

REDUCING THE DISPROPORTIONATE REPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE ADVISORY COMMISSION



The Advisory Commission is charged with identifying and developing state-wide recommendations for systemic change that will impact the disproportionality of African American Children in Foster Care.

Letter from the Chairperson and Director of the Office of Racial Equity Practice

September 30, 2025

Dear Governor Pritzker and Members of the General Assembly,

On behalf of the Advisory Commission established under the *Reducing the Disproportionate Representation of African American Children in Foster Care Act*, I am honored to present this status report for your review and consideration.

This report reflects the Commission's ongoing commitment to ensuring that all children and families in Illinois are served with fairness, dignity, and equity. We recognize the disproportionate number of African American children entering and remaining in the foster care system, and we view this not only as a child welfare concern but as a matter of racial equity and social justice.

Over the past two years, the Commission has engaged in rigorous dialogue and data review to identify the systemic barriers that contribute to these disparities. We have also elevated promising practices and policy recommendations that move Illinois closer to a child welfare system where every child—regardless of race—has the opportunity to thrive within their family and community.

This report provides an overview of our progress to date, including:

- The analysis of disaggregated data to identify disparities.
- The development of strategies to strengthen family supports and prevent unnecessary system entry.
- Recommendations for workforce training, community partnerships, and policy reform to advance equity.

While much progress has been made, we know that our work is far from complete. The strategies outlined in this status report represent a roadmap toward a more equitable child welfare system in Illinois. We are grateful for your partnership and leadership as we work to ensure that every child has the opportunity to grow up safe, supported, and connected to family and community.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue and for your ongoing commitment to the children and families of Illinois.

Respectfully submitted,

Dagené Z. Brown, Chairperson
Advisory Commission on Reducing the Disproportionate
Representation of African American Children in Foster Care

Background and Structure of the Advisory Commission

The Advisory Commission on Reducing the Disproportionate Representation of African American Children in Foster Care (the “Advisory Commission”), established by Public Act 102-0470, emphasized identifying the factors that lead to the overrepresentation of African American youth in care, as well, developing strategies that could mitigate those factors.

The Advisory Commission, per the statute, was charged with the following:

- Regularly track and analyze State and local data on the racial disproportionality of children in foster care in order to develop effective policies to prevent African American children's placement in foster or substitute care.
- Examine and develop strategies and policies to address the 2018 data released by the University of Illinois' Children and Family Research Center, School of Social Work, which showed racial disproportionality during the 5 key stages of the child welfare decision-making process: investigated maltreatment reports; protective custody; indicated maltreatment reports; entries into substitute care; and timely exits from substitute care.
- Assist in the development of cultural competency training programs for child welfare caseworkers to eliminate racial bias and cultural misconceptions about African American families and communities during the child welfare decision-making process.
- Monitor and comment on existing and proposed legislation that affects African American children who are at risk of placement in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems.
- Identify best practices to safely increase the number of family or relative placements for African American children who enter the child welfare system, and
- Collaborate with other State agencies and social services agencies in the development of programs that improve African American families’ access to preventive and supportive services, including, but not limited to, mental health and substance use disorder services, medical care, legal assistance, housing assistance, and family counseling.

Appointed Members

- Robin Albritton, Dept of Children and Family Services
- Dagen Brown, DCFS Director of Racial Equity Practice
- Latonia Byrd-Williamson, Dept of Juvenile Justice
- Margaret Decker, Dept of Labor
- Tanya Ford-Davenport, Dept of Healthcare and Family Services
- Dr. Tamara Fuller, Children and Family Research Center, UIUC
- Pamela Hudson, Dept of Human Rights, *recently reappointed*
- Areda McIntosh, Dept of Corrections, *recently appointed*
- Markus Pitchford, Capital Development Board, *recently appointed*
- Faith Richie replacing Tiana McCall, Dept of Commerce & Economic Opportunity
- LaTasha Roberson-Guifarro, Lutheran Child and Family Services of Illinois
- Michelle Shaver, IL Board of Higher Education

- Tracy Small, Dept of Human Services
- Julia Strehlow replacing Heidi Clark, Dept of Public Health
- Dr. Leslie Ward-Lamina, State Board of Education
- Janelle Washington, IL College Board

Commission Meetings Held in 2024 and 2025

The Commission convened on the following dates and locations:

- March 6, 2024 – Chicago and Springfield, IL
- July 24, 2024 – Chicago and Springfield, IL
- February 27, 2025 – Harvey and Springfield, IL
- April 23, 2025 – Harvey and Springfield, IL
- June 25, 2025 – Harvey and Springfield, IL
- August 27, 2025 – Harvey and Springfield, IL

Commission Framework and Subcommittees

In August 2023, the Commission submitted its first set of recommendations to the General Assembly that identified strategies for four of the six tasks from the legislation, in the following areas:

- Legal System and Its Impact to Youth in Care
- External Resources and Services that Address Disproportionality
- Legislative Impact on African American Families, and
- DCFS Services to Impact Prevention and Reduce the Length of Stay in Foster Care

Developed from these key areas, the Advisory Commission proposed seventeen recommendations to address the overrepresentation of African American youth in the Illinois child welfare system. The following report and update outline DCFS's efforts, as well as collaborative efforts with sister agencies, to build internal and external resources, educate all areas in the child welfare spectrum, and seek legislative changes that support prevention and promote family well-being. This report reflects our continued dedication to reducing disparities, strengthening cross-agency collaboration, and advancing policies that ensure every child in Illinois has the opportunity to thrive in safe, stable, and supportive families.

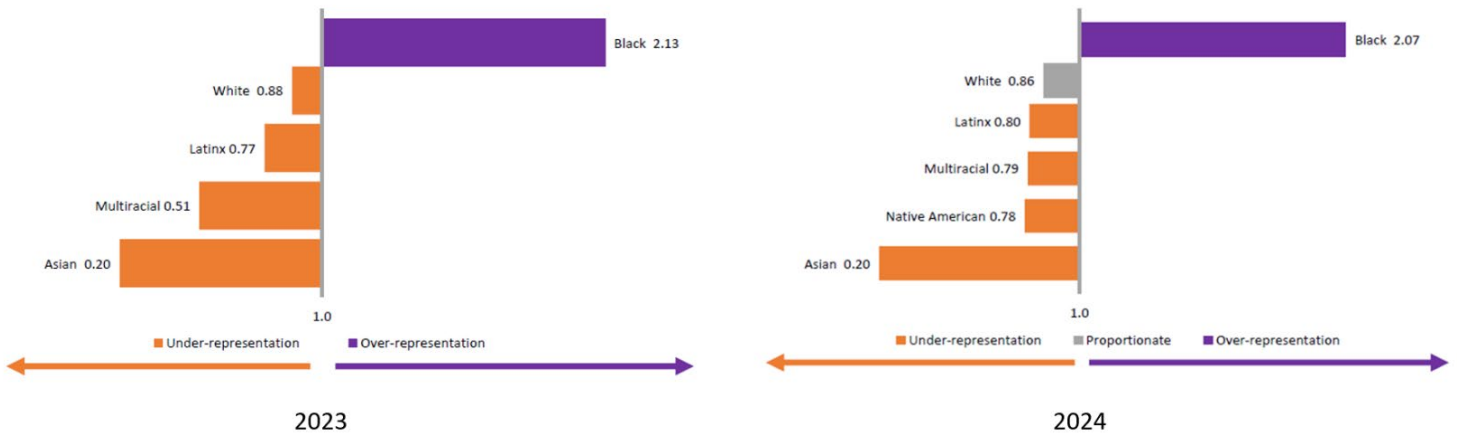
Analysis of Disproportionality Data

In partnership with the Advisory Commission, HB2914—the Racial Disparities Report Act—was enacted in August 2021 to ensure ongoing reporting of racial disparities affecting children and families in the child welfare system. As part of this mandate, the Children and Family Research Center at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign produces an annual disproportionality report, analyzing child welfare data to examine outcomes for Black, White, Latinx, and other racial and ethnic groups.

