



**A PLAN TO
REBUILD & REFORM
CHILDREN'S DIVISION**
Phase II







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OVERVIEW: WHAT IS THE NEXT STEP?

Phase Two of the Plan to Rebuild and Reform Children's Division is the next step to transform Missouri's child welfare system from a reactive process driven by fear to a proactive process inspired by hope, evidence and best practices. We must build on last year's progress in four fundamental ways. Children's Division needs support from the legislature to:

- Provide more resources to recruit, train, and support foster parents, including relatives
- Provide specialized staff to perform the tasks necessary for the replacement of our ineffective computer system
- Provide the staff necessary to search for relative placements as required by last year's legislation
- Restore a circuit-based leadership structure in St. Louis City and St. Louis County

In addition, we must engage the communities around Missouri to identify and provide services to support children and families to prevent them from entering the deep end of the child welfare system. We can then look forward to a third and final phase in which we will fill in the gaps and make necessary adjustments.

During the last legislative session, we were regularly asked whether our budget requests were sufficient to solve the problems at Children's Division. The answer was that our proposal was only "Phase One," the first step in a multi-year transformational plan. This document proposes what should occur in "Phase Two."

RECAP: WHERE WE STARTED

1

INCREASE PAY

- The average starting salary for case-carrying CD team members was **\$39k per year**. Comparatively, surrounding states start at **\$44k** and private sector offers **\$56k**.
- Low pay impacts recruitment and retention efforts



FUNDING WAS PROVIDED TO STABILIZE OUR FRONT-LINE PAY AT A LEVEL NEAR THE AVERAGE OF SURROUNDING STATES.

2

INCREASE WORKFORCE

- CD strives to meet accreditation standards, which is **15 cases** per worker.
- Due to ongoing vacancies, CD team members handle an average of **25+ cases** each, with workers in our metro areas handling much more and leading to burnout.



FUNDING WAS PROVIDED FOR ADDITIONAL CONTRACTED CASE MANAGEMENT TO REDUCE THE CASELOADS OF OVERBURDENED STAFF.

3

PRESERVE FAMILIES

- Due to staffing shortages, Missouri had been forced to be more reactive and less proactive and preventative.
- Reducing the number of children in foster care would allow CD team members to focus on preventative services, which would help children remain safely at home.



THE LEGISLATURE APPROVED 100 NEW WORKERS TO HELP PREVENT CHILD MALTREATMENT AND CHILDREN ENTERING FOSTER CARE.

4

EXPEDITE THE CONCLUSION OF CASES

- Reunification relies on court action, and CD needs more legal representation to allow cases to be resolved in a timely manner.
- When reunification is not possible, lawyers are needed to promptly litigate hearings to move cases toward guardianship or adoption.



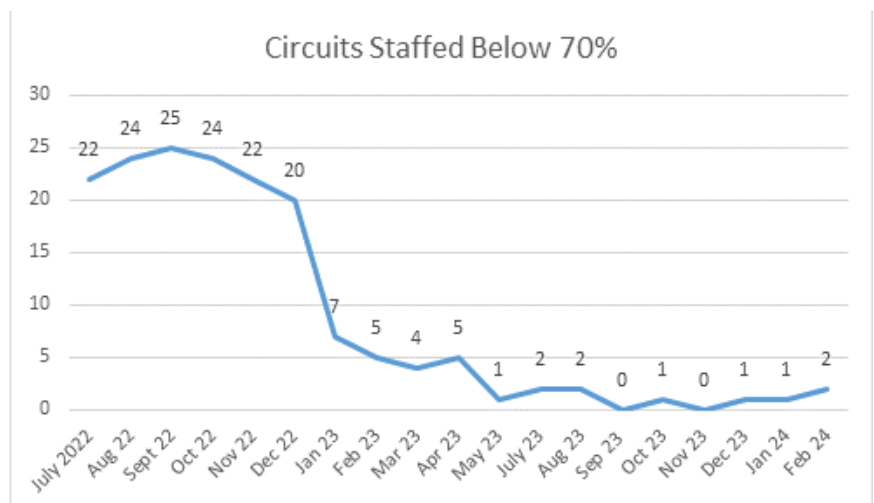
THE LEGISLATURE APPROVED 34 NEW LAWYER POSITIONS TO CONCLUDE CASES FASTER BY TRYING CASES AND ARGUING ON BEHALF OF CHILDREN'S DIVISION IN COURT.

PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES

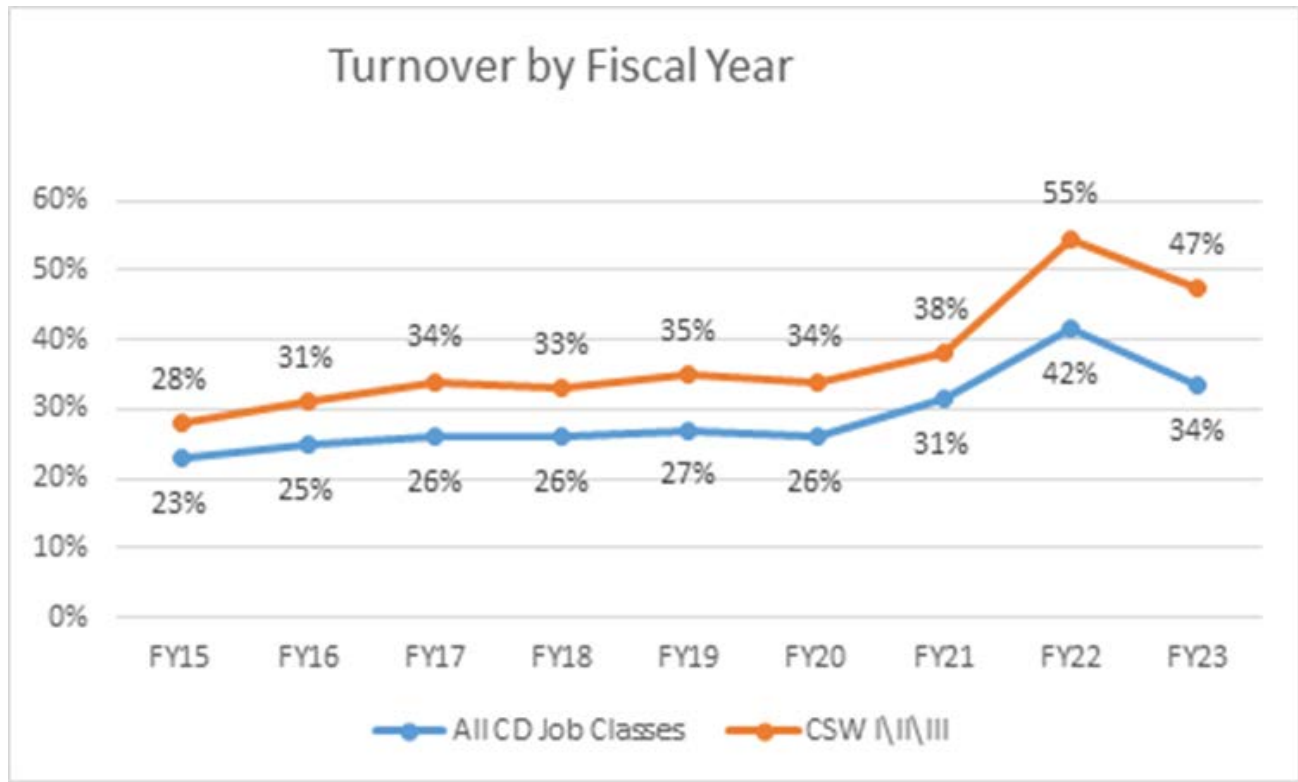
At the time this is being written, we are just beginning to see the impact of phase one. The additional staff are still be trained and deployed, and some remain to be hired. We are already hearing wonderful anecdotes about the work of our prevention team, but it will take time for their full impact to be reflected in the data. We can already see some of the effect of the pay raises in our increased staffing and improved caseloads, but some time is required to fully understand the impact. As things stand now, even before all of our new assets are in place, we have begun to see progress, particularly as it concerns the number of children in foster care. Even so, we continue to face significant challenges which require that we take additional steps.

HIRING AND RETENTION

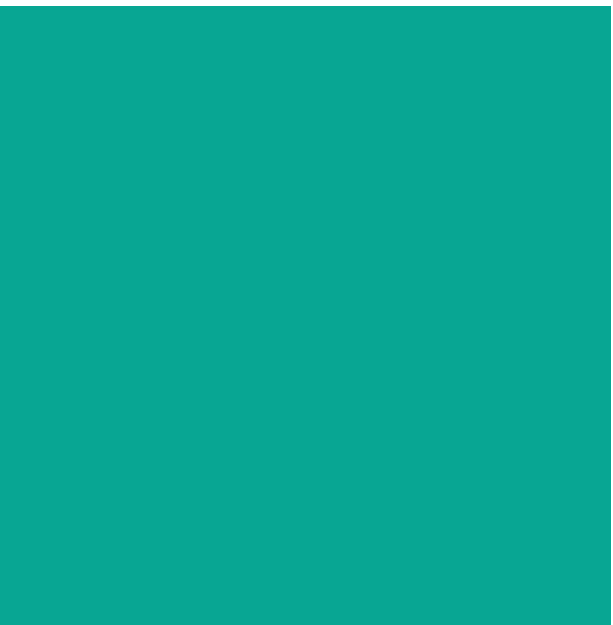
Since the raises went into effect in March 2023, there has been a significant increase in hiring. **At our most dire point, there were 25 circuits that were under 70% staffed.** At the time this is being written, there are two. Here is a chart that shows the direct impact of the pay increases.



