

PRACTICE NOTES

For North Carolina's Child Welfare Workers

From the NC Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program

Volume 29, Number 2
May 2026

This publication for child welfare professionals is produced by the North Carolina Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program, part of the University of North Carolina School of Social Work.

In summarizing research, we try to give you new ideas for refining your practice. However, this publication is not intended to replace child welfare training, regular supervision, or peer consultation, only to enhance them.

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Partnering with Courts to Improve Timely Permanence



In North Carolina's child welfare system, permanence is defined as a mutually committed, lasting, nurturing, and legally secure relationship between a child or youth and at least one adult. County child welfare agencies must make concerted efforts to achieve permanence for children and youth in a timely manner. What "timely" means can vary because specific timeframes must be met for young people based on their permanent plans:

"Timeliness" as defined by the Permanent Plan	
Child's Permanent Plan	Permanence Within
Reunification	12 Months
Guardianship/Custody	18 Months
Adoption	24 Months

Of course, even the most skilled and well-supported social worker cannot control the pace or timelines of a child's legal case. The truth is that timely permanence is not achievable without partnerships between child welfare and the courts. Admittedly, partnering with another system is not always easy — the courts have their own procedures and mandates

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that do not always align perfectly with those of the child welfare system. But the systems also have shared goals: no one wants children to linger in foster care unnecessarily.

We cannot achieve timely permanence without partnerships with the courts.

To help identify and remove barriers to permanence, child welfare professionals and their agencies must continuously and actively partner with parents, judges, attorneys, Guardians ad Litem, clerks, and others. This issue of Practice Notes includes tips from a county where court/child welfare partnerships are successful, suggestions for writing strong court reports, an update on efforts to make NC courts more trauma-informed, and more.

North Carolina's Court Improvement Program

Many child welfare professionals in North Carolina have heard about Safe Babies Courts and the Interdisciplinary Parent Representation Program. These efforts, which aim to enhance outcomes for parents and children involved with child welfare, are supported by a common source: North Carolina's Court Improvement Program (CIP). Courts and child welfare agencies share the same mission — ensuring children achieve safety, permanency, and well-being — and CIP plays an important role in improving how courts handle child abuse and neglect cases.

North Carolina's CIP began in 1995. Federal grant funding is authorized for states to support the CIP to improve court practices for child abuse, neglect, and dependency cases. The purpose of the CIP is to: (1) promote the continuous quality improvement of court processes and legal representation in child welfare proceedings through ongoing data analysis, assessment, interventions, and training, and (2) enhance and expand collaboration to improve outcomes between the judicial branch of state government, the state child welfare agency, and tribes.

Nationally, CIP is expected to support the implementation of three projects that will improve safety, permanency, and well-being:

1. A joint project with the state child welfare agency that will improve outcomes
2. A quality court hearing project, ensuring due process rights for children and parents
3. A quality legal representation project, increasing and improving engagement of

families in child welfare cases

North Carolina's CIP Selected Supported Projects

Safe Babies Courts (Joint Project)

[Safe Babies Court \(SBC\)](#) is an evidence-based approach that targets families with children ages 5 and under who are in foster care and at risk of removal. It connects babies, toddlers, and their families involved in child welfare court with intensive support and services designed to promote healthy child development while working to ensure a safe and timely exit from foster care. There are frequent judicial status conferences and family team meetings to provide additional oversight and ensure the family's needs are met, and that the case is not lingering in the court system.

The North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts (NCAOC), in partnership with the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS), has worked with local stakeholders, including district court judges and local child welfare agencies, to implement SBC in pilot sites. You can read more about New Hanover County's experience in a previous Practice Notes article, [The Safe Babies Court Program: A Model for Collaborative, Family-Centered Child Welfare](#). Additionally, for updated information within this publication, click [here](#).

Abuse, Neglect, Dependency, and Termination of Parental Rights Manual and Online Training (Quality Court Hearing Project)

The primary purpose of the manual is to

provide easily accessible information on laws, procedures, and practices that apply to child welfare proceedings. It is meant to be a useful and reliable reference manual and training tool for judges, social services attorneys, parents' attorneys, guardian ad litem attorney advocates, and others involved in child welfare. The manual combines applicable statutes, relevant case citations, additional resources, and practical explanations for topics. Click the [Abuse, Neglect, Dependency, and Termination of Parental Rights Manual](#) to review it.

Online training was designed to provide the same information as in-person training offered by the CIP Training Workgroup and its partners for new child welfare judges and attorneys. By moving to an online format, training can be offered on demand. Online training can also be beneficial for seasoned attorneys who need a refresher and other legal community stakeholders who practice or participate in the child welfare system. Click the [NC Child Welfare Court Online Training](#) to learn more.

Update on NC's Safe Babies Court Partnership

Delays in children's permanency can have lasting impacts on early brain development, attachment, and long-term well-being. Achieving timely permanence requires intentional collaboration between child welfare agencies and the courts. Recognizing this shared responsibility, North Carolina's Safe Babies Court (SBC) initiative offers a collaborative court process designed to support families early, reduce barriers, and move cases forward with transparency and purpose.

Safe Babies Court is best understood as a **process, not a program** — one that brings courts, child welfare, attorneys, Guardians ad Litem, parents, and community partners together around the common goal of timely and developmentally informed permanence. In April 2025, Practice Notes introduced SBC in the article [The Safe Babies Court Program: A Model for Collaborative, Family-Centered Child Welfare](#). This article is an update on this successful collaborative effort.