Key Decision Points in Child Welfare

The following charts provide a glance at the key decision points that lead to system entry or length of stay for youth in care. Using both FY2023 and FY2024 data, provides a side-by-side analysis of progress addressing the overrepresentation of African American youth in care over the course of a year.

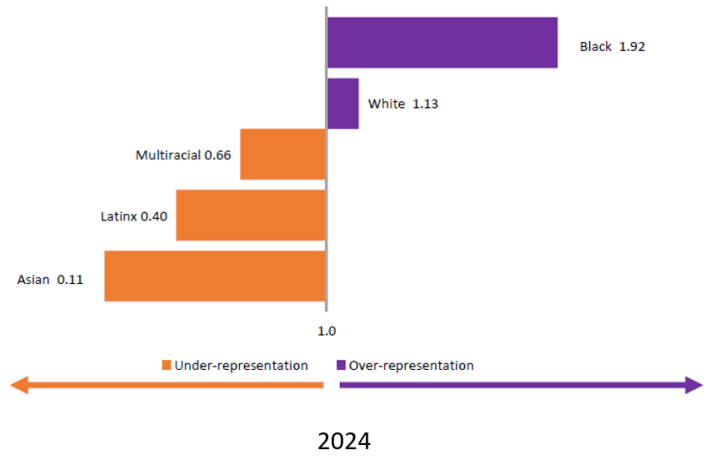
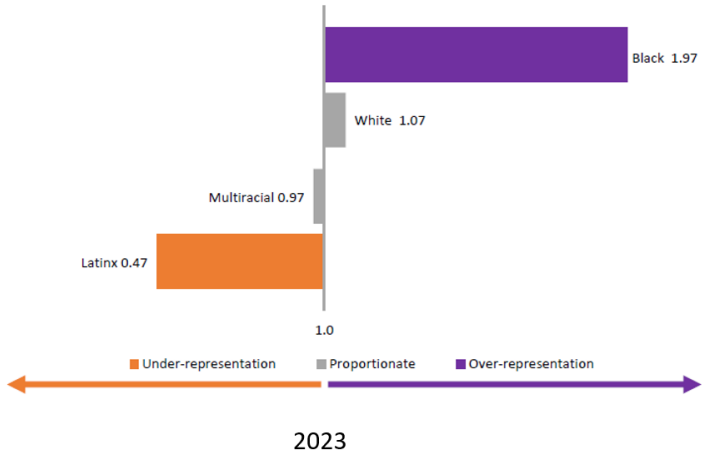
Children in Investigations



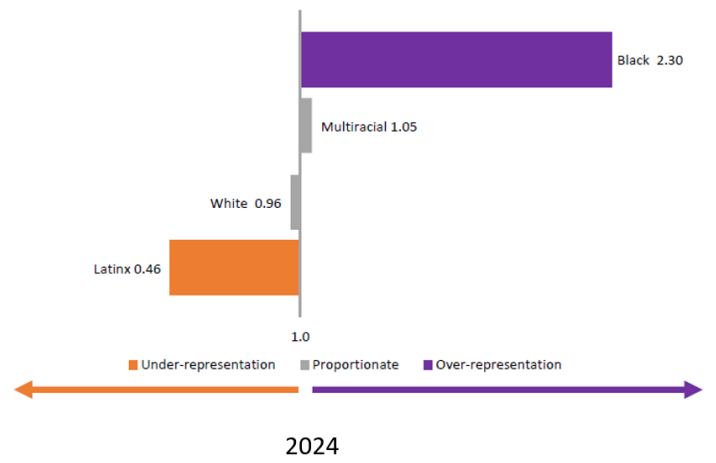
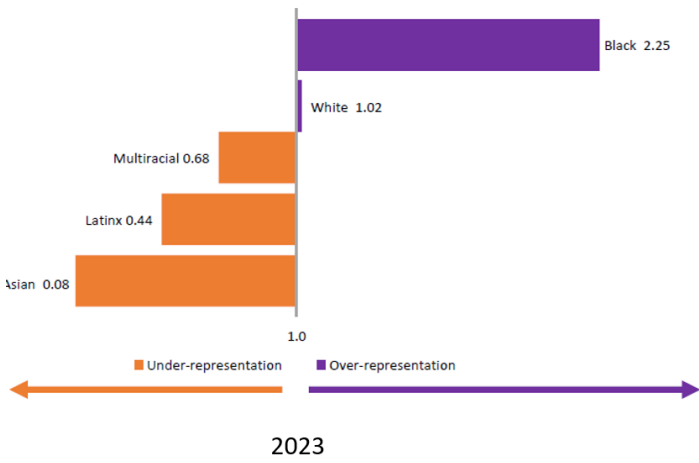
Children in Indicated Investigation



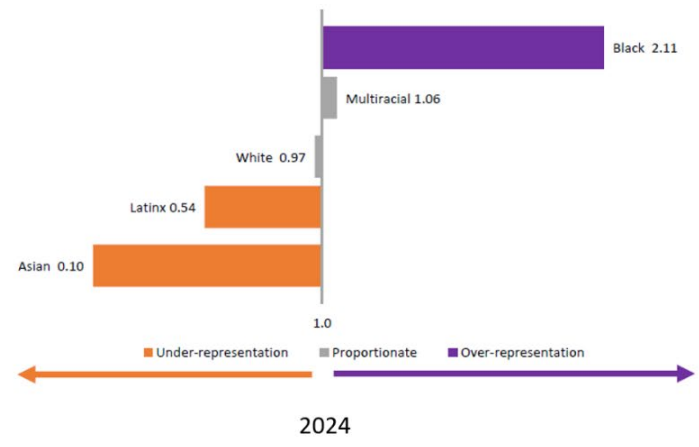
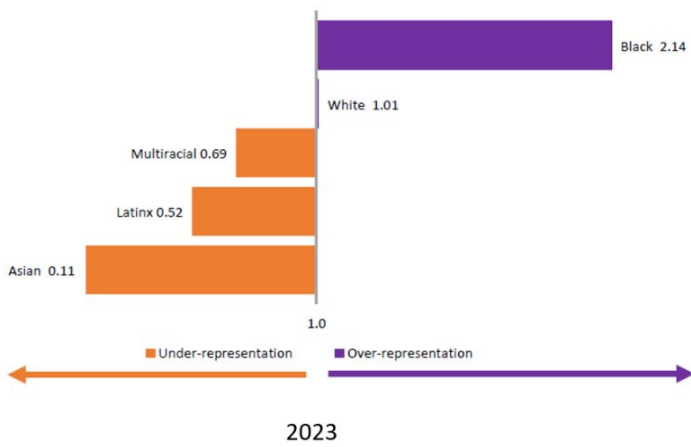
Children Screened by Court



