

Arizona's Children's Justice Act (CJA)

2024 Three-Year Assessment

Overview of Arizona's Children's Justice (CJ) Task Force

The Governor's Council on Child Safety and Family Empowerment (CSFE) was established in July 2015 through Executive Order 2015-08 and comprises Governor-appointed members. This multi-disciplinary council was created to align, leverage, and coordinate resources to address challenges faced by vulnerable children and families within the child welfare system. The Council supports community engagement to strengthen families caring for foster and adopted children. The Council has also focused on reducing and preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and ensuring that ACEs prevention and trauma-informed care are the standard for supporting children across Arizona. CSFE consists of several workgroups that meet regularly to address community needs and systemic challenges, identify best practices, and provide evidence-based solutions that further facilitate what is outlined in the body's executive order. In 2023, Governor Hobbs reauthorized CSFE with [Executive Order 2023-18](#) to include the CJ Task Force as a subgroup of the Council.

The CJ Task Force is responsible for conducting a comprehensive review of the investigative, administrative, and judicial handling of child abuse and neglect cases, making training and policy recommendations in each of the three categories in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) Section 107(e)(1). The CJ Task Force is also responsible for the development of a three-year plan that addresses training and policy recommendations in the following three areas:

1. Investigative, administrative, and judicial handling of cases of child abuse and neglect, including child sexual abuse and exploitation, as well as cases involving suspected child maltreatment-related fatalities and cases involving a potential combination of jurisdictions, such as interstate, Federal-State, and State-Tribal, in a manner which reduces the additional trauma to the child victim and the victim's family and which also ensures procedural fairness to the accused;
2. Experimental, model, and demonstration programs for testing innovative approaches and techniques that may improve the prompt and successful resolution of civil and criminal court proceedings or enhance the effectiveness of judicial and administrative action in child abuse and neglect cases, particularly child sexual abuse and exploitation cases, including the enhancement of performance of court-appointed attorneys and guardians ad litem for children, and which also ensure procedural fairness to the accused; and
3. Reform of State laws, ordinances, regulations, protocols, and procedures to provide comprehensive protection for children from abuse, including sexual abuse and exploitation, while ensuring fairness to all affected persons.

The Task Force discussed developing a three-year assessment, and staff were instructed to proceed with completing this task.

Overview of 2021 CJA Assessment

In 2021, the Arizona CJ Task Force conducted a comprehensive review of the investigative, administrative, and judicial handling of child abuse and neglect cases and made training and policy recommendations in each of the three CAPTA categories in Section 107(e)(1). The approach involved two main components. The first phase was distributing a statewide survey to child welfare agencies, police departments, county attorney's offices, child and family advocacy centers, and private organizations involved in child abuse and neglect cases. The survey was completed and returned by 461 stakeholders. Overall, the 2021 survey responses demonstrated that written joint-investigation protocols are crucial for effective handling, and increased collaboration was needed to improve communication and expedient case processing. The information provided by the survey presented the CJ Task Force with helpful feedback to develop recommendations that address joint investigations, county-wide collaboration, and training. The second phase involved presentations to the CJ Task Force at monthly meetings. Two key presentations were from the Arizona Department of Child Safety (DCS) and the Arizona Child and Family Advocacy Network (ACFAN). Both presentations provided updates on their agencies' involvement with the state's handling of child abuse and neglect cases. Each presentation provided a comprehensive overview of their current and planned future efforts to increase effectiveness by implementing measures that have led to improved outcomes and collaboration.

The four CJA recommendations developed in 2021 are still relevant today and will continue to be used to guide future work that improves the state's response to child abuse and neglect. Highlights that demonstrate accomplishments made include, but are not limited to:

Child and Family Advocacy Centers: The ACFAN has produced guidelines based on the National Children's Alliance (NCA) to aid the development and maintenance of multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs) throughout the state. Due to different jurisdictions having various approaches for coordinating and administrating MDTs in their counties, this information is meant to provide basic guidelines for successful implementation. Arizona's 23 Child and/or Family Advocacy Centers have expanded their services to promote community partnerships and resources. Additionally, through support provided, the number of child and family advocacy centers accredited by the National Children's Alliance (NCA) continues to increase throughout the state. The CJ Task Force will continue to support the development of county-specific protocols and provide technical assistance in collaboration with ACFAN. **[Recommendations 1, 2, and 3]**