Even so, staffing shortages are still a problem and turnover is still high, particularly in the metropolitan areas. The turnover rate is reflected in this chart, as follows:

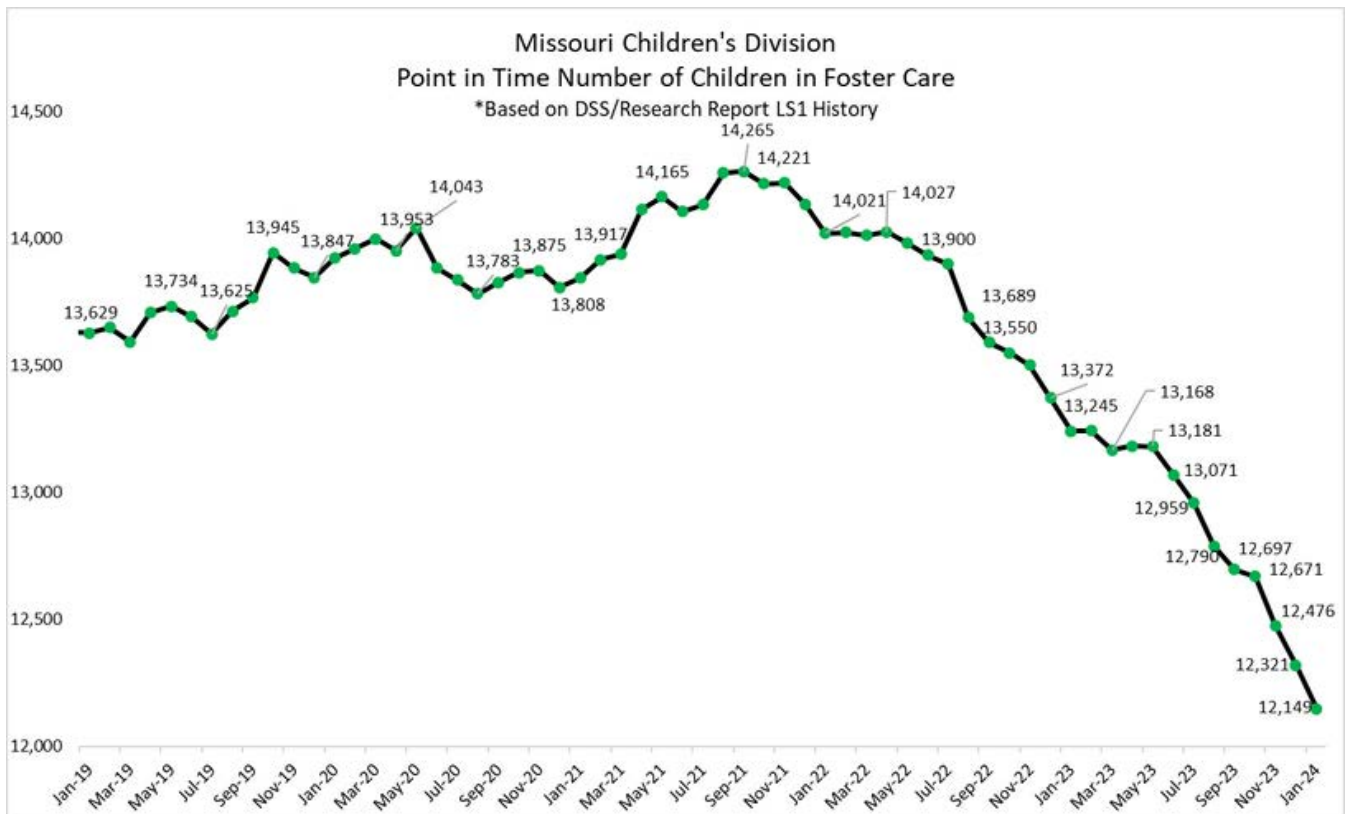


Though the trajectory following last year’s pay increase is promising, turnover for FY23 was still the second highest since 2015, which obviously affects performance. Anecdotally, workers express that they continue to struggle with excessive workloads and frequent on-call duties that result from being short-staffed.