Collaborative Alignment

According to SBC's State Director, Polly Handrahan, and State Coordinator Jadie

Interdisciplinary Parent Representation Program (Quality Legal Representation Project)

The Office of the Parent Defender (OPD) is implementing the Interdisciplinary Representation Program (IRP) for North Carolina. Experienced social workers are paired with parent attorneys to strengthen the legal representation of parents involved in child welfare. Social workers promote parent engagement, an understanding of the child welfare process, and connect parents with services tailored to meet their needs. OPD seeks to enhance parent representation, reduce time in foster care, and achieve permanency faster. You can read more about Buncombe County's experience in a previous Practice Notes article, [New Program Adds Social Workers to Some Parents' Legal Teams](#). Additionally, for updated information within this publication, click [here](#).

For more information about the Court Improvement Program, visit the [CIP website](#) or contact the Court Improvement Program Manager, [Kiesha Crawford](#).

Baldwin-Hamm, Safe Babies Court was designed to align with established child welfare and court processes. The model recognizes that timely permanence cannot be achieved by one system alone, and that achieving permanence requires strong partnerships, shared data, and a willingness to step out of silos.

Implementation of SBC typically takes four to six months and incorporates principles from Zero to Three, ACEs-informed (adverse childhood experiences) practice, and trauma-informed care. SBC's preparation phase helps ensure that court

Current SBC Counties (March 2026)

Safe Babies Court is currently operating in:

- Avery
- Brunswick
- Durham
- McDowell
- Mitchell
- New Hanover
- Rutherford
- Watauga
- Yancey

Funding is secured until June 2027 through the Dogwood Health Trust and The Duke Endowment.

professionals, child welfare staff, and community partners share a common understanding of child development, trauma, and how these factors influence both family engagement and court decision-making.

While SBC is still new — having started in NC in 2023 — Handrahan notes that partners are increasingly seeing how the process benefits everyone involved, especially families. The shift toward a less adversarial, more problem-solving court environment has helped build trust and improve communication across systems.

Core Components

Safe Babies Court includes three core components that directly support timely permanence by improving coordination, transparency, and shared accountability.

1. Active Community Teams

One of the most impactful components of Safe Babies Court is the Active Community Team. A multidisciplinary group of judges, DSS staff, attorneys, GALs, community coordinators, mental health providers, early intervention specialists, and parent partners, the team works to identify available services, uncover gaps, and improve coordination among providers. Community coordinators gather and share

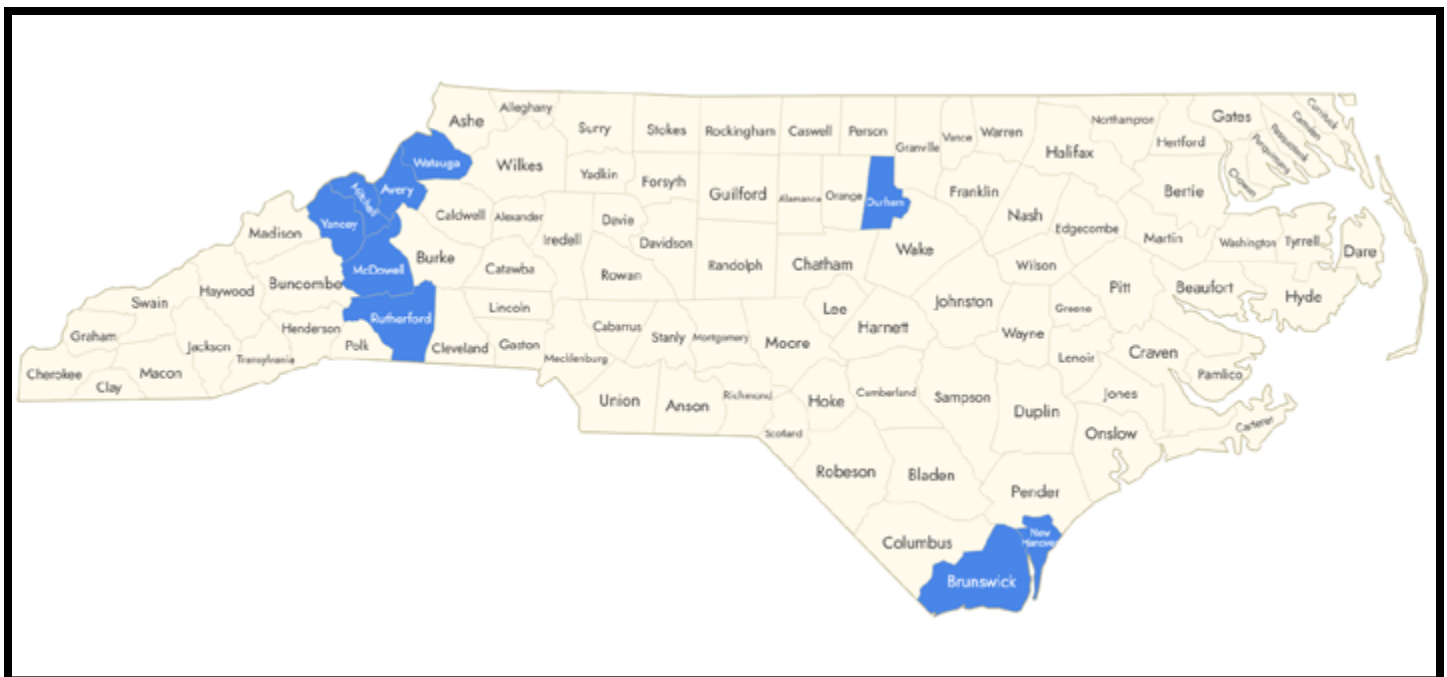
information about local resources not only for SBC cases, but for all cases — including criminal court and juvenile court cases — helping to support the broader system.

