
Minnesota Citizen Review Panels Annual Report

Reporting year 2025, submission 2026



For accessible formats of this information or assistance with additional equal access to human services, email us at dhs.info@state.mn.us, call 651-539-7700, or use your preferred relay service.

ADA1 (3-24)

Table of Contents

Minnesota Citizen Review Panels Annual Report Reporting year 2025, submission 2026 1

 Overview of Citizen Review Panels 1

 Chisago County Citizen Review Panel annual report submission 3

 County report summary..... 3

 Department response to Chisago County Annual Report 7

 Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel annual report submission..... 10

 County report summary..... 10

 Department response to Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel 12

 Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel Annual Report Submission..... 14

 County report summary..... 15

 Department response to Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel 17

Conclusion..... 19

Overview of Citizen Review Panels

Mission: To ensure Minnesota's child welfare systems are protecting children and not causing harm.

Vision: Community members are powerful partners in shaping local and statewide child welfare policy and practice.

Citizen Review Panels (panels) are community advisory groups federally mandated under the [Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act \(PL 111-320\)](#) (CAPTA) and by [Minnesota Statutes 256.01, subd. 15](#). Established in Minnesota in 1999, panels represent a partnership among community members, local child protection agencies and the state child welfare agency.

Panel membership must include volunteers appointed by the commissioner of the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (department), in consultation with the county. The panels follow the [Minnesota Open Appointments Act](#), which requires vacancies to be posted on the Minnesota Secretary of State's Office Boards and Commissions website. Recruitment for vacant seats on the Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel continued throughout the year. The Chisago and Hennepin County panels had zero vacancies for most of the year.

Panels should broadly represent the community in which the panel is established, including members with expertise in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect, child protection advocates, and representatives of councils of color and the ombudsperson for families.

A current list of panel members can be found on the [Minnesota Secretary of State's Office](#) for each panel: [Chisago County](#), [Hennepin County](#) and [Ramsey County](#).

Panel membership may include a:

- Community member, not otherwise specified below
- Adult survivor of child maltreatment
- Parent who has experienced involvement with the child protection system
- Child protection advocate (not employed by the county or by the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families)
- Child welfare professional (not employed by the county or by the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families).

General duties of the panel members include:

- Examine state and local child welfare agency policies and practices to evaluate the extent to which agencies are effectively discharging child protection responsibilities
- Make policy and practice recommendations for equitable, systemic improvement.

The department has established panels in Chisago, Hennepin and Ramsey Counties. The department would support community member-driven efforts to expand Citizen Review Panels to other areas of the state.

In 2025, the panel coordinator worked with community members and the Crow Wing County Human Services director to explore establishing a panel in their community. The coordinator met multiple times with community members and the director of human services of Crow Wing County. The county human services director decided not to move forward due to the current demands for child protection workers. Members of the public can find more information on the [department's Citizen Review Panel web page](#). Additional information about panels is on the Administration for Children and Families' [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#).

In compliance with CAPTA, each panel must prepare an annual report that summarizes the activities of the panel and makes recommendations to improve the child protection system at the state and local levels and submit it to the state and the public (section 106(c)(6) of CAPTA). The state child welfare

agency is required to respond to this report within six months. This annual report will provide a summary of each Minnesota panel's activities and recommendations for Calendar Year 2025, along with the department's corresponding response. States have the flexibility to implement the Citizen Review Panel requirement in ways that best meet their needs, so long as the panels meet the requirements set forth in section 106(c) of CAPTA. Previous panel annual reports and the department responses are available on [the department's Citizen Review Panels web page](#).

Chisago County Citizen Review Panel annual report submission

Mission statement: *To facilitate citizen participation and provide opportunities for members of the community to play an integral role in ensuring that federal, state and county child protection systems protect children from abuse and neglect and meet the permanency needs of children.*

County report summary

Panel members engaged in extensive knowledge-gathering throughout the year to deepen understanding of and support for various child protection issues relevant to our county. Members were offered multiple resources and training throughout the year, including:

- Minnesota Department of Human Services; Final Report on 2020-2024 CFSP, State of Minnesota
- Foster Advocates' release of the Minnesota Promise Report
- The [Effectiveness of Citizen Review Panels - ScienceDirect](#)
- Minnesota Judicial Branch, Progress Report Supreme Court Council Child Protection and Maltreatment Prevention July 2025
- Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) Legislative Update, 2025 Session
- Minnesota Council on Latino Affairs: 2025 Legislative Recap virtual training.