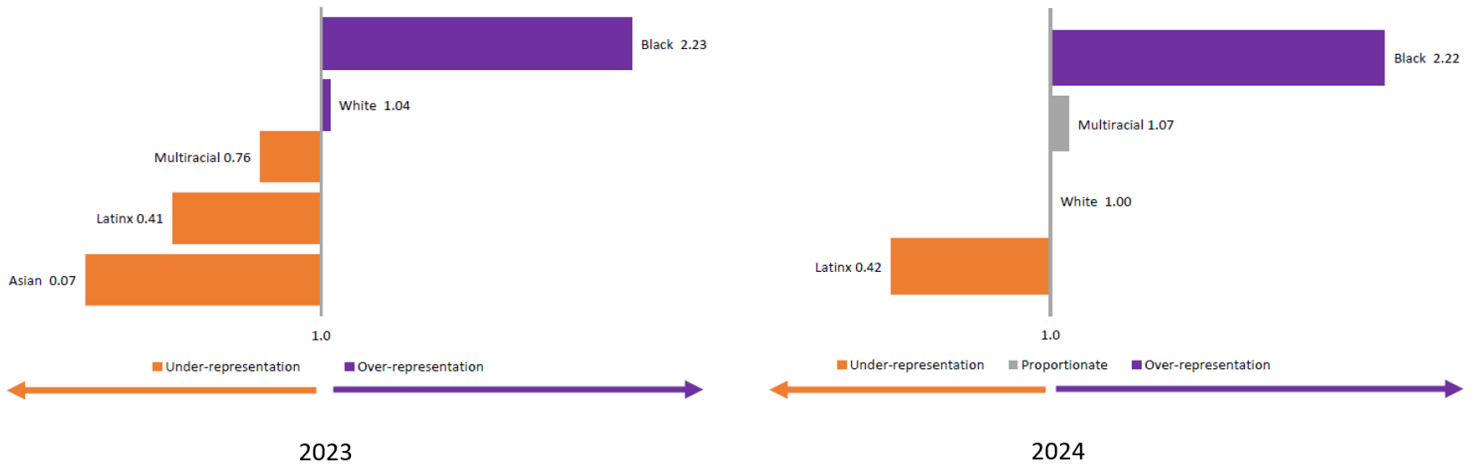
Children in Protective Custody



Children in Safety Plans



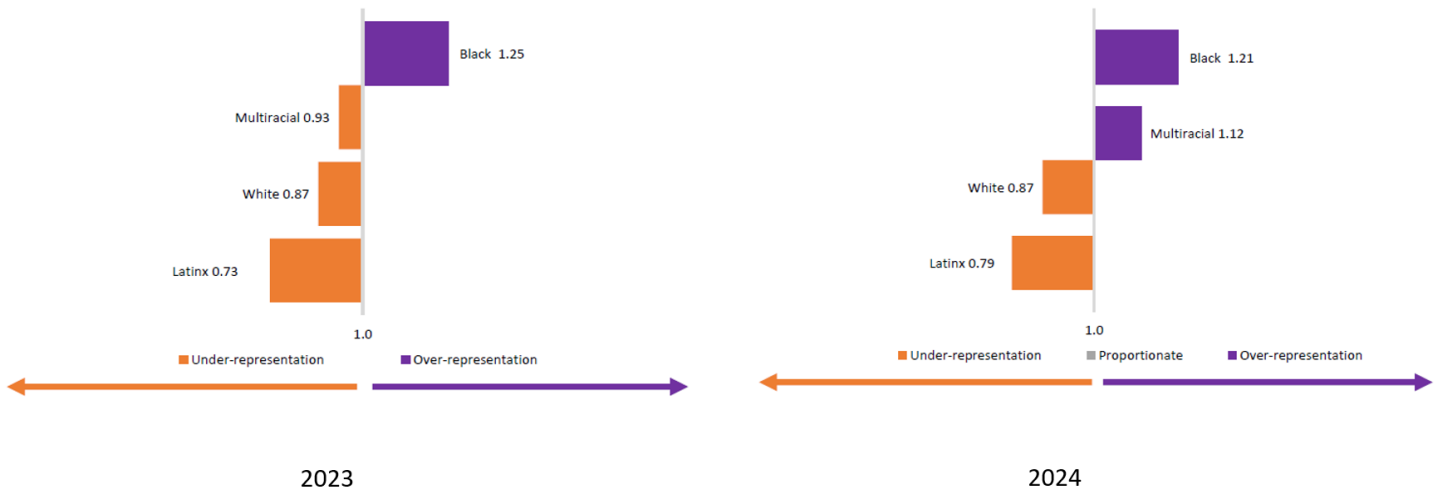
Substitute Care Entries



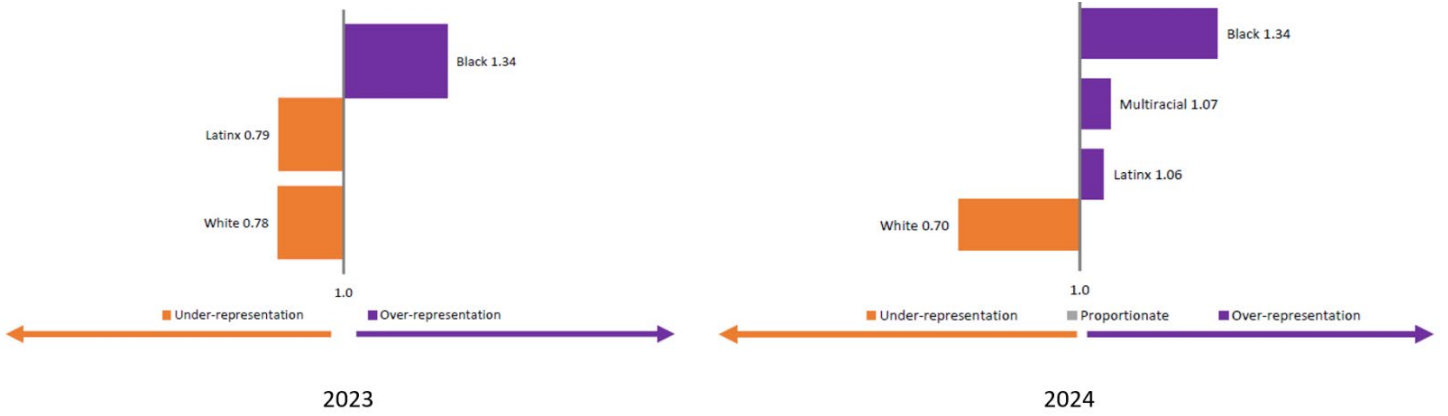
Specialized Foster Care Placements



Congregate Care Placements



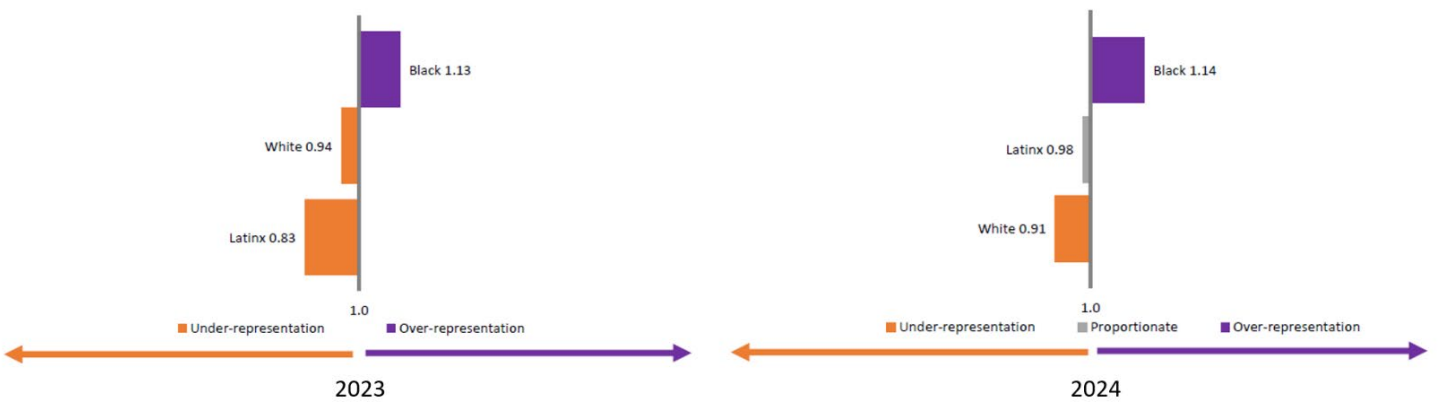
Length of Stay (60 Months or more)



Children who Achieve Permanence



Permanence through Guardianship



African American children are overrepresented at nearly every child welfare decision point, and at the investigation milestone, at over twice their percentage in the Illinois child population. However, as the data above indicates, there has been an incremental decrease at many of the key decision points from FY2023 to FY2024. Specific to the investigation decision points, investigations (2.15 to 2.11), indicated investigations (2.13 to 2.07), screened by court (1.97 to 1.92), safety plans (2.14 to 2.11), and substitute care (2.23 to 2.22) all experienced a decrease in disproportionate overrepresentation. The protective custody decision point (2.25 to 2.30) experienced an increase statewide; however, in areas where there has historically been high disproportionality, there was a decrease, specifically in the northern and central regions of the state.