In western North Carolina, for example, Active Community Teams collaborated with transportation providers across five counties to better understand scheduling challenges. Providers explained the logistical realities of operating in mountainous areas, such as the need to return vehicles before dark. This dialogue led to more realistic scheduling and improved communication, helping to reduce unnecessary barriers for families.

Active Community Teams in the region are also increasing the capacity of mental health providers to engage families. Providers noted that the involvement of families living in the mountains sometimes fell off after the initial contact. To address this issue, Active Community Teams are offering training about engaging Appalachian families to providers, caseworkers, and community partners.

2. Site Implementation Teams

Each Safe Babies Court site has a team that oversees implementation and later evolves into a leadership team. These Site Implementation Teams typically include parent attorneys,



Participating SBC Counties, March 2026

Guardians ad Litem, DSS staff, and other court partners.

The team reviews data together, discusses court processes, and asks critical questions such as: Are time standards being met? Where are cases getting stuck? What does the data tell us about our progress toward timely permanence? This shared review supports continuous quality improvement and helps break down silos between systems.

In Brunswick County, the Site Implementation Team takes collaboration a step further by visiting different service providers. This allows court and child welfare partners to better understand available services, potential barriers, and service quality. As a result, conversations with parents in court are more informed and meaningful, and recommendations are grounded in firsthand knowledge.

3. Judicial Status Conferences

One feature unique to NC's Safe Babies Court is how judicial status conferences are held. These conferences move discussions out of the formal courtroom — judges come off the bench and sit alongside parents. The conversation is parent-led, focusing on progress and needs.

While the frequency of conferences may initially feel like additional work, Baldwin-Hamm emphasized that they often reduce work later. Because these conferences are not formal hearings, no additional court reports are required. This reinforces a less adversarial approach. Conferences have led to reduced time spent waiting in court, benefiting both families and child welfare caseworkers.

Implications for Child Welfare Practice

Safe Babies Court has important implications for child welfare practice. Rather than adding tasks, it supports caseworkers by strengthening partnerships and lightening the load. Local SBC coordinators work alongside child welfare staff, helping make connections to resources, communicating with collaterals, and engaging stakeholders. This shared responsibility helps everyone work together more efficiently instead of working in silos.

Transparency plays a key role. Family Team Meeting notes are shared with all partners,

ensuring everyone understands the plan, progress, and barriers. As a result, SBC cases move more quickly since everyone is informed of progress along the way.

Handrahan noted the overarching goal of SBC is to support child development by reaching permanence as early as possible. While reunification remains a priority, timely permanence also includes guardianship or adoption when reunification is not possible. Even in those circumstances, the SBC process emphasizes supporting parents, strengthening shared parenting, and creating a positive support plan that can promote healing and better outcomes for children or sibling groups.

Current Status and Looking Ahead

Safe Babies Court is currently operating in Avery, Brunswick, Durham, McDowell, Mitchell, New Hanover, Rutherford, Watauga, and Yancey counties. Funding is secured until June 2027 through the Dogwood Health Trust and The Duke Endowment, with ongoing efforts to build long-term sustainability.

At present, approximately 100 families with 130 children are enrolled statewide. Fourteen cases have already reached permanence, including ten reunifications, three guardianships, and one adoption — all placements with family members.

As the initiative moves forward, child welfare system data and geographic considerations will be used to guide thoughtful expansion. The long-term vision is statewide availability that leverages local resources while maintaining fidelity to the Safe Babies Court model.

For more information on Safe Babies Court, [watch a short video](#) or contact [Polly Handrahan](#) or [Jadie Baldwin-Hamm](#).

North Carolina's Court Improvement Program

In 2021, Chief Justice of the NC Supreme Court, Paul Newby, established the Chief Justice Task Force on ACEs-Informed Courts (TFAC). This initiative, supported by the Bolch Judicial Institute at Duke Law School and the North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts, aimed to educate judicial officials on trauma-informed approaches to improve outcomes for individuals involved in the court system. Members of the task force included judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, clerks, law enforcement, private attorneys, child advocates, and academic researchers. TFAC's mission was to help judicial branch stakeholders understand the impact of ACEs (adverse childhood experiences and adverse community environments) on children, and to develop strategies to address these impacts within the court system.

Task Force Accomplishments

The task force achieved the following by the time its work concluded in December 2023:

- The [ACEs-Informed Courts Bench Card](#) was created to guide trauma-informed courtroom interactions, procedures, and considerations.
- [Two advanced certifications](#), one in child welfare and one in juvenile justice, were developed for district court judges in collaboration with the UNC School of Government.
- The Bolch Judicial Institute's [Trauma-Informed Court](#) program at Duke University School of Law piloted educational efforts for judges, court administrators, and counsel on ACEs and related issues.
- A free, on-demand, trauma-informed training was launched in the NC Administrative Office of the Courts Learning Center for all judicial branch employees.
- A six-hour trauma-informed training course for new district court judges is now available as part of their required training.
- Instructional booklets to help [children who are going to court](#) and [youth who attend court](#) gain a better understanding and process their experience within a North Carolina courthouse were developed in collaboration

with the UNC School of Government.

- The [Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument \(YASI\) Bench Card](#), a risk, needs, and strengths assessment, was created for justice-involved youth to measure risk of recidivism and develop service plans.
- [Safe Babies Courts](#), designed for infants and toddlers to exit the child welfare court system more quickly into safe, nurturing, and permanent homes, began piloting in five North Carolina locations in 2023.
- TFAC issued a [final report](#) that includes recommendations for sustaining and expanding trauma informed court practices and emphasizes continued stakeholder engagement and systemwide integration.