Four Chisago County Citizen Review Panel community members and one county staff member participated in the annual Children's Justice Act (CJA)/CRP Annual Retreat in August 2025. The retreat provided key information on CAPTA, recent legislation and impacts, and Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) reporting. The members met separately to update the work plan and assign tasks necessary to complete the annual report.

Panel members participated in three local county child maltreatment reconsiderations during 2025. Mandated timelines were met, and all county decisions were upheld. The panel also participates in local, county fatality/near-fatality reviews. There were no fatality/near-fatality case reviews in 2025.

Achievements, activities, projects completed or in process

The review panel used panel funds to purchase a Meeting OWL device. The OWL is an advanced video conference solution integrating a 360-degree camera, microphone and speaker with automatic focus. This has improved monthly meetings and other committee work, allowing for more effective hybrid meetings.

In addition, the panel voted to provide Chisago County Child Protection with funds to support children and youth in foster care with necessary supplies and camp scholarships.

The Chisago County Citizen Review Panel's 2025 goal was, "Ensuring children in out-of-home care receive timely medical exams and that Social Service Information System (SSIS) data accurately reflects compliance."

The panel developed a work plan with specific monthly tasks and assignments. The following items have been completed:

- Met twice with staff with the department's Quality Continuous Improvement (CQI) Division to expand knowledge of SSIS data input as well as the department data dashboard
- Met with Chisago County supervisor to understand local process and staffing limitations
- Met with Continuous Quality Improvement Staff from the department
- Identified counties with similar completion percentages; those counties were Clay, Goodhue, Mahnomen, Otter Tail and Pine
- Developed survey questions for gathering information from the five counties
- Completed surveys and compiled survey results
- Developed four recommendations for submission in annual report.

Citizen Review Panel recommendations

The Chisago County Citizen Review Panel makes the following recommendations after reviewing existing data, surveying similar counties and analyzing available data:

1. The Minnesota Legislature should fully fund any reporting and/or documentation mandates related to child protection issues. Rewriting existing legacy information systems is lengthy and costly. While the legislature has appropriated initial funding for the Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS), our recommendation is intended to address the need for ongoing legislative funding and support.

2. SSIS as a reporting/data tracking mechanism needs to be updated so that it:

- Is user-friendly
- Increases staff efficiencies
- Incorporates experiences learned (Pine County study) on reducing paperwork.

Our group acknowledges that there are some study groups and surveys underway looking at addressing modernization. Our recommendation is intended to address the need for ongoing extensive stakeholder involvement, ensuring that line staff, data consumers, client perspectives and key stakeholders are involved.

3. DCYF should make more timely updates available to counties for data warehouse reporting and provide a better interface between raw data and reporting options for county staff.

It is presumed that any new system will address the timeliness of data availability; however, in the interim, data warehouse updates should be addressed using existing data systems and the data warehouse.

4. DCYF should create a working group of social workers and other interested parties focused on identifying barriers to meeting mandated federal and state reporting requirements and then make recommendations to create efficiencies in meeting those reporting requirements.

Based on data gathered during our panel's survey process, as well as discussions with local frontline staff, many of the required measures do not appear to consider the actual real-world process flow for situations like medical examinations, referrals to outside resources, etc. These types of business processes are often outside the scope of database modernization. Our recommendation is intended to ensure that process flow, timing of data and resource availability do not artificially reflect on

appropriate child protection work being done. Understanding these processes requires involvement by frontline staff and key stakeholders.

Areas for additional support from the department:

The Chisago County Citizen Review Panel would like to request support in two areas:

1. Simplification of the citizen applicant process

The current process within DCYF requires numerous steps and decision points that overcomplicate and significantly delay the process for new members to participate. It is understood that processes outside of DCYF are not within the scope of our panel.

2. Expand our budget by \$2,000, bringing the annual total to \$7,000

The current budgets were created when there were more counties participating and when our panel did not have all citizen slots filled. To ensure that citizen members can be reimbursed by statute while still allowing our panel to complete annual projects, additional funding will be needed.