In addition to the key intake decision points, overrepresentation in restrictive placements of specialized care (1.30 to 1.28) and congregate care (1.25 to 1.21) had also decreased. Youth in care for less than 12 months and up to 47 months are consistently disproportionately underrepresented, proportionate at 47 to 59 months, and overrepresented in care for 60 months or more (1.34). There has been no significant change in the under- or overrepresentation of the length of stay for African American youth in care in the placement continuum.

Finally, at a statewide level, there has been no significant change in the disproportionate underrepresentation of African American children for the permanency decision point (.89) from FY2023 to FY2024. Although African American children are underrepresented in achieving permanency overall, the guardianship decision point (1.13 to 1.14) from FY2023 to FY2024 supports DCFS efforts in keeping families together.

Recommending Strategies

Operating from the four key areas of the Legal System and Its Impact to Youth-in-Care, External Resources and Services that Address Disproportionality, Legislative Impact to African American Families, and DCFS Services to Impact Prevention and Reduce Length of Stay in Foster Care, the Advisory Commission identified 17 recommendations to address the disproportionate and disparate outcomes for African American youth in the care of DCFS. The recommendations and efforts will be discussed for each key area.

Legal System and Its Impact to Youth in Care

- Rec 2: Advisory Commission supports House Resolution 85
- Rec 14: DCFS to coordinate an education protocol for parents navigating the legal system, develop a legal clinic in the Advocacy Office, and develop Family Advocacy Centers to inform parents of their rights.
- Rec 15: DCFS create a policy where parents can submit their independent court report

The Advisory Commission supported HR0085, which addressed the disproportionate length of stay experienced by African American families within the Cook County court system. The resolution called for an in-depth examination of court practices contributing to disproportionality, including delays in adjudication and permanency determinations, extended lengths of stay in care, and the disproportionately low rates of reunification.

Parents currently receive the Parents' Bill of Rights, which outlines their rights and responsibilities. In addition, over the past two years, the DCFS Birth Parent Council developed a Birth Parent Handbook—written from the perspective of parents with lived experience—to provide clearer guidance and practical information for navigating DCFS. The Council prioritized this effort to ensure parents have accessible, transparent resources during their involvement with the system.

To strengthen parents' voices in the legal system, DCFS reported its continued support to advance efforts for pre-petition legal representation, ensuring that parents have access to counsel as early as the investigation stage. While additional research is needed to determine the best model for Illinois, DCFS remains committed to identifying and developing resources that support parents from the very beginning of their case through to case closure.

External Resources & Services Addressing Disproportionality

- Rec 5: Develop a “warm line” that is operated and monitored independently of DCFS
- Rec 6: Enhance the Mandated Reported Training to increase implicit bias awareness
- Rec 10: DCFS funded to facilitate a research project of closed reunification cases to inform system changes
- Rec 12: Institute Promise Programs allowing for tuition enhancements for education and/or trades for parents
- Rec 13: Review of the childcare waiver allotment, and increase 24-hour childcare resources statewide
- Rec 16: Present data review meetings statewide, conducted by an external Illinois partner

In collaboration with DHS, ISBE, IDPH, HFS, DJJ, and the Governor's Office, the Illinois Children's Behavioral Health Transformation Initiative (CBHTI) launched the Behavioral Health Care and Ongoing

Navigation (BEACON) portal—a centralized platform that connects youth and families to vital mental health services. Through the portal, families can access both state agency resources and community-based programs, with dedicated Resource Coordinators available to help parents and guardians navigate options and secure the supports their children need to thrive.

In July 2025, DCFS launched the updated Illinois Mandated Reporter Training, designed to integrate the dual responsibilities of reporting child maltreatment and supporting families. The updated curriculum emphasizes a balanced approach—helping mandated reporters understand not only when to report but also when to connect families with resources that strengthen and stabilize them. New content highlights decision-making strategies to reduce bias, encouraging reporters to make informed, equitable choices. The training also includes a dedicated focus on implicit bias, with modules on understanding how bias operates in child welfare, practical strategies to mitigate it, and the impact of disproportionality on children and families.

In response to legislation directing the Advisory Commission to identify cultural competency training for direct staff, the Commission endorsed DCFS's selection of the University of Maryland's SHARP Training. Representatives from the University of Maryland presented to the Commission, outlining the training's goals and focus on strengthening child and family systems through an equity lens. The Advisory Commission further recommends that ISBE, DHS, and HFS consider the University of Maryland for training, ensuring that the state's human service sister agencies have cultural competency alignment.

DCFS noted that reviewing closed reunification cases may be less effective in identifying barriers to reunification. Instead, a more meaningful approach would be to examine cases where reunification was the initial goal but later shifted to substitute care, as these cases are more likely to reveal the challenges that prevented families from reunifying. The Advisory Commission continues to support the need for the necessary funding that supports DCFS's ability to conduct research around reunification barriers.

External resources and support recommendations provided by the Advisory Commission that remain unaddressed will require further examination of capacity and feasibility, particularly those that extend beyond the scope of DCFS.

Legislative Impact to African American Families

- Rec 7: Modify the statutory language, ensuring guardianship has equal consideration as adoption as a permanency goal

Since the enactment of the Illinois Children and Family Services Act, adoption had long been identified as the sole permanent family arrangement available to children in Illinois. While adoption provides stability for many children, it does not always reflect the unique needs, cultural values, or family dynamics of every child and family. Recognizing this limitation, the statute was amended in June 2023 to also include guardianship as a permanent family arrangement. This change acknowledges that children can thrive in safe, stable, and nurturing homes without necessarily requiring the legal severance of parental rights. By elevating guardianship, Illinois has expanded the menu of permanency options, offering families greater flexibility in creating enduring connections and ensuring that children have lasting relationships and a sense of belonging.

In addition to the changes to the Children and Family Services Act, other legislative changes have occurred that support maintaining family connections, cultural belonging, and parent voice.

In January 2023, the CROWN Act was enacted to protect against hair discrimination, addressing the unique experiences of African American individuals. Building on this progress, HB5097 was introduced to require the development of a hair and skin care plan for youth in care. This legislation is especially significant for children in transracial placements, where caregivers may not be familiar with the cultural importance of hairstyles or the specialized products needed to maintain healthy hair and skin. By ensuring that youth have access to culturally responsive care, this initiative not only promotes dignity and self-esteem but also strengthens the identity and belonging of youth.

The Kinship in Demand Act (KIND), which took effect in July 2025, prioritizes placing children with relatives or fictive kin and establishes a certification process for relatives rather than the traditional foster care licensing pathway. Certified relatives receive the same level of financial support as licensed foster homes, while non-certified relatives receive no less than 90%, ensuring equitable support for kinship caregivers. By allowing DCFS to adopt more flexible standards for certifying relatives who can safely care for children, the Act creates greater opportunities for youth in care to find stability and permanency within their families. The KIND Act represents a landmark advancement in child welfare legislation by elevating the importance of familial and cultural connections in placement decisions. This reform not only accelerates the process of securing safe, stable homes but also expands pathways for African American children—who are disproportionately represented in care—to achieve permanency through guardianship with family members. Equally important, the Act places guardianship on equal footing with adoption, reinforcing the value of kinship ties as a foundation for children’s well-being, stability, and lifelong belonging.

To elevate the voices of parents impacted by the child welfare system, Governor Pritzker signed into law the Child Welfare Disclosure to Parents Act. This landmark legislation establishes a new standard in Illinois child welfare practices by affirming and expanding the rights of parents involved in the system, signaling a significant cultural shift in how child welfare is approached. The Act recognizes that birth and non-custodial parents, when appropriate, play a vital role in decision-making and care planning for their children.