FOSTER CARE NUMBERS

Missouri has extremely high numbers of children in foster care. At the beginning of 2022, we had over 14,000 foster children, double the national average per capita. Only four other states were in worse condition. Since that time, by encouraging prevention and working with court partners to conclude cases, we have seen the number fall to **12,149** in January 2024. As stated earlier, our reduction in the use of foster care reduces trauma and saves the state \$30,000 per year for each child kept out of the system. The following chart demonstrates the number of kids in care over the last four years and the reduction of children in care accomplished over the last two years.



We are now sixth highest in the nation with 9.1 children per thousand in foster care. While there is a long way to go, we have made progress. Here is the latest chart from Casey Family Programs:

Rate In Care | State Rankings

In care rate is measured by the unique number of children and youth in the foster care population on the last day of the reporting period per 1,000 children and youth in the general population.



Source: state submitted AFCARS data (children/youth < age 18; federal fiscal year ending 09/30)

casey family programs | casey.org

The progress is clear, but these are early days. Funding became available for prevention workers on July 1, 2023, and hiring began shortly thereafter. The impact of their diversionary efforts have not yet been realized because they are just beginning their work in the field. Most of our reduction of foster children appears to have come from more promptly concluding cases of children already in care. Once all of our prevention workers are trained and deployed, we expect even more substantial reductions will result as our team finds solutions to allow many families to safely remain together. The hiring of lawyers to promptly move cases through the court system should accelerate the number of children leaving foster care through guardianship and adoption. **If our interventions have their intended effect, the reduced number of children in state custody will allow for us to normalize caseloads.** Then, our staff will be able to commit themselves to preventing child maltreatment and working directly with families before it would become necessary for their children to come into foster care.

PHASE II: PLAN OUTLINE

1

SUPPORT OUR FOSTER PARENTS

- We need more foster homes to support the number of kids currently in care.
- Foster parents, including relative placements, aren't able to get the attention and support they need because our case workers are already overtaxed with case management, and as a result we are losing foster homes.
- **We need 50 FTE dedicated to supporting, recruiting, and retaining foster families.**

2

CCWIS SPECIALISTS

- CD is in the process of replacing an antiquated and user-frustrating computer system with a Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS)
- **We need 12 FTE to provide assistance with field surveys, testing, development, and training associated with building a new system.**

3

RESTORE ST. LOUIS LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

- St. Louis Super Circuit (the combined City and County) is not working and causing unnecessary delays and deterioration of communication and the relationships with juvenile officers and judges in each area.
- **We must remedy this situation by adding two circuit managers to accommodate a St. Louis City circuit and St. Louis County Circuit.**

COST ANALYSIS FOR PHASE II

Foster parent support staff (50 FTE)	\$4.2 M
CCWIS staff for creation and implementation (12 FTE)	\$1.1 M
Circuit managers for St. Louis City and St. Louis County (2 FTE)	\$226 K

TOTAL COST FOR PHASE II: \$5,540,919



1. SUPPORT OUR FOSTER PARENTS

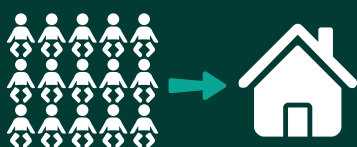
Missouri has a severe shortage of foster homes. There are roughly 4,500 homes to house over 12,000 children. That ratio needs to be drastically changed. Not only do we need enough homes to care for the children currently in care, there must be a surplus so that there are open foster homes in each school district in Missouri. Only then can we be sure that no children will face the prospect of being placed outside their community.

When we are required to place children far from home, they lose their school, teacher, any activities they may have been involved in, and all of their best friends. Many older youth are difficult to place, even with family members, and therefore are sent to distant placements, severing their social connections at a crucial time in their lives. To prevent such losses, foster homes must be widely dispersed so that there are always available placements everywhere in Missouri. In order to accomplish these goals, we must provide resources necessary to recruit and support foster homes.

With our current work force, Children's Division is unable to provide the swift and comprehensive assistance foster parents require and deserve. Workers have a strong desire to provide for foster parents' needs, but those concerns often get pushed to the back burner. Because workers are required to first conduct mandated visits with children and their biological parents and appear at required court hearings, there is little time left to provide necessary support for the foster families who directly care for the children. Consequently, many unsupported foster parents and relatives are unable to continue caring for children in their homes, especially when they are dealing with older youth who may have emotional and behavioral issues. The only way to remedy this problem is to establish a force solely dedicated to recruiting, licensing, managing, and supporting foster homes.