Number of panel members

The Chisago County Citizen Review Panel met monthly during 2025, except for July and December. The panel had four active citizen members for most of the calendar year. Members conducted extensive recruitment throughout the year. Three applicants were interviewed in October and were accepted. The community membership now includes Laurel Dreckman, Deb Kerschner, Nancy Grossmann, Karen Kennedy, Lisa Rydning, Lorraine Swenson and Adrienne Zierman. In November, the panel elected Karen Kennedy to serve as co-chair with Deb Kerschner for the upcoming year.

Number of vacancies on the panel

During most of 2025, the panel had two vacancies, with an additional vacancy occurring in October. The panel prioritized filling the vacancies with notifications on the Secretary of State website, the Chisago County website and by placing an ad in the Chisago County Press. The panel also posted in various social media groups and made contact through personal connections. Recruitment flyers were placed at all five county library locations and at various religious and business locations throughout the county. Recruitment efforts were successful, and the panel has seven community members for 2026.

Department response to Chisago County Annual Report

The department extends its appreciation to the Chisago County Citizen Review Panel for its thoughtful analysis, strong engagement in statewide learning opportunities and commitment to continuous improvement in child protection practice. The panel's structured approach — grounded in data review, cross-county comparison and stakeholder engagement — provides valuable insight to inform statewide policy, practice and system improvements. The department recognizes the importance of aligning legislative mandates with sustainable funding, particularly as the state transitions toward a Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS). Ongoing investment is critical to ensure counties can meet documentation and reporting expectations without negatively impacting service delivery. The department agrees that modernization of the Social Services Information System (SSIS) is essential to improving usability, efficiency and data quality. The transition toward CCWIS provides an opportunity to address longstanding system challenges while incorporating lessons learned from counties.

The department acknowledges the panel's findings and offers the following responses and implementation considerations:

1. Legislative funding for reporting and documentation requirements

In 2025, the Minnesota legislature directed DCYF to acquire and implement a modern child welfare information system and provided funding to contract with a vendor to do so. The department has engaged with interested parties across state and local agencies to complete the necessary planning work, including writing requirements for the new system and developing the implementation plan. The public can stay up to date on the progress on the [SSIS Engagement and Information Site](#).

Regarding collaboration with counties and associations to document administrative burden and impacts, the department conducted six functional focus groups and counties participated 52 times, generating more than 1,245 challenges and enhancement criteria over 15 days of engagement. The follow-up sessions included 55 participants representing 38 county participation instances, focused on clarifying and validating initial themes.

Regarding seeking federal funding opportunities (e.g., Title IV-E administrative funds) to support allowable technology and staffing investments, because this project will involve federal funding, the department is required to follow a specific review and approval process with the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The Implementation Advanced Planning Document, along with the Request for Proposal for the future vendor who will assist Minnesota in building the new system, was submitted to ACF in May 2026. Progress on planning for CCWIS is documented on the department's [Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System Project Engagement HQ](#).

2. Modernization of SSIS (Social Service Information System)

System modernization planning work is underway. The department released a new mobile application this year that allows workers to add case notes and enter their time in the field, as well as a new streamlined Out-of-Home Placement Plan. The department will continue working towards the development of CCWIS with a focus on:

- User-centered design, including direct input from frontline workers by incorporating recommendations from the Minnesota Association of County Social Service Administrators (MACSSA) [Position Statement](#) on Social Service Information System (SSIS) Modernization.
- Workflow simplification to reduce duplicative data entry and administrative burden
- Integration of findings from county-led efforts.

The department established a formal SSIS/CCWIS Steering Committee that includes state and local agency leaders, in addition to the longstanding SSIS Partnership Advisory Group. Additionally, the department has begun staffing a dedicated modernization team whose sole focus is executing on the legislative mandate to develop and implement the new system.

3. Timeliness and accessibility of data warehouse reporting

The department is unable to make many updates with the current SSIS system. The department will work with the User Advisory Group to express the need and request of the panel to address the following:

- Increase the frequency of data warehouse updates, where feasible within current system constraints
- Provide training and technical assistance to county staff on accessing and utilizing data effectively
- Create a feedback mechanism for counties to report data lag issues and prioritize fixes

- Explore enhancements to existing platforms, such as the Minnesota Child Welfare Data Dashboard, to improve real-time usability.