DCFS Services to Impact Prevention & Reduce Length of Stay in Foster Care

- Expand policies to include an assessment and provision of cash assistance to promote stability
- Review practices and procedures to provide remedies that strengthen non-biased decisions; provide alternatives to system involvement; increase permanency with emphasis on Cook County; and increase guardianship for African American children who are unable to return home
- Actively fund, review, and amend PA 101-0237 (Ta’Naja’s Law), requiring collaboration among state agencies to prioritize families identified for a Child Welfare Service Referral
- Expedited process at CMS for hiring, identifying key roles as urgent; CMS/DCFS to collaborate on hiring strategies
- Expand the home visiting model using DHS program model, making HV services available to Intact families; and develop resources for mandated reports to access social service support rather than contact the Hotline

In 2022, DCFS announced its intent to transition from the Child Endangerment Risk Assessment Protocol (CERAP) to the Safety Assessment and Family Evaluation (SAFE) Model for assessing child safety. The SAFE Model is designed to reduce decision-making errors and promote best practices by ensuring consistent, equitable, and culturally responsive assessments. DCFS is currently in Phase II of implementation, moving toward full adoption of the model statewide. As part of this work, changes have already been introduced at the Hotline level, where new practices and procedures are being applied to

strengthen initial safety decisions. As a result, there has been a 33% decrease in the number of new investigations and a 120% increase in Child Welfare Services referrals to preventative services.

DCFS reported that it is actively exploring an alternative response to traditional system involvement and is working to design a model that promotes system deflection. This approach seeks to provide families with timely supports and resources without requiring deeper entry into the child welfare system, thereby reducing unnecessary trauma and preserving family stability. The Advisory Commission strongly supports DCFS’s efforts to develop this alternative response program and will continue to monitor its progress, offering guidance to ensure the model is implemented effectively, equitably, and with the voices of families and communities at the center.

DCFS reported on its two-year participation in a three-year pilot program that provides families with concrete supports aimed at reducing the risk of future child welfare involvement. Families engaged with Intact Family Services in the pilot areas are eligible to participate, receiving resources designed to stabilize households and strengthen family well-being. Research from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign has demonstrated that concrete supports can significantly reduce risk, and at the conclusion of the pilot, the University will provide a full evaluation to assess the program’s effectiveness and inform potential expansion.

DCFS has reported notable growth in permanency outcomes for African American families, with increases in both adoption and guardianship. The tables below highlight the upward trend in permanency achievements from 2020 to the present, reflecting progress toward greater stability and long-term connections for children and families.

Guardianships Completed

by Region and FY - As of September 5, 2025					
Fiscal Year	Central	Cook	Northern	Southern	Grand Total
2020	72	68	64	53	257
2021	83	185	66	65	399
2022	101	163	71	95	430
2023	90	162	77	92	421
2024	153	219	111	107	590
2025	166	245	103	119	633
Grand Total	665	1,042	492	531	2,730

Adoptions Completed

by Region and FY - As of September 5, 2025					
Fiscal Year	Central	Cook	Northern	Southern	Grand Total
2020	533	320	307	353	1,513
2021	599	323	308	452	1,686
2022	666	285	323	438	1,715
2023	771	308	358	511	1,948
2024	814	407	426	547	2,194
2025	922	505	400	670	2,497
Grand Total	4,305	2,148	2,122	2,971	11,553

Since 2020, completed guardianships have increased by 146%, with a 50% increase since 2023. Adoptions have also experienced a 65% increase since 2020, and a 28% increase within the last two fiscal years. The tables and graphs below also indicate increases in both guardianship and adoption relative to African American youth in care. Over the last five fiscal years, guardianship for African American youth increased by nearly 128%, and 36% in the last two years. There have been significant increases for African American youth in the Central and Cook regions,

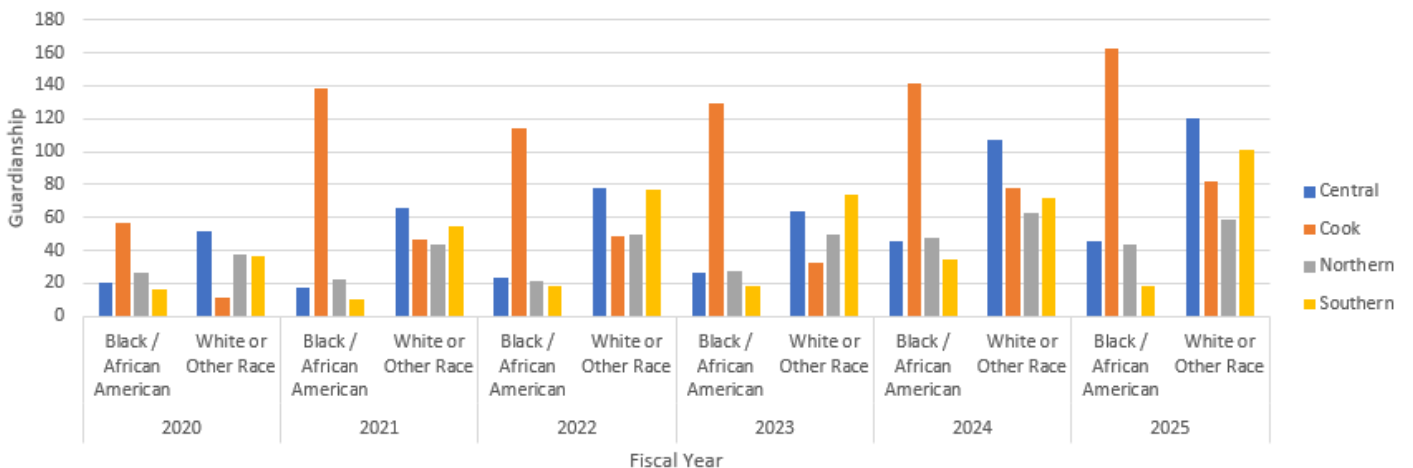
Guardianships Completed

by Region, FY and Race - As of September 5, 2025

Fiscal Year and Race	Central	Cook	Northern	Southern	Grand Total
2020	72	68	64	53	257
Black / African American	20	57	26	16	119
White or Other Race	52	11	38	37	138
2021	83	185	66	65	399
Black / African American	17	138	22	10	187
White or Other Race	66	47	44	55	212
2022	101	163	71	95	430
Black / African American	23	114	21	18	176
White or Other Race	78	49	50	77	254
2023	90	162	77	92	421
Black / African American	26	129	27	18	200
White or Other Race	64	33	50	74	221
2024	153	219	111	107	590
Black / African American	46	141	48	35	270
White or Other Race	107	78	63	72	320
2025	166	245	103	119	633
Black / African American	46	163	44	18	271
White or Other Race	120	82	59	101	362
Grand Total	665	1042	492	531	2730

130% and 186% respectively. The Northern region also experienced a 69% jump in completed guardianships. DCFS supported this effort by expanding its permanency staff to strengthen support for families pursuing guardianship. This increase is helping ensure that guardianship subsidies are completed timely.

