



South Carolina Citizen Review Panel

**Annual Report:
April 2020 - March 2021**





MISSION

Engaging citizens to improve outcomes for SC's children and families affected by child abuse and neglect.

VISION

That all of South Carolina's children and families are free from child abuse and neglect.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Members of the South Carolina Citizen Review Panel would like to express their appreciation to the following individuals and organizations for their support of the panel's work during the past year.

Outgoing Chairpersons:

- Kim Janha, Executive Chair and Midlands Panel Chair
- Angela Pruitt, Upstate Panel Chair

MSW Intern:

- Christina Rivero

South Carolina Department of Social Services:

- Michael Leach, State Director
- Karen Bryant, Deputy State Director
- Portia Hawkins

LETTER TO READERS

Dear Reader:

South Carolina, in accordance to The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), has three Citizen Review Panels that are charged to examine the policies, procedures, and practices of the child protective services system. CRPs', located in the Low-Country, Midlands and Upstate, members work in collaboration with child welfare stakeholders to research and evaluate topics that have influence on the programs administered to our children and families.

SC CRP members are citizens of varied backgrounds who come together to discuss and address measures to improve the services to children and families of South Carolina. The panels' goals are to build awareness around its works and to connect with other advocacy and child welfare service organizations to address concerns and promote well-structured service practices of the state's child-welfare agency. The year 2020, can be said to be the year that forced our society to regroup and to strengthen and/or seek new measures to serve. The challenging 2020 seemed to be the force needed to accept an "improved" normal. SC CRP's focus is to be on transforming our child welfare agency into the model child welfare agency in the United States.

In 2020, the panels addressed kinship care, the mental health of caseworkers and the relationship between the caseworkers and guardians ad litem. The panels, under the coordination of the Children's Law Center, partnered with the Department of Social Services Administration and other community service organizations to gain knowledge on the chosen topics to provide informed recommendations for improved services in these areas. Working with these entities proved to be advantageous in noting the challenges and strengths in the policies and practices of DSS.

It has been a pleasure serving as the Executive Chair for the SCCRP, since 2017. It is with great confidence in the newly elected panel chairs, that the panel will continue to pursue a strong communal approach to ensure that our children and families are served effectively and efficiently. I appreciate Carolyn Morris and the leadership at the Children's Law Center for all of the support given to the panels' efforts.

In Service,

[Dr. Kim Janha](#)

Kim Janha, Ph.D.

Executive Chair

ABOUT THE PANEL

Citizen Review Panels (CRPs) are federally mandated mechanisms for citizen participation in child protection, through evaluation and public outreach. Each state is required to have at least one CRP, and most are required to have more based on their federal funding level. In South Carolina, there are three panels located in different geographic areas of the state. The Upstate Panel alternates meeting in Greenwood and Greenville counties; the Midlands Panel meets in Richland County; and the Lowcountry Panel meets in Charleston or Dorchester County. Panels review policies, procedures, and practices of the child protection system and make recommendations annually to the South Carolina Department of Social Services (SCDSS). These recommendations are intended to improve the child protection system and make a difference in the lives of children who are abused or neglected. Citizen Review Panels offer volunteers an effective way to share in the community's responsibility to protect the children of South Carolina.

LEGAL AUTHORITY

Citizen Review Panels were established through the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) Reauthorization of 1996 and amendments were enacted in the 2003 and 2010 reauthorizations. Under CAPTA, the state child protection agency must establish at least the required number of panels in the state, provide information on cases as determined to be necessary, arrange for staff assistance to the panel in the performance of its duties, and respond to the panel's recommendations.

CAPTA also outlines the duties of the panel. Each Citizen Review Panel is charged with evaluating the extent to which the State is fulfilling its child protection responsibilities in accordance with its CAPTA State plan by: (1) examining the policies, procedures and practices of state and local child protection agencies, and (2) reviewing specific cases, where appropriate. In addition, a panel may examine other criteria that it considers important to ensure the protection of children, including the extent to which the State and local child protection system is coordinated with the Title IV-E Foster Care and Adoption Assistance Programs of the Social Security Act. This provision also authorizes panels to review the child fatalities and near fatalities in the state. Panels must meet at least quarterly to accomplish these duties.