4. Creation of a Statewide Working Group on reporting barriers

The department supports the recommendation to continue to convene work groups focused on identifying barriers to meeting federal and state requirements. Understanding real-world practice constraints is essential to aligning policy expectations with operational realities. Currently, this recommendation is being implemented by the CCWIS Steering Committee and the SSIS Partnership group. The department coordinator will report progress updates to the panel.

Requests for additional support from the department

1. Simplification of the Citizen Review Panel application process

The department can commit to looking at its internal processes to support the panel's request by:

- Conducting a process mapping review to identify inefficiencies and delays
- Streamlining the application approval steps by potentially reducing the number of approval levels at the department prior to approval by the department commissioner
 - Reducing duplicative review layers where possible
- Exploring options to create a workflow process before the phase out of SharePoint once the department moves to a more modern environment. The department will have new workflow processes starting July 1.

2. Increase in annual panel funding

The department recognizes the panel's need for sufficient funding to support member participation and project activities. The department will explore contract options that would increase base funding levels or provide supplemental or competitive funding opportunities for panels undertaking specific projects. Additionally, the department coordinator has requested that funding considerations be incorporated into future budget requests and federal grant planning tied to CAPTA.

Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel annual report submission

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

County report summary

In January 2025, Hennepin County presented Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) and Critical Family Response Meetings (CFRM). The panel learned about the four different types of FGDM. The purpose of a Critical Family Response Meeting is to give the family a chance to share their story and actively participate in making the best decisions for their child(ren). These meetings are required when out-of-home placement may be imminent or when an Order for Immediate Custody is being sought. This approach emphasizes collaboration and transparency, ensuring families are involved in critical decisions that impact their children’s safety and well-being.

In June, the Hennepin County Youth Advisory Council (YAC) showcased the incredible work of young leaders making a difference in our community. Joining us was Lola Adebra from Partners for Performance (P4P), an organization dedicated to supporting foster care for youth ages 16 and older. Two former P4P clients — now staff members — shared their inspiring journeys through the foster care system, their experiences as youth participants and how they’ve transitioned into leadership roles. Through P4P’s mentorship, youth gained essential life skills such as storytelling, communication, identity development and leadership. They also learned to advocate for themselves and others by understanding the foster care system, court processes and ways to support peers. This presentation is a powerful reminder of how mentorship and advocacy can transform lives and create future leaders.

In August, several panel members attended the Children’s Justice Act and Citizen Review Panel 2025 annual retreat alongside representatives from Hennepin County Community Engagement and Resident Services. The Community Engagement Team’s participation was instrumental in helping the panel develop its work plan for 2025-2026. During the retreat, the panel heard presentations by the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) on human services performance management, the Child and Family Services Review and 2025 legislative updates.

The Native American, African American and multicultural community engagement coordinators regularly attend monthly panel meetings to share updates on their work in the community and invite panel members to participate. In November, a panel member joined the Native American coordinator at Little Earth Community to assist with surveys and engage in meaningful conversation with attendees. This discussion focused on how best to communicate information and resources to community members, as well as additional opportunities for engagement.

Outcomes or desired outcomes of achievements or projects listed above

This year, the panel approved an initiative to acknowledge and support foster care families by providing \$300 in gift cards. These cards were hand-delivered to six families and used for essential needs, such as: laundry services, sports equipment, personal care items and baby supplies. This effort reflects the panel's commitment to recognizing the vital role foster families play and ensuring they have resources to meet everyday needs.

The panel remains actively engaged in the Collaborative Safety Mapping process. During this review period, two mapping sessions were completed as part of ongoing efforts to identify trends, gaps and strengths that inform recommendations for system improvement at the county level. Recent internal process changes have impacted which cases are brought forward for review. Panel members are now required to meet on-site with Hennepin County staff to review case materials — a shift that presents scheduling challenges for members balancing work and personal commitments. Despite these changes, the panel continues to explore innovative ways to track data and strengthen its recommendations, ensuring that collaborative efforts lead to meaningful improvements in child welfare practices.