THE NEED FOR FOSTER PARENT SUPPORT

Currently, because of a lack of support, our case workers don't have a choice but to send children to any available home - near or far.



Ideally, our case workers would be able to choose the best home for the child, increasing the probability of success for the placement and limit the trauma to the child.



In addition to workers who to recruit foster parents from the community, we also require staff to find and support relative placements. The law in Missouri has always prioritized relative placements, but last session's Senate Bill 186 requires we find all of a child's relatives quickly and notify them that the child has come into foster care. Those relatives must then be given first consideration for placement. If they live in another state, the process becomes even more complicated and time-consuming.

Once those relatives are located, they need to be supported and provided with all of the information and resources necessary to effectively care for their young family members who have entered the foster care system. Relative placements are known to be more stable and allow for children to retain their connections with family and friends. This is less traumatic for children, results in more durable placements, and provides the possibility for swifter resolution if parents are unable to regain custody. We particularly need to provide for the needs of family members caring for our more challenging older youth. **Support for these grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other relatives is essential to the reform of our system.**

For those children whose behaviors make placement difficult, we need to establish and fully support career foster homes and treatment foster homes for whom this work will be a vocation. This could fill in the gap that has been left by the loss of residential settings for the most challenging children.

To meet our current need, we require at least 6,000 foster homes. If we sustain this number even as the number of foster children declines, there will always be a home available for a child in their area – a situation that doesn't currently exist. In order to effectively recruit, retain, and support our foster homes, workers must be dedicated to only that task. Under ideal circumstances, a worker would manage 40 homes. Based on our current number of children in care, provision of this support would require 150 full time employees, but **we are only requesting 50 additional personnel to provide foster parents the support they need.** We anticipate that the number of children in foster care will continue to decline, requiring fewer workers and freeing up additional staff to support foster homes.



2. CCWIS SPECIALISTS

Children's Division is in the process of replacing its antiquated and user-frustrating computer system with a Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS). This process will involve a large number of people to do the proper field surveys and testing, and the practical work involved in the development of a new system, including training of the new processes. We need people to engage with our entire staff in order to be certain that the system we build is the one our workers need. Children's Division will require 12 additional full time people to accomplish this daunting task.



3. RESTORE ST. LOUIS LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

In addition, problems with the leadership structure in the St. Louis area have become apparent. Some years ago, a decision was made to merge the St. Louis City and St. Louis County offices into a kind of Super-Circuit. Experience dictates that we reverse course on that decision and restore the former structure in St. Louis. Workers who used to operate in a specific area are now traversing across the entire St. Louis region, often in heavy traffic, which has proven remarkably time consuming and inefficient. Also, the lack of separate leadership in each judicial circuit has adversely impacted communication and relationship with the juvenile officers and judges in the two circuits. We must remedy this situation by adding two circuit managers, one for St. Louis City (the 22nd Circuit), and another for St. Louis County (the 21st Circuit).



PHASE III

What's Next?

With the tools provided in Phase One and Two, we will be equipped to begin our movement toward a proactive, preventative child welfare model. More resources will be needed, however, to fully implement the Plan to Reform and Rebuild Children's Division. Once we have people in place to engage with families and refer them to the appropriate services, we need to fill in the gaps in communities where the needed services are not available. We will also need to make adjustments within our workforce to provide needed expertise and leadership, which will not only improve practice, but also help address the difficulties we continue to experience with employee retention.





Last year, the General Assembly whole-heartedly embraced our Plan to Rebuild and Reform Children’s Division. Numerous legislators throughout the session expressed concern that what we had proposed would not be enough to address the well-known challenges facing our agency. We acknowledged that their assessment was correct; we would ultimately need to do more. The process of stabilizing the agency and retooling it to a fundamentally different approach would require time to implement, and necessitates a multi-phased roll-out. This proposal is the second phase of that process. The third phase will involve an analysis of the impact of these initial changes and an identification of gaps that need to be filled. Hopefully, upon the completion of Phase Two, Missouri will have a new and improved child welfare system that takes better care of kids and families. Progress has been made, and with ongoing support, Missouri will have an excellent child welfare system which takes better care of children by being more proactive and less invasive in the lives of the families we support.





*Empower Missourians to live safe, healthy,
and productive lives.*