In order to assess the impact of current procedures and practices upon children and families in the community and fulfill the above requirements, citizen review panels must provide for public outreach and comment. Finally, each state Panel must prepare an annual report that summarizes its activities and makes recommendations to improve the child protection system at the state and local levels. The report must be submitted to the child protection agency and the public.

Reference: Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), as amended, 42 U.S.C. 5106a(c).

SOUTH CAROLINA CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL MEMBERSHIP

Panels are to be comprised of volunteer members who are representative of the community and include members who have expertise in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect. CAPTA requires that members maintain confidentiality by not disclosing any identifying information regarding child protection cases. In South Carolina, the panels are self-perpetuating with new members elected by current members. Each panel elects its chairperson.

Members during the period of April 2020 – March 2021 are listed below:

Lowcountry

1. Donna Xenakis (Chair)
2. Tomeika Martin
3. LuShorn Smalls

Midlands

1. Kimberly Janha (Chair)
2. Ralphielle Green
3. Kay Powers
4. Nina Spinelli
5. Chris Whitaker
6. Brooke Wymer-Ellis

Upstate

1. Angela Pruitt (Chair)
2. Brittany Able
3. Sharon Britz
4. Tanya Camunas
5. Chloe Evans
6. Michael Gaskin
7. Allie Elizabeth Howell
8. Linda Klemm-Maxie
9. Betsy Manning
10. Kimberly McIntyre
11. Sabrina Miller
12. Loretta Parker
13. Dorothy Priestler
14. Rosella Quarles
15. Paulette Randall
16. Danny Varat
17. Paige Wall

STAFF SUPPORT

SCDSS provides funding for staff support and administrative expenses through a contract with the Children’s Law Center at the University of South Carolina School of Law. The Panels function independently, with staff and research support to assist in the performance of their duties.

The Children’s Law Center employees a part-time staff coordinator to assist the panels. The position was vacant during the period covered by this report but is expected to be filled in the near future. An MSW Intern, Christina Rivero, provided research support and information to the panels.

YEAR IN REVIEW

The past year has been challenging as South Carolina struggled with the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic. Panels had to adapt to changing conditions, including the conversion to virtual rather than in-person meetings. Additionally, the prolonged vacancy in the Coordinator position has left the panels without the level of support needed. This part-time position was posted, but unfortunately did not result in successfully filling the position.

In spite of the challenges this past year, three regional panels continued their work in the Upstate, Midlands, and Lowcountry. Panels met throughout the year to review policies and practices and discuss issues affecting the child welfare system in the state. Each panel focused on different topics. The Upstate panel addressed the role and relationship of DSS child welfare professionals and volunteer guardians ad litem. The Midlands Panel focused on well-being / mental health issues affecting child welfare professionals related to secondary trauma. The Lowcountry Panel began a review of issues affecting kinship caregivers, particularly the need for financial assistance.

The Executive Committee (comprised of the panel chairpersons) met periodically with representatives of the South Carolina Department of Social Services. During these meetings, panels chairs asked questions or discussed concerns. SCDSS shared updates on the Michelle H. lawsuit, the Child and Family Services Review, and the agency’s priorities and plans.

Panel members joined together for a virtual retreat on February 11, 2021. Karen Bryant, Deputy State Director for Child Welfare Services, SCDSS, presented updates from the agency and responded to the Panel’s previous recommendations. Sharleta Woodall, Statewide Kinship Care Manager, shared information about that growing program. Christina Rivero, Children’s Law Center MSW Intern, presented information about mental health issues and child welfare professionals. Ms. Rivero also discussed findings of a survey of panel members related to diversity and recruitment. Panel chairpersons presented summaries of their work.