Guardianships Completed
by Fiscal Year, Region and Race
FY 2020 - 2025 (YTD)
As of September 5, 2025



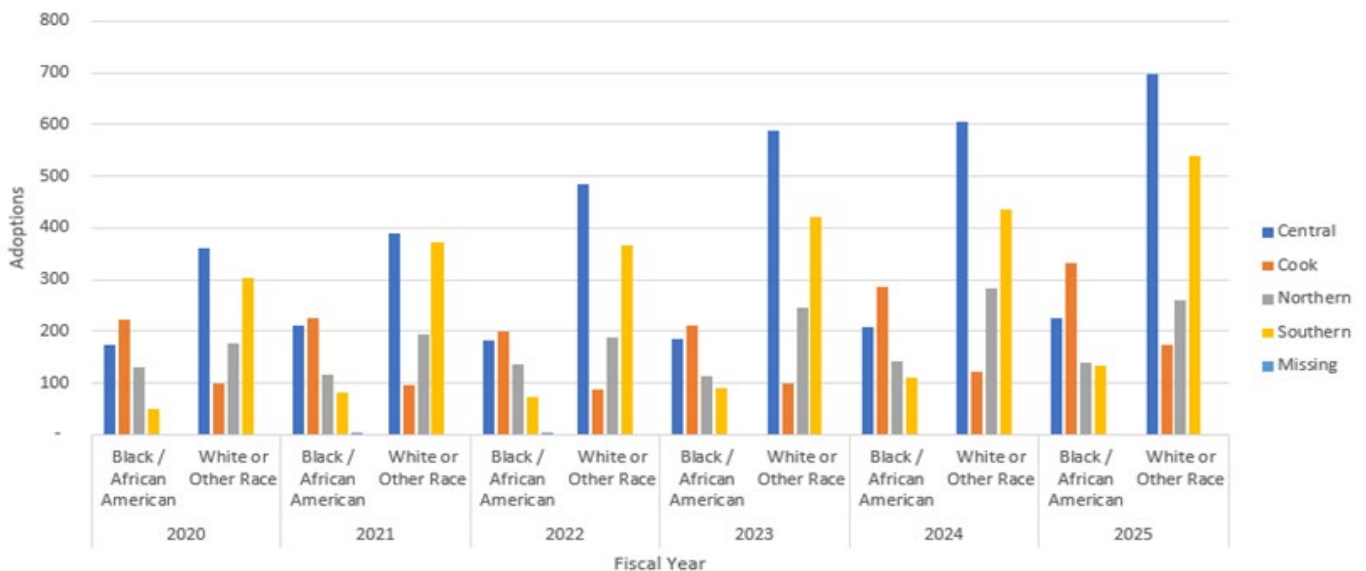
Relative to adoption in the last five years, African American youth experienced a 44% increase, and 38% within the last two. All regions across the state had an increase in completed adoptions; however, the Southern region experienced the most growth with a 159% increase in five years and a 47% increase since 2023.

Adoptions Completed

by Region, FY and Race - As of September 5, 2025

Fiscal Year and Race	Central	Cook	Northern	Southern	Grand Total
2020	533	320	307	353	1,513
Black / African American	172	221	130	51	574
White or Other Race	361	99	177	302	939
2021	599	323	308	452	1,686
Black / African American	210	226	115	80	635
White or Other Race	389	97	193	372	1,051
2022	666	285	323	438	1,715
Black / African American	183	199	135	72	592
White or Other Race	483	86	188	366	1,123
2023	771	308	358	511	1,948
Black / African American	184	210	114	90	598
White or Other Race	587	98	244	421	1,350
2024	814	407	426	547	2,194
Black / African American	209	285	143	111	748
White or Other Race	605	122	283	436	1,446
2025	922	505	400	670	2,497
Black / African American	225	332	139	132	828
White or Other Race	697	173	261	538	1,669
Grand Total	4,305	2,148	2,122	2,971	11,553

Adoptions Completed
by Fiscal Year, Region and Race
FY 2020 - 2025 (YTD)
As of September 5, 2025



DCFS supports ongoing strategies aimed at enhancing permanency for African American families, and with the implementation of the KIND Act, there is a greater emphasis on strengthening kinship placements.

Through a strategic collaboration with CMS, DCFS has expedited hiring and achieved its lowest vacancy rate to date—2.7%. Over the past three years, when CMS vacancies were high, DCFS was prioritized to fill its most critical positions, allowing the agency to stabilize its workforce. DCFS has also expanded recruitment efforts by hosting on-the-spot hiring events and actively participating in job fairs, college fairs, and community events statewide. Since August 2023, these efforts have produced measurable results, including nearly a 20% increase in Investigators, a 40% increase in Placement staff, and a 25% increase in Intact staff—significantly strengthening the agency’s capacity to serve children and families

DCFS has expanded access to its Home Visiting Services program, making these supports available to Intact families for the first time. Currently, home visiting is funded through DHS and ISBE, but discussions are underway about transitioning the program to the newly established Illinois Department of Early Childhood, where services for children ages 0–5 can be more fully coordinated and streamlined. In addition, DCFS has been uplifting the SAFE at Home Model, which—similar to home visiting—provides families with in-home supports aimed at strengthening family stability and preventing foster care entry.

In addition to the above strategies listed, DCFS established collaborative partnerships with other state agencies to develop strategies that support family voice and parent and child well-being through an equity lens.

Illinois Partners for System Transformation—bringing together DCFS, DHS, HFS, ISBE, IDPH, IDOT, and ICOY— aims to define child well-being in a holistic way that goes beyond safety to include stability, health, education, and strong family and community connections. Equally important, the initiative advances human-centered policy and practice by elevating the voices of families and communities most impacted by the child welfare system and embedding their perspectives into decision-making. The goal is to create a child and family well-being system that is proactive rather than reactive, equitable in both access and outcomes, and firmly rooted in the belief that every child and family in Illinois has the right to not only survive, but to thrive.

DCFS has engaged in extensive cross-agency collaboration with IDHS, IDPH, HFS, and ISBE through the Family Recovery Plans Implementation Task Force (led by IDHS) and the Family Care Plan Leadership Team (led by DCFS). Together, these efforts have produced a pilot program, currently operating in three counties during FY2026, that provides a holistic and integrated model of care for pregnant individuals with substance use disorder. The program is designed to coordinate access to Medicaid, mental health and substance use treatment, home visiting programs, economic supports, and early childhood resources, ensuring seamless, personalized care that continues beyond childbirth. This initiative prioritizes addressing the role of implicit bias in the screening, testing, and reporting of BIPOC individuals and their infants—factors that have historically contributed to disproportionate child welfare involvement and family disruption.

Considerations

The Advisory Commission continues its efforts to reduce the overrepresentation of youth in the Illinois child welfare system by examining disproportionality data and developing recommendations that support family preservation, stabilization, and cultural connections for African American families. Meaningful and consistent participation from state agencies and Illinois legislators is crucial for the success of these initiatives. Additional considerations include adding alumni youth to the board, which would require a

statutory change, and transitioning the commission's meetings to a virtual format, in line with recent changes to the Open Meetings Act that allow for remote convening if recommendations are not binding. The Advisory Commission aims to revisit recommendations outlined in the 2023 Report and introduce a new recommendation to enhance service provisions for African American families further.

2023 Recommendations

- **Development of a "Warm Line":** Establish a streamlined support line for families throughout the state, operated independently of DCFS.
- **Promise Programs:** Implement programs that offer tuition enhancements for higher education or trade training for birth parents engaged with the child welfare system.
- **Policy Expansion:** Ensure that family contact with DCFS includes an assessment and provision of cash assistance to address housing stability and other essential family needs.

New Recommendation

- **SHARP Training Implementation:** Secure funding for the SHARP training, ensuring alignment across state agencies (DHS, HFS, ISBE) that serve families.

In conclusion, the Advisory Commission's commitment to these recommendations not only aims to address the unique challenges faced by African American families but also strives to create a more equitable and effective child welfare system that uplifts and empowers all families across Illinois.

Appendix A Advisory Commission 2023 Recommendations

Number 1: To increase Reunifications, it is important that tangible resources are available to parents prior to the actual return of children in their care. Parents are also required to provide the required minimal care when there are court-ordered unsupervised visits that lead to return home.

Recommendation:

All parents or previous guardians of DCFS Youth-in-care who have valid unsupervised visitations as documented per the service plan and working towards the goal of Return Home barring a court order that states otherwise; shall be eligible for Department of Human Services and other state funded services they otherwise would be eligible for if their children were in their care and custody. This recommended policy update is recommended to be added to the existing eligibility requirements.

Number 2: The relevant data from the FY2022 Monitoring Report of the B.H. Consent Decree, the FY2022 Racial Disproportionality Report in response to HB2914 as well as IDCFS data indicates that African American children are overrepresented in that they are placed into substitute care at rates 2 times that of their percentage within the Illinois child population and will remain in care longer than 3 years at three times their representation in the Illinois population. Additionally, in Cook County the average length of stay in care for African American children is 3 ½ years or 42.6 months as of January, 2023 which by comparison exceed every other region statewide.