Children's Justice Training and Advanced Forensic Interview Training (AFIT): Arizona's Children's Justice Training and AFIT programs were established through subcontracting with a not-for-profit, Prevent Child Abuse Arizona, Inc. (PCAAZ). PCAAZ, in collaboration with experts in relevant fields, evidence-based practice studies, and child abuse service providers, established multiple child abuse awareness, investigation, and prosecution-centric pieces of

training. These trainings are provided upon request and free of charge to Arizona's law enforcement, child welfare professionals, and court organizations, largely focused on rural counties. Since 2021, scholarships for detectives, prosecutors, and attorneys have been awarded for AFIT. This four-day (32-hour) experiential course teaches investigators how to interview children and adults forensically. It is open to DCS investigators, detectives, designated forensic interviewers, tribal CPS, and prosecuting attorneys. **[Recommendations 2 and 3]**

Arizona Child Abuse Prevention Conference: For the past three years, the Arizona CJ Task Force, in conjunction with the Governor's Office of Youth, Faith, and Family, helped to sponsor a two-day workshop training event targeting representatives from agencies involved in child welfare. This conference brought together child welfare teams and advocacy center directors to learn best practices on leading MDTs, national child welfare best practices, and regional training opportunities that staff can offer to their communities. This annual conference offers practical topics that will improve advocacy work and build important relationships between partnering agencies. **[Recommendation 1 and 2]**

Overview 2023 Three-Year Assessment Process

The approach to developing the 2023 assessment involved two main components. The first was distributing a statewide assessment survey to child welfare agencies, police departments, county attorney's offices, child and family advocacy centers, and private organizations involved in child abuse and neglect cases (see Attachment F). The survey was created by reviewing previous Arizona CJA assessments and examples from other states' child welfare assessments. Those solicited had direct experience and knowledge regarding the status of joint investigations, the effectiveness of the MDTs around the state, and the judicial handling of cases. The survey was completed and returned by 92 stakeholders. The information extracted was used to develop recommendations and priority areas for the current report.

Responses to the survey indicate:

- Greater access to training opportunities is needed in urban and rural communities.
- Consistent communication between multidisciplinary team members to foster positive and productive working relationships.
- Improving employee retention within agencies to decrease delays in case handling.
- Address inconsistencies in the Mandatory Reporting Training (MRT) from external stakeholders outside state agencies.
- Clearly written and up-to-date joint-investigation protocols to help facilitate well-coordinated and successful handling of cases to decrease retraumatization.
- Increased collaboration between law enforcement, DCS, and the courts is desired.

Overall, the survey responses demonstrate that county protocols are crucial for effective collaboration, and additional buy-in is needed in some areas to improve communication for expedient case processing. The information provided by the survey provided the CJ Task Force

with helpful feedback to develop recommendations that address joint investigations, county-wide collaboration, and training.

The second phase involved quarterly meeting discussions and collaboration among the CJ Task Force members. These quarterly meetings, which included presentations, provided a comprehensive overview of efforts within the state to increase case-handling effectiveness by implementing best practices, improving outcomes, and collaborating.

CJA Subgrantees

The CJA Subgrantees provided an overview of their current efforts to improve the handling of child abuse/welfare cases and community support for victimized children. CJA Subgrantees are family advocacy centers throughout Arizona and include the following organizations: Amberly's Place, Inc; Childhelp, Inc. Maricopa; Flagstaff Medical Center - Safe Child Center; Southern Arizona Children's Advocacy Center; and Yavapai Family Advocacy Center. These subgrantees support the establishing, sustaining, and improving community MRT and staffing the MDTs in their respective counties. They also promote a coordinated, community-based, multi-disciplinary response to victims of child abuse, sexual assault, and family violence. Data provided by CJA subgrantees included the yearly increased metrics of trained professionals in MRTs and participants in MDTs. Their efforts to engage and partner with rural counties and newly hired professionals yielded a consistent increase in participation over the last three years.