(North Carolina Judicial Branch, n.d.)

Impact in Judicial District 29

To understand the local impact of these

efforts, Practice Notes interviewed Judge Beth Tanner, District Court Judge for Moore and Hoke counties. In 2023, when trauma training became mandatory for all new judges, Judge Tanner participated in the first cohort.



District Court Judge Beth Tanner

She described the training as essential, noting that it introduced concepts and language she had not encountered while practicing law.

Judge Tanner pursued additional professional development and is scheduled to complete all three juvenile court certifications by the end of 2026. These courses significantly influenced her judicial practice and fostered a supportive community of judges who shared experiences, resources, and strategies. Setting clear expectations, using trauma informed language, and intentionally creating trauma responsive offices and courtrooms are approaches she learned about during the certification process and has found particularly effective in her courtroom.

Setting Expectations

Uncertainty and prolonged waiting in courtrooms often heighten anxiety, particularly for individuals with trauma histories. To reduce this stress, Judge Tanner plans out her juvenile court hearings which are always held on Fridays by holding virtual planning meetings the preceding Monday with attorneys, Guardians ad Litem, social workers and the juvenile clerk. These planning meetings allow the group to identify cases requiring continuances due to crises occurring within the family, prioritize scheduling based on school and family needs, and provide families with clearer expectations about when to appear in court.

Using Trauma-Informed Language

Judge Tanner incorporates language from the ACEs Informed Courts Bench Card into her courtroom practice. She clearly explains the purpose of hearings, what participants can expect, and when breaks can be taken. For example, “We are going to talk about some really hard things today, and one of those things is about whether we can continue to pursue reunifying you with your daughter. Please let me know if you need a break, and we will take a break.” Judge Tanner says acknowledging emotions in a genuine, nonjudgmental manner, such as naming visible frustration or distress, is extremely important.

Judge Tanner also shared an example in which acknowledgment and affirmation made a difference with one birth mother. She helped this mother recognize that acknowledging she was not in a place to both address her sobriety and adequately parent her child was itself an act of parenting.

Tips for Successful Partnerships between Courts and Child Welfare Agencies

Across North Carolina, we often hear about barriers to successful partnerships between courts and child welfare agencies. Lack of understanding of roles, scheduling delays and continuances, adversarial relationships, and high turnover of attorneys have all been cited as challenges that can make it difficult to achieve timely permanency for children and youth. Yet there are partnerships out there that are working well – including the one in Rowan County.

Creating a Trauma-Informed Office and Courtroom

Judge Tanner has learned that trauma-informed language alone is not enough. She says, “We must create a safe space in order to allow people to feel safe to speak.”

Judge Tanner redesigned her office to feel more welcoming by adding a comfortable seating area, candles, puzzles, and plants. Because visitations (i.e., family time) can be hard to set up, she coordinates court dates and visitations to occur on the same day, allowing families to use her office for visits. In the courtroom, she provides fidgets, snacks, and drinks to ease the challenges of long proceedings.

She is also using the tools developed through the TFAC initiative. She provides instructional booklets to county child welfare staff to share with children and youth and regularly uses the YASI reports to confirm juvenile court counselors are using data points to ensure comprehensive consideration of youth risk and needs.

Recommendations

Judge Tanner stresses the importance of trauma informed understanding among all judicial staff. She recommends collaboration between county child welfare leadership and courthouse leadership to identify opportunities for trauma responsive changes and encourages juvenile judges to pursue specialized certifications. She also endorses the “One Judge / One Family” model (which reduces the number of times families must repeat their story to judges), noting its positive impact in family and juvenile courts in Moore and Hoke counties. She strongly encourages other jurisdictions to consider thoughtful implementation of this model across both family courts and all juvenile courts.



Chief Judge Beth Dixon

To learn about this successful partnership, Practice Notes spoke with District 19c’s Chief Judge Beth Dixon, Director Micah Ennis, and Program Administrator Roxie Cashwell from the Rowan County Department of Social Services (DSS).

Judicial Leadership Sets the Tone

According to Cashwell and Ennis, consistent judicial leadership is the foundation. Under Judge Dixon, child welfare court improvement has been a sustained priority. Judge Dixon partnered with the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) to provide training and facilitation focused on improving partnership and outcomes. The principles that guided this work are in the sidebar.

With NCJFCJ’s help, Rowan County created a change team that involved all stakeholders, including parent attorneys, DSS staff and attorneys, GAL, and judges. Together, this team worked to understand the issues specific to Rowan County and learn new ideas from each other’s perspectives. “I’m a huge advocate of multidisciplinary training,” Judge Dixon emphasized. “We should all be hearing those same messages at the same time.” Inviting stakeholders like these to a training provides an opportunity to develop connections.

To build a successful collaborative team, Ennis stressed the importance of framing child safety and permanency as **shared community responsibilities**, not challenges to be handed off or blamed on another system. Rather than saying, “The system is broken—you fix you,” Rowan County took the stance, “We need to fix us, and we can’t do it alone.”

Collaboration requires trust and intentional relationship building. Ennis emphasized, “Entities don’t have relationships. People do.” Individuals within DSS built trust with individual judges, clerks, GALs, school partners, and nonprofit providers—often by showing up when needed, offering help, and developing a network of reciprocal, community minded relationships. These relationships allowed for more open conversations and a different approach to sharing consistent feedback and clarifying mutual expectations. According to Ennis, these partnerships endure not because they are

mandated, but because leaders prioritize them.

