TFFH)

A significant area of panel focus involved the alignment between TFFH policy requirements and implementation in practice. Panel members identified ongoing inconsistencies in the completion of required mental health assessments and in the provision of timely, high-quality follow-up services. Contributing factors discussed included placement instability, limitations in data collection and tracking, and challenges associated with the privatized service delivery structure. To support deeper analysis of root causes and systemic barriers, the panel requested additional qualitative information and performance data.

Updated data presented by Sydney Dringman reflected measurable statewide growth in therapeutic family foster home capacity. The panel commended this progress and identified opportunities to further strengthen outcomes through increased consistency in placement standards and service delivery across regions. Concentrations of TFFH services in areas such as Sedgwick County were identified as potential models for expansion, with recommendations for demographic, fidelity, and outcome analyses to inform replication of effective practices.

Additional discussions addressed the role of TFFH placements as a diversion from higher levels of care and highlighted the importance of maintaining educational stability, effective coordination of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and consistent application of best-interest determinations.

Mental Health Provider Network Capacity

Across meetings, the panel consistently identified the expansion and stabilization of the mental health provider network as a critical system need. The panel acknowledged and commended DCF for its proactive efforts to address this challenge, including investments in TFFH capacity-building grants to support provider recruitment, workforce development, and enhanced service delivery for youth with complex behavioral health needs.

Panel members also noted progress in expanding partnerships and improving access to timely mental health screenings and behavioral health services for children in custody. These efforts were recognized as important steps toward strengthening service capacity and improving continuity of care.

Children's Service League (KCSL), highlighting the program's role as a statewide, no-cost access point for families and professionals seeking support and service navigation. The presentation reviewed program utilization, target audiences, access methods, and emerging outcomes.

1-800-CHILDREN provides 24/7 confidential support through a dedicated helpline (1-800-CHILDREN or 1-800-332-6378), as well as text and email options, a mobile application, and an online resource directory available at 1800childrenks.org. The directory includes thousands of verified local, statewide, and national resources across areas such as health, education, child care, housing, food assistance, financial stability, and mental health. As the centralized access point for Help Me Grow Kansas, 1-800-CHILDREN supports early identification of needs, facilitates referrals to community-based services, and strengthens coordination between families and providers—contributing to prevention and early intervention goals statewide.

Cross-System Training and Multidisciplinary Collaboration

The panel also explored opportunities to strengthen cross-system training involving medical providers and the judicial system to promote shared understanding and coordinated practice. Panel members highlighted existing Kansas initiatives that support multidisciplinary training, including programs for Child Abuse Review and Evaluation (CARE) providers and ongoing collaborative efforts among child welfare agencies, healthcare professionals, and court partners.

These efforts include joint trainings, workshops, and shared learning opportunities focused on improving case coordination, identifying indicators of maltreatment, and applying trauma-informed practices across systems. The panel noted that expanded cross-system training aligns with the objectives of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), particularly its emphasis on multidisciplinary collaboration, workforce development, and interagency coordination.

Coordinated Care and Kansas Care Expansion Considerations

The panel devoted considerable attention to identifying strategies to improve continuity of care for children and families. Building on prior recommendations, members examined opportunities to expand the Kansas Practice Model—or a comparable coordinated care framework—to more effectively integrate mental health service providers.

Key discussion areas included:

- **Medicaid reimbursement structures and billing barriers affecting provider participation**
- **Potential innovative and sustainable funding approaches**
- **Options for direct reimbursement mechanisms**
- **Opportunities to strengthen collaboration among Medicaid administrators, behavioral health leadership, and system partners**

Following these discussions, the panel initiated development of a proposal to expand a coordinated care model to address identified service gaps. After consultation with legislative representatives, the panel determined that further advancement of this initiative should be deferred pending the availability of additional data and a more robust evidentiary foundation to support potential funding redirection. This approach reflects the panel’s commitment to data-driven decision-making and fiscal accountability.

The activities described in this section reflect the panel’s continued commitment to evidence-informed oversight and continuous quality improvement within the child welfare and behavioral health systems. Emphasis remains on prevention, placement stability, family preservation, and integrated care as foundational strategies for improving long-term outcomes for children, youth, and families involved with the child welfare system.