Recommendation:

The Advisory Commission supports House Resolution 85 which calls for an examination into the Cook County court system around disproportionality, the lengthy court process, i.e., the length of time to adjudication and permanency determinations, the length of stay in care as well as the disproportionate low number of Reunifications.

Number 3: Poverty plays a major role in families being able to meet their needs. Families that interact with IDCFS are disproportionately poor and/or have low-income levels. A small percentage of system impacted families receive public assistance; however, cash assistance is vital in making sure that our most vulnerable at-risk populations are supported whenever applicable. IDCFS data indicates a continual increase in its utilization of Norman Funding with a total expenditure of \$38,304,421.78 for FY2022 of which 41.58% was paid out in support of African American families.

Recommendation:

DCFS will continue and expand its policies in such a way that ensures that all types of family contact with IDCFS includes an assessment and provision of cash assistance to meet needs that promote housing stability and other minimal family needs. Cash assistance is a viable tool to assist families in need. This service consideration shall include, but is not limited to, Investigations, Child Welfare referrals, Intact Family service programs or in instances of Family Reunification. An open IDCFS shall not prohibit a family from receiving this service if engaged by IDCFS during its existing and future program array.

Number 4: The high cost of housing and the disproportionate low-income levels of families served by IDCFS requires an aggressive mechanism of support and a bridge to self-sufficiency for parents. Poor families suffer from additional barriers to housing such as credit worthiness guidelines, inconsistent housing history, inconsistent employment, and a disproportionate experience with discriminatory housing practices. We must address these barriers in an urgent and concrete way to combat the number one obstacle parents face when seeking reunification. It is recognized that IDCFS currently has cash assistance programs, housing advocacy programs and multiple Memorandums of Understandings with Housing Authorities statewide, all of which must be increased to support families seeking reunification and reduce the length of stay in care.

Recommendations:

- 1. It is recommended that IDCFS develop and receive legislative funding for an innovative pilot housing assistance program in four areas throughout the state of Illinois in which there are disproportionate numbers of African American youth in care. IDCFS shall partner with agencies who specialize in housing assistance.**
 - 2. This Housing Assistance Program will be specific to biological parents who are seeking and receive court approved reunification.**
 - 3. This Housing Assistance Program will provide 18- 24 months of housing subsidy support that will have a gradually decrease in subsidy support beginning 6 months after Reunification.**
 - 4. Such a pilot shall include housing advocacy and educational support to parents throughout the twenty-four (24) months period.**
 - 5. This Housing Assistance Program shall be evaluated by an external entity for the purposes of recommendations to strengthen the program and further expansion statewide.**
 - 6. The suggested areas or counties include Cook, East St Louis, Peoria, and Will County. However, the final area selections should receive further study.**
 - 7. IDCFS and Illinois government officials continue to expand and/or create HUD public housing opportunities for Illinois families.**
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Number 5: The overrepresentation of African American children in the IL Child Welfare System is introduced at the IDCFS Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline as a disproportionate percentage of these calls involve African American children. Per the FY2022 Monitoring Report of the B.H. Consent Decree, African Americans are reported to the Hotline at a rate of twice their current representation in the Illinois population. Illinois families are resilient and, with the proper resources in place, will seek out support when needed. Illinois must adopt a robust statewide network of services and coordination to support families in need. Being the subject of an IDCFS call to the hotline should not be the avenue that an interested citizen must use to meet a concrete need for a family. Most of the calls to the IDCSF hotline are of a neglect concern.

Recommendations:

- 1. Therefore, it is recommended that instead of the IDCFS Hotline that a “Warm Line” for families shall be developed and organized to streamline support options for parents throughout the state. It is recommended that this state run “Warm Line “operate outside of IDCFS so that families and mandated reporters can call a help line versus calling the IDCFS Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline.**
 - 2. It is recommended that this service be housed at the Department of Human Services as many of the state funded support programs are housed in that agency. It shall be required to operate 24 hours/7 days a week and provide timely responses.**
 - 3. It is recommended that a state-wide network (portal) be developed with a mandatory requirement that all State entities and services be connected and engaged for purposes of information sharing and awareness of the full range of systems a family is involved with. Equally important is the increased knowledge of available services throughout the state of Illinois.**
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Number 6: Mandated Reporter Training – In FY21 and FY22, 67-69% of the mandated reporters were human service professionals and/or others in a helping profession.

Recommendations:

1. It is recommended that there shall be increased training conducted on a semi-annual basis that includes but is not limited to racial disproportionality, the impact of family preservations services as well as the urgency to achieve permanency.
 2. It is recommended that the Mandated Reporter Training be enhanced to increase an awareness of implicit bias. It is recommended that there be a separate and distinct implicit bias training for Mandated Reporters. This training shall include a required impact analysis component for purposes of identifying trends and means for improvement.
 3. It is further recommended that this training include race informed decision-making processes specific to the professional's line of sight work. (First Responder, Teacher, Medical)
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Number 7: Per Section 2-28 Court Review, paragraph (E) of the Juvenile Court Act Juvenile Court Act, "*(E) The guardianship of the minor will be transferred to an individual or couple on a permanent basis provided that goals (A) through (D) have been deemed inappropriate and not in the child's best interests. The court shall confirm that the Department has discussed adoption, if appropriate, and guardianship with the caregiver prior to changing a goal to guardianship.*"

Additionally, the Children and Family Resource Center at UIUC conducted research on the use of Guardianship for Black and White youth that concluded that the use of guardianship is proportionate for groups, however, its total utilization is only 2% of permanencies statewide (Reunification, Adoption or Guardianship).

Sixty five percent (65%) of Illinois youth in foster care are placed with relatives or fictive kin. African American relatives and fictive kin, in many instances, prefer guardianship rather than termination of the parental rights of their family members. Additionally, there is no definitive data that concludes guardianships are any less stable for Illinois youth versus adoption when reunification is deemed unattainable.

Recommendations:

1. **Modify and/or further clarify the statutory language with regards to guardianship as a permanency option as measurable change has not yet been achieved since the initial amendment. The implication is that the updated language is not strong enough to ensure adoption is not required to be ruled out before guardianship can be considered. The Illinois Courts needs definitive guidance to increase the use of Guardianship as a viable permanency option that maintains family connections.**
2. It is recommended that Paragraph (E) of Section 2-28 Court Review of the Juvenile Court Act be amended to include guardianship as a permanency goal equally with adoption when goals (A) through (C) are deemed inappropriate or not in the child's best interest as provided as follows:

"(E) The guardianship of the minor will be transferred to an individual or couple on a permanent basis provided that goals (A) through (D) have been deemed inappropriate and not in the child's best interests. The court shall confirm that the Department has discussed adoption, if appropriate, and guardianship with the caregiver prior to changing a goal to guardianship."

Recommended Amendment

(E) The guardianship of the minor will be transferred to an individual or couple on a permanent basis as a permanency goal. The court shall confirm that the Department has discussed guardianship with the caregiver prior to changing a goal to guardianship.

No other goal has the same requirement of "deemed inappropriate" contingent for permanency. Additionally, this consideration by the courts will allow staff to pursue the best interest of the child.

Number 8: The number of youths being reported to the IDCFS Hotline has increased in recent months. Disproportionality begins at this initial encounter with IDCFS and carries through the investigative and intake process for youth in care. Prevention programming in Child Welfare referrals is increasing as well. Illinois Permanency achievement in FY20- FY23 has demonstrated a trend toward an increase in the overall number of permanencies achieved but remains low and requires improvement. The Illinois Cook County permanency data suggests an even greater need for improvement. DCFS shall review and institute changes that will increase efficiency in the processes and ultimate achievement in Reunification and all forms of alternate permanency options, specifically Guardianship.