Key Principles from the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges

- Keep families together.
- Ensure access to justice.
- Engage families through alternate dispute resolution techniques.
- Ensure child safety, permanency, and well-being.
- Ensure adequate and appropriate family time.
- Provide judicial oversight.
- Ensure competent and adequately compensated representation.
- Advance development of adequate resources.
- Demonstrate judicial leadership and foster collaboration.

Source: NCJFCJ, 2016

Transparency Builds Trust

A turning point in Rowan County was the decision to openly share data with court partners. Transparency signaled accountability and invited collaboration. Even though the data was not perfect, Ennis felt it was an important first step to demonstrate open communication and trust. “We had to be willing to share all of it—good, bad, and ugly—and encourage inquiry.”

Rowan DSS regularly shared data with court partners on permanency timelines, placement stability trends, time to adoption or reunification, and 60-day adjudication compliance. Ennis admitted that sharing data requires cultural change. Staff initially feared external scrutiny, but Ennis believes leadership must model openness and be willing to take that risk.

Judge Dixon monitors these metrics closely and communicates with partners if concerns arise. “If we start seeing something that’s not right, she’s getting in contact with our attorney,” Cashwell said. Judge Dixon will ask, “Hey, what’s going on with this? We need to make sure we’re where we’re supposed to be.”

Today, reviewing data is a routine component of partnership meetings. Everyone monitors metrics closely, and quarterly permanency collaboratives reinforce shared ownership of outcomes. (For more on data sharing, see the article [Data Sources to Support Permanency-Focused Partnerships](#) in this issue.)

Improved Practices

Many changes have been implemented because

of these efforts, including strategies to reduce continuances. Judge Dixon believes addressing continuances requires being intentional and working together to develop a continuance policy. In Rowan, consistent expectations helped shift courtroom culture. “Once this continuance policy was in place and applied consistently over time attorneys had to adapt,” Dixon explained. Now, she says, “attorneys don’t come [to court] expecting a continuance. Continuances need to be seen as not an option, and everyone needs to be committed to this goal. Continuances should be rare and only for situations that we cannot control.”

Other procedural changes also helped reduce continuances. For example, the next court date is usually scheduled while everyone is in the courtroom. This practice ensures families, attorneys, and DSS staff know the next hearing date months in advance. This reduces scheduling conflicts.

In addition, DSS requires court reports to be submitted weeks before hearings. Cashwell explained, “Supervisors have court reports due three weeks in advance. Then it goes to our attorneys to review before we submit it to the court.” As a result, attorneys and judges receive well-prepared reports, and the likelihood of delays during hearings is reduced. Rowan County also ensures that DSS attorneys are prepared.



Courtroom number five in Rowan County. (Photo Credit: NC Judicial Branch, 2023)

DSS attorneys attend weekly high-risk case meetings; this ensures they understand cases early, which reduces friction later.

Judge Dixon also reduced the number of judges rotating through court. She explained, “We used to have all five of our district judges rotate through... and we have narrowed that down to two judges that are trained in this type of work.”

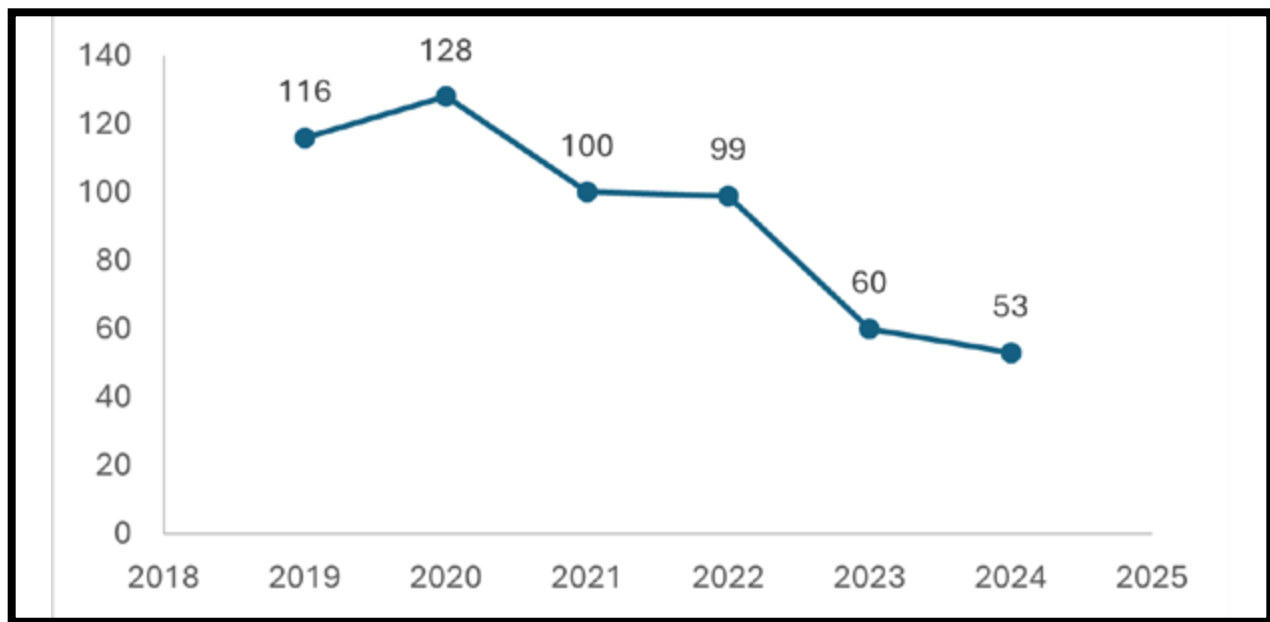
She believes this change allows judges to closely monitor cases and reduces the time they need to catch up prior to each court date.