Highlights of the presentation include:

- *Mandatory Reporting Training (MRT)*: MRT is crucial to disciplines relevant to child neglect/welfare disciplines. The training explains when and when not to report suspected child abuse and neglect to ensure all agencies working with minor children are aware of their legal responsibilities to report. The training is requested by school districts, law enforcement, medical health providers, faith organizations, and community partners. Each CJA subgrantee's training can be held virtually or in person, and asking questions is encouraged. These trainings supplement the DCS recorded MRT required by statute for educators to complete by allowing participants to inquire about the actions required in complex cases.
- *Multi-Disciplinary Teams (MDTs)*: MDTs are utilized by staff to challenge child abuse cases and include representation from many disciplines and agencies associated with the investigation. This team typically includes law enforcement, prosecution, medical, mental health, advocacy, and DCS representation. MDTs are an essential component of child abuse investigations within the state, not only for addressing difficult cases but for formulating healthy working relationships between independent agencies that lead to sustainable and efficient teamwork.

Safety Trends: Human Trafficking

Maricopa County Sheriff's Office (MCSO) provides patrol services and criminal investigation to unincorporated county areas and operates the county jail system. One of the major crime divisions within MCSO is the Special Victims Unit. The Special Victims Unit is a highly specialized division within MCSO that immediately responds to, and investigates, crimes involving: sexual assaults, child sexual offenses, and child abuse or neglect incidents. These incidents involving children are investigated through the utilization of the Maricopa County Multidisciplinary Protocol for the Investigation of Child Abuse. MCSO's Victim Services Unit provided an overview of the work they are implementing to reduce child sex trafficking within Maricopa County and via social media. The data compiled by the MCSO demonstrated an increased understanding of the intersectionality of human trafficking and child abuse cases and increased safety assessment completion. Highlights of the presentation include:

- *Intersection of Human Trafficking:* Children in out-of-home care or placed in foster care have an increased vulnerability to human trafficking due to their familial, emotional, or basic needs not being met in their current environments. Traffickers build relationships and coerce their victims by offering a false sense of security in exchange for their exploitation.
- *Risks for Children in Social Media:* Traffickers utilize social media platforms to identify potential child targets. Their recruitment takes place in the form of grooming, impersonation of youth, media engagements, and blackmailing when sexual content is exchanged.

Trauma-Informed Care and Staff Resiliency

Promoting staff resilience is a key component to reducing trauma and stress. Child welfare agencies that are trauma-informed and resilience-oriented promote ways to mitigate further trauma during the handling of child abuse and neglect cases. Each presentation provided details on how to promote a trauma-informed lens within child welfare, ultimately supporting staff resilience and reducing trauma to families. Highlights of the presentation include:

- *Working with Children Through a Trauma-Informed Lens:* Robin Blumenthal, a certified ACEs Trainer and a member of the Arizona ACEs Consortium, provided insight into Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Understanding ACEs when working with child victims provides professionals with an understanding of how to bridge the gap between safety and trust through empathy and compassion. ACE-informed practices offer strategies to staff that provide support to children and families vulnerable to the detrimental effects of trauma.
- *Building a Resilient Staff:* Promoting a culture of health and wellness for staff in direct service with child abuse/neglect cases is crucial to preventing compassion fatigue and burnout. Chuck Price of Blue Collar Consulting facilitated a conversation about the importance of building resilient staff. Promoting trauma-informed and building resilience

in staff will lead to better outcomes for staff handling child abuse/neglect cases. Outcomes such as staff retention are key components of child welfare to prevent setbacks in case processing.

Legislative Review

Representatives of DCS and the Center for the Rights of Abuse Children provided updates on the state's new legislation related to the handling of child abuse and neglect cases, including criminal conduct cases. Each presentation provided a comprehensive overview of their efforts to increase collaboration in their advocacy. Highlights of the presentation include:

- *Arizona Department of Child Safety (DCS)*: DCS Chief Legislative Liaison, Chris Gustafson, discussed the importance of the new legislation presented to improve the handling of child neglect cases, children that age out of foster care, and education-related policies. Senate Bill 1067 concerning abuse in group homes by staff was presented to improve accountability and transparency in the systemic review of cases of child maltreatment.
- *Center for the Rights of Abused Children*: Kendall Seal, Vice President of Policy at the Center for the Rights of Abused Children, provided an overview of the current legislation related to child abuse/neglect with a focus on SB 1235. SB 1235 proposes establishing a Child Safety Fatality & Near Fatality Review Team within the DCS to recommend changes to policy and practice that improve outcomes for children and families. The multidisciplinary team housed in DCS must review cases reported to the Child Abuse Hotline that concluded in a fatality or near fatality within the prior three years to amend systemic gaps and use these cases as a learning opportunity for staff.