Number of panel members

The panel meets monthly. Members have remained constant despite having two resignations. We currently have 13 members of staff. The panel members include Beatrice Officer (co-chair), Darringer Fuches (co-chair), Carmin Hatchett, Emma Daugherty, Sarah Driever, Jamal Mohamed, Mary Kane, Carmin Hatchet, Josephina Geronimo, Charmine Young and Jancie McDaniels.

The Citizen Review Panel makes the following recommendations:

1. Continue partnering with the panel on Collaborative Safety case reviews and ongoing training opportunities.
2. Continue providing the panel with informational updates and opportunities to learn.

Department response to Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel

The department acknowledges the value of the panel's engagement in learning opportunities, including Family Group Decision Making (FGDM), Critical Family Response Meetings (CFRM) and youth-led advocacy initiatives. These approaches align with statewide goals to strengthen family engagement, prevent unnecessary out-of-home placement and center youth voice in decision-making.

Programs such as Family Group Decision Making and Critical Family Response Meetings represent best practices in collaborative, family-centered decision-making. Additionally, partnerships with youth-serving organizations and engagement with the Hennepin County Youth Advisory Council highlight the importance of integrating lived expertise into system improvement efforts.

The department also recognizes the panel's community engagement efforts, including collaboration with cultural community coordinators and direct outreach within communities such as Little Earth of United Tribes. These efforts are critical to ensuring culturally responsive practice and strengthening trust between systems and communities.

The panel's use of Collaborative Safety mapping and its adaptability in response to process changes demonstrates a strong commitment to continuous quality improvement, despite operational challenges.

Implementation strategies or progress towards recommendations:

1. Continued partnership on Collaborative Safety case reviews and training

The department supports ongoing collaboration with Citizen Review Panels in advancing the Collaborative Safety approach. Panel participation in case reviews and mapping processes provides a valuable external perspective and strengthens system accountability.

The department will:

- Support Hennepin County staff and encourage the expansion of access to training opportunities on Collaborative Safety for panel members, including refresher and advanced sessions
- Partner with the county to develop flexible participation options (e.g., hybrid or virtual review processes) to address scheduling barriers related to on-site case reviews while being mindful of sensitive information and confidentiality considerations
- Create guidance for counties on incorporating panel feedback into practice improvements and quality assurance processes
- Support development of standardized tools or templates for mapping sessions to improve consistency across counties
- Present at the National Citizen Review Conference in June 2026 to share and promote the use of the Collaborative Safety Model for other panels across the United States.

2. Continued provision of informational updates and learning opportunities

The department agrees that ongoing access to timely information, training and system updates is essential to maintaining an informed and effective panel.

The department will:

- Provide regular statewide briefings for panels on:
 - Policy and legislative updates
 - Program and practice changes
 - Data and performance outcomes
- Develop a centralized resource hub for panels that include:
 - Training materials
 - Recorded webinars
 - Guidance documents
- Coordinate cross-panel learning opportunities in partnership with the Minnesota Child Welfare Training Academy (MNCWTA), allowing panels to share best practices and innovations
- Partner with organizations and community groups to expand learning on:
 - Youth engagement and leadership development
 - Culturally responsive practices
 - Lived experience feedback

- Continue collaboration with initiatives connected to CAPTA to ensure alignment with federal expectations for panels.

Additional observations and opportunities for support

1. Supporting foster families

The department commends the panel’s initiative to provide direct support to foster families. Small, flexible funding efforts can have a meaningful impact on placement stability and caregiver retention.

2. Strengthening youth voice and leadership

The panel’s engagement with youth leaders and individuals with lived experience reflects a strong commitment to system improvement. The department will explore:

1. Expanding partnership with the department’s Youth Advisory Council
2. Integrating youth voice into policy development, training and system redesign efforts
3. Supporting workforce development pathways for individuals with lived experience.

3. Addressing operational barriers to panel participation

The department acknowledges the challenges posed by on-site case review requirements and their impact on panel members' participation. The department can review current requirements to identify opportunities for flexibility while maintaining confidentiality and data security.