The team has also made the courtroom more family friendly. Through a small grant, Judge Dixon was able to have the courtroom painted with a mural that changed the tone of the space. While seemingly a small change, Judge Dixon said, “I know it makes me happier to work in that

courtroom, and we hope it makes it easier for families and children to be there.”

Outcomes

These collaborative reforms have produced measurable improvements in permanency outcomes. As the figure below shows, Rowan County’s average time to adjudication decreased dramatically—from 128 days in 2020 to 53 days in 2024. Most cases now meet the statutory 60-day adjudication requirement. “We can feel like court is different—but the data shows it,”



Average Days to Adjudication in Rowan County

Cashwell said.

Data analysis also helped the county identify the need for additional court capacity. After reviewing caseload trends, they added extra court sessions to manage the volume of cases requiring adjudication. “That came because the data showed we had all these cases that needed to be adjudicated and we didn’t have time to do it,” Cashwell explained.

Start with What You Control

When asked what other counties should do first, common themes were clear:

1. **Look at your data.** What does it say about your system? What is within your influence to change?
2. **Start conversations about the system, not individual cases.** Use existing meetings, such as permanency collaboratives, to introduce data discussions.
3. **Identify shared goals.** No one wants children to linger in foster care unnecessarily.
4. **Take small, actionable steps.** Momentum builds through consistent follow-through.

Ennis encouraged leaders to focus on their circle of influence and control: “What part of this belongs to me? What can I control?”

Judge Dixon stressed that counties should not assume judges do not want to work with them.

Data Sources to Support Permanency-Focused Partnerships with the Courts

In child welfare work, we need partners outside our agencies to achieve the outcomes we seek. This is especially true when it comes to timely permanence for children and youth. Even the most skilled and well-supported social worker cannot control the pace or timelines of a child’s legal case.

At the agency level, access to and understanding of performance data—our court partners’ as well as our own—is necessary if we are to understand and increase the effectiveness of our efforts. Shared data and clear communication enable both systems to understand roadblocks to timely permanence and allow managers and court personnel to work creatively to overcome those challenges.

Reach out and ask for a meeting. “Not all judges understand what the permanency outcomes mean from the DSS perspective,” she explained. “We know the law, but we don’t know social work.”

Judge Dixon encourages DSS to invite judges to the table and show them what the numbers mean. “Everyone wants better outcomes for children and families, and we just need to understand how we work together to accomplish that.”

“Everyone wants better outcomes for children and families, and we just need to understand how we work together to accomplish that.”
— Chief Judge Beth Dixon, District 19c

“Our permanency outcomes are strong because of decades of investment in the conversation,” Ennis explained. Cashwell agreed, saying, “The improvements did not come from a single initiative. They came from staying at the table.”

Strong court partnerships are built—not assumed. They require transparency, humility, structure, and sustained leadership. When those elements come together, children move more quickly and safely toward permanency.

To support collaboration between our state’s child welfare agencies and its courts, Practice Notes would like to spotlight the following North Carolina data sources.

Permanency Performance Profiles

Created to support District Permanency Collaboratives (see sidebar), the Permanency Performance Profile provides administrative data from the court system (JWISE), child welfare administrative data, and case review data from the Onsite Review Instrument (OSRI). The profile comes in the form of a downloadable Excel file; a new profile is available for download every quarter.

District Permanency Collaboratives

District Permanency Collaboratives are local groups comprised of judges, attorneys, Guardian ad Litem, family court, child welfare leaders, and other stakeholders.

The central question for collaborative members is: “Is what we are doing getting the intended outcome...safe, timely permanency for children?”

These groups discuss permanency data (e.g., the Permanency Performance Profile) and identify ways to improve permanency of children in juvenile abuse / neglect / dependency cases. Although they sometimes take place during regular meetings by another name, each judicial district and / or county has its own District Permanency Collaborative.

The Permanency Performance Profile provides a wealth of data points, including:

- Court Improvement Program measures (e.g., time to first permanency hearing)
- Hearing time standard reports (e.g., number of adjudication hearings held more than 60 days after the filing of the petition)
- CFSR measures (e.g., permanency in 12 months for children in foster care 12–23 months)
- OSRI measures (e.g., cases where permanency goal for child was rated as a strength)

Instructions are included on the first tab of the Excel file. In general, use the green drop-down cells to select county, historical timepoint, and

measure. Note that after downloading the file, some data points will be missing—counties/ districts must retrieve hearing time standards data from JWISE and manually add them to the file.

To assist users, NCDHHS has created a [Usage Guide](#) with more detailed instructions and descriptions of the measures included in the profile.

To access the NCDHHS Permanency Performance Profile and other supporting information, click [here](#).

Creating Indicators for Child Welfare

A successor to the website Management Assistance for Child Welfare, Work First, and Food & Nutrition Services, Creating Indicators is a site that provides data and charts that can help North Carolina child welfare professionals, as well as the general public, in several ways, including:

- Understanding what happens to children and families who become involved in the child welfare system.
- Providing easy access to detailed information about the experiences of children who enter the custody of a NC county department of social services (i.e., “placement authority”).
- Making it possible to track experiences from the initial placement through all subsequent placements, up to and including permanent placement with the child’s birth family, an



Permanency in 12 months for children entering foster care (all years)

Update on NC's Interdisciplinary Parent Representation Program

North Carolina's Interdisciplinary Parent Representation Program (IPRP) pairs parent attorneys with social workers to strengthen advocacy for parents involved in the child welfare system. In April 2025, Practice Notes profiled Buncombe County's experience with the IPRP in the article [New Program Adds Social Workers to Some Parents' Legal Teams](#). This is an update on the program's continued success.