Recommendations

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In accordance with the mandate outlined in Section 106(c)(6) of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), it is incumbent upon the Citizen Review Panel to furnish recommendations aimed at enhancing the efficacy of child protective measures both at state and local levels. Significant progress has been achieved by the panel in pursuit of their objectives. The collaborative efforts between the Kansas Citizen Review Panels (CRPs) and the Department for Children and Families (DCF) continue as robust partnerships, steadfastly dedicated to fostering ongoing cooperation in endeavors geared towards enhancing outcomes in child protection. These collaborative efforts are particularly focused on addressing the recommendations outlined herein.

Recommendation 1: Access Through Alternate Funded Models:

CRP CTT recognizes that Medicaid reimbursement does not offer long term sustainability for mental health providers, as there are many barriers, including but not limited to low reimbursement, administrative burden, and workforce shortages.

CTT recommends that DCF consider opportunities to incentivize therapists to accept children in state custody as clients. The panel recommends that potential funding opportunities be implemented for mental health providers to apply for to improve family access to quality mental health care and incentivize mental health providers.

Recommendation 2: Improve and Provide Education on Resources for Youth 14 and Above in Care

The CTT Citizen Review Panel (CRP) concurs with its sister panel regarding the critical importance of access to, utilization of, and familiarity with available resources for children, youth, families, and service providers. While acknowledging the broader system-wide need for these supports, the CTT CRP's primary focus is on **older youth ages 14 and older who are in foster care, including youth pursuing adoption or reunification, youth with concurrent permanency goals, and those preparing to age out of care.**

The panel recognizes and appreciates DCF's ongoing efforts to expand access to services and supports for older youth. However, during the reporting period, the CTT CRP observed an opportunity for improvement in coordination, communication, and effective utilization of available resources, particularly for youth transitioning out of foster care.

Panel observations indicate that many youths aging out of care continue to face challenges in understanding, accessing, and navigating existing supports, which may impede their ability to successfully transition to adulthood. Despite federal requirements that youth receive a transition plan (My Action Plan) no later than six months prior to aging out of care, the panel observed that these timelines are not consistently met in practice. As a result, some youth transition without adequate preparation, information, or linkage to essential services.

Based on its review and discussions, the CTT CRP identified the need for focused improvements related to:

1. **Consolidation of resources** to reduce fragmentation and improve accessibility;
2. **Education and communication** to ensure youth, caregivers, and professionals understand available supports and how to access them; and
3. **Consideration of the development of user-friendly materials and tools** to strengthen engagement and promote timely utilization of services.

2.A

The CTT CRP recommends expanded education and outreach efforts to ensure youth, caregivers, and caseworkers are informed about available resources and how to effectively use them.

This includes ensuring that youth clearly understand key benefits and supports, such as tuition waivers and other postsecondary education resources, as well as the purpose and timing of My Action Plan. Improved consistency in education and communication may support stronger engagement, earlier preparation for transitions, and improved outcomes for youth as they move toward adulthood.

2.B

The panel recommends that DCF convene targeted focus groups to better understand the availability, accessibility, and utilization of resources for older youth.



These focus groups should explore

- *Areas of miscommunication or confusion;*
- *Barriers to accessing services;*
- *Resources youth and caregivers identify as most needed;*
- *Familiarity with tools such as the Parent Calendar and Transition Plan; and*
- *Overall understanding of available benefits and supports.*

Recommended participant groups include:

- *Individuals with lived experience, including:*
 - *Kinship caregivers*
 - *Foster parents*
 - *Youth currently in care*
- *Older Youth Services staff*
- *Court stakeholders*
- *Education partners, including education advocates, teachers, and other education professionals*

2.C

The panel encourages DCF to explore opportunities to consolidate information and resources into a more accessible and youth-friendly format.

This may include reviewing models used by other states, such as Florida's Foster Power mobile app, which centralizes information for youth transitioning out of care.

While recognizing the logistical, fiscal, and operational challenges associated with developing or implementing technology-based tools, the panel recommends exploring potential collaboration with other states or agencies to reduce duplication of efforts and enhance access to resources.

Conclusion

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The panel believes that integrating stakeholder feedback with targeted education and outreach will reduce fragmentation, improve utilization of existing supports, and better prepare older youth for successful transitions to permanency and adulthood.

The CTT CRP is pleased to acknowledge the significant achievements made over the past year in advancing the objectives of child welfare. We anticipate further advancements in the upcoming year. Our commitment to continual improvement and innovation remains steadfast as we uphold our commitment to excellence in all endeavors. For more information on the content of the report, please contact Savannah Withrow at swithrow@teammns.org.