The department will:

- Pilot alternative review models (e.g., summarized case reviews)
- Gather feedback from panels to inform policy or procedural adjustments.

Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel Annual Report Submission

Mission statement: *Provide opportunities for citizens to play an integral role in ensuring the child protection system is protecting children from abuse and neglect and ensuring a nurturing home environment.*

County report summary

The Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel inquired and learned in depth about the following issues and participated in workshops, trainings and community events:

- Three members of the panel attended the annual retreat for the panels and the CJA task force in August 2025. Presentations were centered around discussing the Minnesota Child and Family Services Plan and a review of child welfare legislation. Panel members present during the retreat engaged in enriching discussions about developing performance measures specific to Ramsey County and reviewing them alongside statewide measures.
- The panel invited child safety staff from the department's Child Safety and Permanency Administration to give an overview of the screening and intake process for reported cases of child maltreatment from the state's perspective. This was followed by a presentation by Ramsey County staff on the screening and intake process from a county perspective, and recommendations made under the Transforming Systems Together (TST) initiative.
- A panel member attended the foster-informed training and MN Promise report hosted by AspireMN on Nov. 14, 2025.

Achievements, activities, projects completed or in process:

- David Herrera re-joined the panel as a Ramsey County representative starting in January 2025. David is extremely knowledgeable about the various aspects of child welfare in Minnesota, and the panel has a very strong working relationship with him.
- The panel worked on developing a survey to assess the well-being of foster youth between the ages of 14 and 17 years in collaboration with St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS). Panel members, led by co-chair Tonya Long, worked on developing a questionnaire focused on three key areas of culture, education and procedure. Panel members also spoke to representatives from the SPPS about administering the survey and data collection. However, the survey was not carried out due to disagreements between the department, the county and the panel about the sample population and areas of focus.
- The panel spent a large chunk of time recruiting and onboarding new members and training them in the child welfare and protection system. At the start of 2025, the Ramsey County Panel had three members; today, the panel has eight.

- The panel worked on developing a flyer intended to boost recruitment efforts. The draft has been shared with the communications department in Ramsey County.

Outcomes or desired outcomes of achievements or projects listed above:

- The panel’s strong relationship with David Herrera will help ensure that the panel and the county can work towards the shared goal of bettering child welfare outcomes in the county.
- The panel remains hopeful that the survey will be conducted in the future. The panel believes the survey will yield crucial data that will guide future recommendations about child welfare.
- The current panel members represent diverse identities and perspectives from within Ramsey County.
- The panel has been discussing its possible involvement in the Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionality Act (MAAFPCWDA) implementation and review process within Ramsey County. Though no specific ask has been determined yet, members and the county have discussed opportunities for members to review cases.

Areas for additional support from the department:

- Develop processes and technology accessibility for panel members to access and examine county cases, data and policies to make recommendations to ensure children are safe, while fostering community ownership and partnership. Create a more streamlined process to ensure that DCYF, the county and the panel can work towards shared goals.
- Engage leadership earlier in the projects. This involves identifying which leaders need to be and want to be engaged in the project/s.

Number of panel members: The panel has eight members, including Tonya Long (co-chair), Ankit Sood (co-chair), Beth Salzl, Casey Acord, Kat Ruth-Leigh, Molly Evans, Jill Esch, Melissa DeBlizan and Rachel Johnson.

Number of vacancies on the panel: There are currently seven open seats on the panel; however, applications continue to come into consideration of appointment. The panel asked that they work with the county to increase awareness about the panel. The panel is waiting for the flyer to be finalized by the county. Once finalized, the flyer will be a useful tool in increasing awareness about the panel.

Additionally, efforts to increase public awareness and engagement about the panel at community events and gatherings will continue.

The Citizen Review Panel makes the following recommendations:

1. Simplify the recruitment process and reduce the time taken to confirm new members.
2. Improve the onboarding process for new members by having more training opportunities and better training materials.
3. Expedite access to data on reported cases to the panel members so the panel can conduct case reviews.

Department response to Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel

The department extends its appreciation to the Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel for its dedication to strengthening child welfare systems through learning, collaboration and community engagement. The panel's efforts to deepen understanding of intake processes, elevate youth voice and expand membership reflect a strong commitment to improving outcomes for children and families.