Improved Outcomes

With the assistance of AdoptUSKids, an evaluation confirms what national research has shown: when parents are represented by a team that includes both an attorney and a social worker, children reach permanency sooner, and families are better positioned for long-term stability.

Buncombe County program data for clients served by the IPRP were compared to clients in the same county who did not receive assistance from an IPRP social worker. Parents who participated in the IPRP achieved their desired case outcome 64% of the time, compared to 50% for parents who did not participate in the IPRP. The evaluation considered case rulings of reunification with parents, consenting to custody or guardianship, and voluntary relinquishments as positive outcomes. Parents served by the IPRP had their rights terminated less often, and voluntary dismissals from the county child welfare agency (i.e., withdrawing the petition alleging abuse, neglect, or dependency) occurred more often.

Anecdotal data indicate that parents served by the IPRP moved through the court system differently. They were better prepared for court hearings, more connected to community-based services, and more responsive to court expectations. Attorneys were able to focus on legal advocacy while social workers addressed barriers related to housing instability, transportation, substance use treatment coordination, and communication gaps. The result was not only quicker movement toward permanency, but better-informed decision-

making throughout the life of the case. Interdisciplinary representation is working and will continue to be evaluated in North Carolina.



Sharice Zachary,
Interdisciplinary Parent
Representation Program

Parent Attorney Shortages and Legal Deserts

Over the past year, Annick Lenior-Peek, Parent Defender of the NC Office of the Parent Defender, embarked on a tour of North Carolina county courthouses, public defender offices, and private parent representation firms to understand what was working and where there were continued needs in abuse, neglect, and dependency court.

"Parent attorneys are overwhelmed with cases that require a different set of skills than what attorneys possess," Peek reports. "Having an IPRP social worker by their side would help them understand and explain what is happening in the case and why DSS is requiring a certain plan."

Peek adds, "A trained IPRP social worker can help explain to DSS why the proposed plan does not specifically address the needs of the parent or family, including assisting in finding a more

"Attorneys who use IPRP social workers tend to stay in the practice because they are not alone and can concentrate on providing legal assistance."

*— Annick Lenior-Peek, Parent Defender,
NC Office of the Parent Defender*

beneficial program.

Across North Carolina, particularly in rural counties, we are seeing the emergence of "legal deserts"—areas where parents technically have a right to counsel, but meaningful access to experienced, trained parent defense attorneys is increasingly limited.

Part of the reason is the pay. Indigent parent

attorneys in NC are currently compensated at \$65 per hour to represent parents. These cases are complex, emotionally demanding, and time intensive. They require courtroom litigation, client counseling, collateral advocacy, document review, and coordination with multiple agencies. The current compensation rate does not reflect the scope or value of this work, nor has it kept up with inflation or rates in other areas of legal practice.

As a result, some judicial districts struggle to attract attorneys willing to accept appointments. Others rely on a very small number of attorneys who carry significant caseloads across multiple counties.

The IPRP does not solve the compensation crisis, but it does strengthen attorneys' capacity, increase their efficiency, and provide support that makes the work more sustainable.

From Caution to Collaboration

Each time IPRP is implemented in a new county, there is some trepidation from partner agencies. This is understandable. It is natural to have questions and anxieties about role clarity, duplication of effort, impact on existing workflows, and potential tensions between IPRP social workers and county child welfare caseworkers.

Yet in every IPRP county, these concerns have been alleviated. Rather seeing IPRP social workers as competitors, partner agencies increasingly view IPRP social workers as connectors who are bridging communication gaps, reducing misunderstandings, and helping parents engage more meaningfully with the process. We've heard many success stories from county child welfare agency caseworkers, attorneys, judges, and most importantly, parents who have successfully navigated the system.

Today, IPRP social workers are actually getting referrals directly from child welfare caseworkers who recognize that additional parent-focused support can improve case progress. Guardian ad litem programs have invited IPRP representatives to share information during volunteer training. Judges have observed improved preparedness

and more thorough information presented in court.

One New Hanover County child welfare caseworker said about an IPRP social worker, "She truly has shown how important it is to engage with the whole team and build positive relationships. She is extremely professional, caring, and always available to support our clients. She advocates well for her clients and helps them feel like a priority, no matter what the situation. She always ensures open

communication and encourages everyone that it takes a supportive team to achieve successful outcomes. I wish more clients had such an amazing support person in their lives."

Looking Forward

North Carolina's child welfare system faces significant pressures, including workforce turnover, complex family needs, and regional disparities in access to services, treatment, and counsel. The IPRP is not a fix for these problems. But it is a proven practice that can lessen systemic strains that keep families separated.

Many counties are taking note of the IPRP's successes and have inquired about bringing it to their area. Our hope is that IPRP will receive additional investment so expansion can be more expeditious, and eventually, we will be available statewide.

For more information on the IPRP, visit the [website](#) or contact IPR Program Manager Sharice Zachary at sharice.j.zachary@nccourts.org.

Attorney Feedback on the IPRP

"I've had two cases recently that were stagnant, and both had been open for well over a year. The same IPRP social worker was assigned to both clients, and in the last month, both moms were able to get a trial home placement!"