Recommendations:

IDCFS shall annually report to this committee all efforts, strategies, and outcomes to:

- 1. Review practices and procedures during the investigative process and provide practice remedies that strengthen non-biased decisions.**
 - 2. Provide alternatives to IDCFS involvement and program data on Child Welfare referrals.**
 - 3. Increase permanency achievement for African American children in furtherance of reducing the length of stay in care and preventions services for Illinois children statewide; with an emphasis on Cook County.**
 - 4. Increase the use of Guardianship for African American children who are unable to return home.**
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Number 9: Public Act 101-0237 officially named Ta’Naja’s Law requires that when a State Central Registry Call Floor Worker (Hotline) receives information from a mandated reporter and the information reported to the Hotline does not meet the requirements under the Abused and Neglected Child Reporting Act (ANCRA) for an investigation, and there is a prior indicated report of abuse or neglect, or there was a prior open service case involving any member of the household, a Child Welfare referral will be completed. This brief 30-day service period allows families to be linked to a community-based service with further involvement with IDCFS. The need for community-based resources is critical to prevent a future child abuse neglect finding. This program is truly preventative in nature.

The following data suggests that the number of families served in this capacity is increasing at a rapid rate:

FY18: 6,005

FY19: 5,531

FY20: 9,014

FY21: 14,242

FY22: 16,639

FY23: 16,462

FY24: 1,394 total intake evaluations of those 1,170 were for preventive services (Data from July 1, 2023 thru August 11, 2023)

Recommendations:

- 1. This legislatively mandated prevention program shall be actively funded to serve this ever-increasing caseload and its corresponding resource needs.**
- 2. Public Act 101-0237 shall be reviewed and amended in such a way that require increased collaboration amongst state funded agencies as a resource for these families who are on the cusp of increased involvement with child welfare services in Illinois.**

3. **Families identified as in need of a Child Welfare Referral receive priority status with all state funded agencies and receives immediate and priority status for a service referral within the thirty-day (30) service window.**
 4. **Utilize Child Welfare Referrals as a bridge to services in the aforementioned “Warm Line” recommendation.**
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Number 10: The barriers to reunification need to be reviewed with corresponding action recommendations.

Recommendation:

It is recommended that IDCFS shall be funded to facilitate such a research project of closed reunification cases. The intent of this data is to research and analyze data regarding reunification specifically, to inform system change.

Number 11: The IDCFS mandate is critical. There must be an urgent and planful strategy to meet the staffing demands of IDCFS at all levels. Central Management Services plays a key role in supporting IDCFS.

Recommendations:

1. **There shall be expedited processes at Central Management Services for IDCFS hiring.**
 2. **Key direct services positions and leadership positions shall be earmarked in such a category that promotes urgency for filling such vacancies.**
 3. **Central Management Service and IDCFS shall collaborate on strategies that increase hiring efficiencies and benchmark future performance against previous years hiring trends.**
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Number 12: Poverty and employment opportunities will assist families with concrete supports that enable family well-being to reach its highest levels. Supporting educational access for IDCFS involved parents, similarly to current programs that are available for older youth in foster care has a direct link to family self-sufficiency. This support includes but is not limited to traditional programs but also include trade, vocational or skill training.

Recommendation:

The Subcommittee recommends Promise Programs that allow for tuition enhancements for higher education or trade programs for birth parents that are involved with the child welfare system.

Number 13: Per IDCFS data in FY2022, approximately 12% of the indicated findings for abuse and neglect were for inadequate supervision, specific to an inadequate caregiver or being left alone without supervision. There were well over 30,000 allegations of this type pertaining to African American Families alone. Many African American parents are employed in industries that have non-traditional work schedules or unable to afford quality childcare.

Recommendations:

1. **It is recommended that the current childcare waiver allotment be reviewed for the purposes of expanded childcare waivers being granted for cases that are reported to SCR for specific allegations, such as inadequate supervision.**
 2. **Specifically, at the time a hotline call is made, and contact occurs with the family, there is an option for diversion if supervision is ruled as the critical protective factor that requires action for addressing risk/safety.**
 3. **Increased funding support and development of statewide 24 Hours childcare resources to support working low-income parents.**
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Number 14: Parent education regarding the IDCFS process and the Juvenile Court System is a situational process in which there is not a specific set of information disseminated to all parents.

Recommendations:

- 1. IDCFS coordinate the development of an educational protocol to assist parents with navigating the legal system and promote the service responsibilities of the agency that is voluntary in nature. This information shall include written and pre-recorded virtual trainings and shall be accessible in various languages. This information will be disseminated to parents at the onset of case openings and designated meetings (Administrative Case Reviews). Such information dissemination shall also include the use of web links, QR Codes and open display in IDCFS offices and community provider contracted agencies. This information will also include key information that a court will consider when reviewing a parent's progress. Additionally, IDCFS shall engage in an informational campaign for purposes of disseminating this information in multiple places statewide including but not limited to Family Advocacy Centers.**
- 2. IDCFS will further develop the existing Family Advocacy Centers to provide in-person consultations for purposes of informing parents of their rights and providing a step-by-step demonstration of the court process.**
- 3. Per the Advisory Commission's charge to develop child welfare policies and practices that advance more equitable outcomes for African American children, it is recommended that parents be afforded an opportunity for referral to a legal clinic and or IDCFS develop a specific support in their Advocacy office. The legal clinics or IDCFS Advocacy offices shall be available statewide and shall, in addition to other duties, provide information to families that guides them through the investigatory process, and keep parents informed of their rights and responsibilities throughout the process.**
- 4. Established peer advocates for parents that aid in the accomplishment for achieving housing, education, and childcare for a specified timeframe. It is recommended that each recommendation accepted/realized should have an educational pathway and mentorship opportunities for parents to support success. This shall include identified community partners that will serve as a liaison of sorts without there being a mandate to contact the department (as applicable). These should be offered further upstream without mandates for involvement with IDCFS and/or an indicated finding.**

Number 15: Parents have a voice in juvenile court proceedings.

Recommendation:

It is recommended that IDCFS create and/or update practice in policy that allows for Parent/Family Court Reporting. IDCFS shall develop a guide, similarly to the court reports utilized by IDCFS in which parents may submit to the court before or during court hearings on their progress and/or deficiencies upon advice of counsel. This recommendation and information shall not be expected to supersede a parent's right to and adhere to guidance from their legal counsel. This shall not be a mandatory requirement for a parent.

Number 16: The data presented in the FY2022 Monitoring Report of the B.H. Consent Decree and the FY2022 Racial Disproportionality Report in response to HB2914 regarding disproportionality, the State Central Registry, Length of Stay In Care and prevention programs is key to informing the Illinois Juvenile Justice system. The data reported to the legislature by external university partners is critical, informative and provides a road map on strengths and challenges. Current trends and analyses are critical for the Juvenile Court to address and implement due process for families. Critical information must have a consistent path for distribution and analysis.

Recommendations:

- 1. Data review meetings should occur statewide. It is recommended that statewide court "data review" meetings be mandated and conducted on at quarterly or biannual basis.**
- 2. The meetings shall be held by county and/or by clusters of counties within a region/area.**

- 3. It is recommended that such meetings be conducted by external informed Illinois partners who are reviewing this data on a regular basis. The meetings will create opportunities for the Department to present the data & discuss possible solutions to reducing the disproportionality within the respective regions or area.**
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Number 17: The federal Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program is an established proven service that supports a pregnant or recent parent(s) during this stressful period. IDCFS fully supports Public Act 103-0498 which establishes the DHS Home Visiting Program to support communities, promote family well-being and provide evidence-based preventive services. The DHS Home Visiting Program shall serve as a guide to increase its usage and shall be a developed resource for non-system involved families as well as IDCFS involved families.

Recommendations:

- 1. Expand the home visiting support for families impacted by multiple barriers using the DHS Home Visiting program as a guide. Home visiting shall be offered as a preventive service and shall be available and accessible at the local clinic level throughout Illinois.**
- 2. Intact families involved with DCFS shall also be eligible for Home Visiting services.**
- 3. There shall be a specific review and comprehensive Home Visiting plan that encompasses the state of Illinois; thus, increasing true prevention resources. This resource will provide mandated reporters with a method to acquire social service support outside of the parameters of a call to the DCFS hotline.**