The department recognizes the panel's work across training, partnership development and system improvement initiatives, and offers the following responses and implementation considerations.

The department acknowledges the panel's active participation in statewide learning opportunities, including the Children's Justice Act/Citizen Review Panel retreat and engagement with the Minnesota Child and Family Services Plan. These efforts support alignment between county-level practice and statewide and federal expectations.

The panel's focus on understanding screening and intake processes, from both state and county perspectives, demonstrates a strong commitment to transparency and system alignment. Initiatives such as Transforming Systems Together are critical to improving consistency, equity and decision-making in child protection.

Additionally, participation in training related to AspireMN and the Minnesota Promise highlights the panel's focus on incorporating foster youth voice and experience into system improvement efforts.

The department commends the panel's efforts to:

- Strengthen collaboration with county leadership
- Explore and draft a youth well-being survey in partnership with St. Paul Public Schools
- Expand and diversify panel membership
- Increase community awareness through recruitment strategies.

While the foster youth survey was not implemented, the department recognizes the value of this effort and the importance of continued collaboration to align on scope, methodology and data use.

Implementation strategies or progress towards recommendations:

1. **Simplification of recruitment and appointment processes**

The department recognizes that lengthy and complex recruitment processes can create barriers to timely panel participation and sustainability.

The department will:

- Conduct a process mapping review to identify inefficiencies and delays
- Streamline the application approval steps by potentially reducing the number of approval levels at the department prior to approval by the department commissioner
 - Reduce duplicative review layers where possible
- Explore options to create a workflow process prior to the phase out of SharePoint once the department moves to a more modern environment. The department will have new workflow processes starting July 1, 2026.

2. **Strengthening onboarding and training for panel members**

The department agrees that consistent, high-quality onboarding and training are critical to ensuring panel members are equipped to contribute effectively. To address this recommendation, the department will:

- Add and develop a standardized onboarding toolkit that is part of orientation, including:
 - An overview of Minnesota’s child welfare system
 - Roles and responsibilities of panels
 - Key policies, terminology and processes.

- Offer regular training opportunities, including:
 - Foundational and advanced topics
 - Live and recorded sessions for flexibility.
- Create a centralized training repository accessible to all panel members
- Partner with organizations such as the Minnesota Association of African American Families in Child Welfare to incorporate culturally responsive and community-informed training content.

3. Access to data, case information and streamlined collaboration

The department acknowledges the importance of timely and appropriate access to data and case information for panels to effectively fulfill their statutory role, while also ensuring confidentiality and data privacy protections. The coordinator can take the following steps to address the recommendation:

- Conduct a joint review with county and panel members to clarify:
 - Appropriate levels of access to case information
 - Data sharing protocols that align with privacy laws, with input from general legal counsel and the Ramsey County Attorney’s Office.
- Explore secure technology that allows panel members to:
 - Access de-identified or summarized case data
 - Review trends and system-level information.
- Develop a standardized guidance outline, including:
 - Roles and expectations for panels in case review
 - Processes for accessing policies, procedures and aggregate data.
- Pilot streamlined collaboration model policy or guidelines in Ramsey County to improve coordination between the department, counties and panel.

Conclusion

Over time, adjustments to Minnesota's child protection system have produced important improvements, but many longstanding challenges remain. Meaningful progress requires looking beyond incremental change and considering new approaches that better align with the needs of children, families and communities.

The ideas presented in this framework are intended to encourage thoughtful dialogue and exploration of alternatives that strengthen child safety while promoting family well-being. They are not offered as definitive solutions, but rather as a foundation for continued discussion, collaboration and innovation. Minnesota's children deserve a system that prioritizes prevention, addresses family needs before crises occur and supports safe family preservation whenever possible. When intervention is necessary, it should be tailored, effective, and no more intrusive than required to ensure a child's safety and well-being.

Achieving this vision will require leadership, partnership and a commitment to reexamining existing practices through the lens of equity, effectiveness and family-centered support. Minnesota has an opportunity to build a stronger system — one that better serves children, strengthens families and reflects the values of its communities.

For additional questions or comments, contact the department's panel coordinator, Laura Gapske, at laura.gapske@state.mn.us.