— Lyana Hunter, New Hanover County Assistant Public Defender

"I think we both excel at making our clients feel seen and heard. That, in turn, translates into greater client confidence and a higher rate of successful outcomes."

— Reid Gonella, Buncombe County Parent Attorney

"I am VERY appreciative of the IPR Program and SWs. They each are doing an amazing job connecting with the clients, meeting them where they are, and filling in the gaps to find resources."

— Katie Becker, Cleveland County Parent Attorney

"I confess that I was extremely skeptical of the value of the IPRP; however, I now request a social worker in almost every case. Their value is tremendous."

— Jennifer Harjo, New Hanover County Public Defender (Retired)

What Makes a Good Court Report?

In North Carolina child welfare practice, court reports are more than a procedural requirement; they are a communication tool that connects the work of the agency to the decisions made in court. Judges depend on these reports to understand the lived experiences of children and families, assess safety and risk, and determine the next steps related to custody, services, and permanency. A well-crafted court report tells a clear, balanced, and evidence-based story that reflects both the realities of the case and the family's capacity for change.

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Be Clear, Concise, and Objective

Clarity is essential. Judges often review multiple cases in a limited amount of time; therefore, reports must be organized, concise, and easy to follow. Effective reports use clear headings, logical flow, and plain language to ensure key information is accessible. When a report is easy to read, it strengthens the court's ability to make timely and informed decisions.

Equally important is accuracy and objectivity. Strong court reports clearly distinguish between observed facts, statements made by parties involved, and professional assessments. Rather than relying on opinions or assumptions, caseworkers should describe specific behaviors and patterns. This approach enhances credibility and allows the court to draw conclusions based on concrete, verifiable information.

For example, rather than stating:

Avoid
"Ms. Taylor is uncooperative and does not prioritize their child's needs."

An objective court report documenting observable behaviors might say:

Preferred
"Ms. Taylor missed three scheduled visits on March 3, March 10, and March 17, 2026. She did not respond to follow-up phone calls or text messages from the caseworker. Child, Sara, reported on each date that she was sad and upset that her mom did not come for family time. Sara was rubbing her eyes, fighting back tears."

DSS Model Court Reports

NC is integrating a recommended court report template. Review the online, on-demand course: [DSS Model Court Report — PATH NC Updates](#).

Working Well, Worries, and Next Steps

When working with families, the Safety Organized Practice framework guides NC caseworkers to answer three questions: What's working well? What are we worried about? What needs to happen next? These are things the court wants to know. Draw from answers to these questions found in case documentation when writing court reports. Examples of communicating this in a court report might look like this:

Question	Example in a Court Report
What's working well (strengths)?	"According to Ms. Taylor's therapist, Ms. Smith, Ms. Taylor has been successful in accomplishing the goals of...When asked what she's learned in therapy, Ms. Taylor reported that when she is feeling anxious, it helps to breathe deeply and go for a walk."
What are we worried about (needs)?	"Ms. Taylor has not completed the parenting education support services or demonstrated parenting behaviors during family time that would increase safety for her children. Ms. Taylor explained that group learning environments are challenging for her, which may be getting in the way of practicing these behaviors."
What needs to happen next?	"Ms. Taylor has been referred to individual parenting coach support services to support the parenting behaviors needed for her children's safety. She is scheduled for her initial coaching session on _____. Ms. Taylor and the caseworker will also complete the Circles of Safety and Support tool to build the safety network that supports her in developing and maintaining a safety plan for her children."

Reasonable Efforts

Clear documentation of reasonable efforts is a key expectation in child welfare practice. Reports should describe the services offered, the family's level of engagement, and the impact of those services. Document initial efforts to connect

families with supportive services and safety networks to prevent removal and, if the child is removed, the efforts to support reunification.

Also, document efforts to pursue concurrent permanency options. For example, caseworkers should note all efforts to identify kin (both relative and non-relative) and the outcome of engaging them. Even if they may not be a permanent option at this time, kin may be a support to the child through the coordination of family time and/or calling, texting, etc. Demonstrating reasonable efforts is both a legal requirement and a reflection of the agency's commitment to supporting families.

Incorporate the Child's Voice

Court reports should provide a holistic view of the child's well-being, including physical health, emotional functioning, educational progress, placement stability, and connections to family and community. Incorporating the child's voice helps ensure decisions remain grounded in their experience and best interests. For example, a court report might say:

"When asked, 'If you could wish for anything that would make you feel safer, what would that be?' The child shared, 'I wish I could live with my aunt. I like staying with her because it's quiet, there's no scary fighting, and I get to go to school and see my friends every day.'"

Establish a Timeline

North Carolina child welfare policy strongly recommends that court reports be shared with all parties involved in any court action before the day of court. Timeliness and preparation are critical.

Courtroom Confidence for Child Welfare Staff

A new course, *Courtroom Confidence for Child Welfare Staff*, is also coming soon to [NCSWlearn.org](https://www.ncswlearn.org). A key learning objective includes strengthening the ability to write clear and objective court reports.

Submitting reports within required timeframes allows all parties to prepare for hearings and support efficient court processes. One strategy to support timeliness is to establish a planning timeline aligned with court expectations. Know what the court's expectations and the child welfare agency's expectations are for when reports are due, then plan internal deadlines for drafting, supervisory, and agency attorney review, and revisions to ensure submission occurs within required timeframes. Reviewing reports for accuracy and anticipating potential questions strengthens a caseworker's ability to communicate effectively in court.

Ultimately, a strong court report reflects both technical skill and professional judgment. By prioritizing clarity and balance, child welfare staff can produce reports that support the court in making decisions that promote the child's safety, permanency, and well-being.

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