Both presentations included data that described the current status of child abuse and neglect investigations through statistical achievements.

Arizona's CJ Task Force Recommendations

During quarterly CJ Task Force meetings, members discussed the information presented, reviewed the prior recommendations, and assessed survey responses from the 2023 assessment to determine recommendations for 2024-2027. The CJ Task Force decided to focus on the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Continue sponsorship funding to the Arizona Child Abuse Prevention Conference and other professional development opportunities to promote the exchange of ideas, build a professional network, and coordinate training opportunities. [Section 107(e)(1) (A) & (B)]

Recommendation 2: Improve guidelines and training for county joint-investigation protocols and communicate them to relevant parties in each county, encouraging revisions and determining technical assistance where needed. [Section 107(e)(1)(A)&(C)]

Recommendation 3: Continue to sustain and strengthen existing resources for MDTs and MRTs throughout the state, including child or family advocacy centers, Children’s Justice Coordinators (CJCs), the ACFAN, and DCS, to increase the efficiency of investigations and improve services to victims. [Section 107(e)(1)(A), (B) & (C)]

Recommendation 4: Expand prevention resources awareness for community stakeholders to enhance support for families needing services to reduce stressors for families lacking resource accessibility and prevent unintentional child neglect. [Section 107(e)(1)(A)&(C)]

Incorporation of New Recommendations

Over the next three years, the CJ Task Force, with support from the GOYFF CJA program administrator, will be charged with developing and implementing strategies that help improve the state’s coordinated response to child abuse and neglect. Through collaboration between the CJ Task Force, GOYFF, ACFAN, professionals, advocates, and other child safety agencies, the state will further enhance systems to attain improved outcomes for children and families by leading the work on the following tasks:

Arizona Child Abuse Prevention Conference: The CJ Task Force will work with the GOYFF CJA program administrator to continue sponsoring the current networking and workshop training event in 2024 for the state’s CJCs and relevant professionals. The 2024 survey provided a diverse list of ideas and focus areas. The CJ Task Force will administer additional surveys to solicit suggestions from other staff and agencies to ensure a wide range of subject matter for the various disciplines in attendance. The event will provide information on best practices for CJCs to network and foster relationships invaluable to the sustainability of MDTs. In addition, it will provide an opportunity for advocacy center directors and CJC supervisors to receive training to support their staff. [Recommendations 1 and 3]

Arizona CJA Funding Solicitation: GOYFF will provide funding opportunities to support the CJ Task Force’s 2024 recommendations. Arizona’s CJA funding has consistently supported the coordination of MDTs in several counties, in addition to training child abuse and sexual assault investigators, dedicated forensic interviewers, prosecutors, and other specialists. This has helped various jurisdictions establish and maintain consistent, collaborative efforts across the state. In 2025, the state will release a solicitation that addresses these recommendations. GOYFF will work with the CJ Task Force to explore additional incentives promoting sustainability, such as assurances that MDTs and MRTs will be consistently maintained with a contingency plan for

continuing efforts in the event of staff changes or turnover. Maintaining MRTs and MDTs provides internal staff with constant, up-to-date training relevant to other agencies' processes in handling child welfare cases. **[Recommendation 1]**

County Joint-Investigation Protocol Review: The CJ Task Force will assume the role of multi-disciplinary protocol oversight to support and guide counties in revising, establishing, and sustaining effective joint investigation protocols. The CJ Task Force will consistently engage with local MDT stakeholders, including advocacy center representation, to regularly review county-specific protocols, offer technical assistance, and promote best practices. **[Recommendation 2 and 3]**

Expand Cross-Agency Training Statewide: The CJ Task Force will encourage agencies to design and implement training across their respective agencies to ensure a cohesive understanding of every role and part in the process of a child neglect/welfare case. GOYFF will work with the CJ Task Force to explore training options and build a resource roadmap with guidance from sister agencies to prevent reporting in cases where families require resources and are not intentionally perpetrating child neglect. **[Recommendation 4]**