Ms. Rivero, as part of her MSW internship work, completed two projects that will benefit the panel in the coming year and beyond. In partnership with a colleague, Mandy Bidinger, Ms. Rivero undertook a project entitled *Recruiting a Diverse Citizen Review Panel to Accurately Reflect Community Needs*. They

conducted a meta-analysis literature review, reviewed websites for current CRP memberships, and sent a survey to South Carolina CRP members. They found that panel diversity that is representative of the served community is more likely to advocate for the needs of those groups. The surveys revealed that current CRP membership is primarily comprised of women with advanced degrees. Some vital perspectives are lacking, such as youth who are in, or were previously in, foster care. They recommended a comprehensive recruitment and selection plan to achieve broad representation on the panel. Specific recommendations were:

- Improve the CRP website and expand information about joining the panels and what membership entails
- Revise CRP recruitment materials
- Each panel elect a recruitment chair or committee
- Build relationships with targeted organizations and groups that can fill identified gaps in representation
- Remove barriers to participation
- Monitor recruitment, selection, and membership.

In addition to the diverse membership project, Ms. Rivero conducted an examination of the Panel's bylaws and compared them to those of other organizations and CRPs in other states. She drafted proposed revisions and held a work session with several CRP members. This effort led to a comprehensive set of bylaws that are ready to be voted on. As suggested by the CRP members, the bylaws are structured to include broad guidelines for the entire state and an addendum to be prepared by each panel to set out its specific processes. This provides uniformity while also allowing each panel to function in a manner that best suits its needs.

PANEL CHAIR REPORTS

LOW COUNTRY CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL

Kinship Care

The LowCountry Citizen Review Panel began project work in 2019 to look at Kinship Care, specifically the financial strain on Kinship CareGivers. Two of the biggest concerns of Kinship Caregivers are access to health care for the children and financial hardship.

in 2019, the LowCountry CRP met monthly from February to September.

Subsidies Available in South Carolina

On the Department of Social Services (DSS) website there are three methods of financial support for kinship caregivers including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Child Support, and Foster Care Board payments.

TANF

TANF is a federal program that provides temporary assistance to families with very low incomes in the form of a child only or family grant. The income threshold for South Carolina's TANF program is approximately 50% of the federal poverty level and approximately 79% of TANF recipients are children under the age of 18. In SC, the average monthly TANF payment is \$207 per month, which is less than half of the stipend Foster Parents receive for one child. However, because the parents of the children are required to pay this money back, most Kinship Caregivers will not apply because they don't want to put a financial burden on the parents who may already be struggling.

Child Support

Parents of children in Kinship Care are required to provide financial support unless and until parental rights are terminated or a child reaches the age of majority.

Foster Care Board Payments

Licensed Kinship Caregivers providing formal Kinship Care with DSS involvement are eligible to receive monthly board payments for expenses related to the care for the child in Kinship Care. To become licensed, a Kinship Caregiver must have a background check, home inspection, receive a medical disclosure from a doctor, financial report and attend required training. Licensed Kinship Caregivers are entitled to receive payment at the full foster care rate for the cost of essentials their child needs and any other benefits available to Foster Parents. However, there are many barriers for Kinship Caregivers to become licensed. Many Kinship Care givers don't have transportation or a computer, therefore they can't apply online or attend required meetings or trainings to become licensed. Research shows that Kinship Caregivers are more likely to be poor or living on a fixed income. Kinship families who are living in poverty, and Kinship Caregivers who are living on a fixed income need financial assistance.

Comparing Foster Care to Kinship Care in South Carolina

SC Foster Parents receive a monthly stipend for each child that is in their home. The payment is to cover essentials for the child/children in their care. The stipend is paid to the Foster Parent to help cover the cost of essentials like food, clothing, daycare, car seats, beds, and any extras like after-school activities.

According to Fostering Great Ideas, the current rates of payments for Foster Children in SC are:

0-5 years old \$500

6-12 years old \$523

13-21 years old \$589

Clothing Stipend \$100 (Initial)

Other financial supports available to Foster Parents are Medicaid, ABC vouchers, WIC vouchers, and a quarterly Clothing Stipend. Although parents of children in foster care may be ordered by the court to pay child support, to the best of our knowledge there is not a set requirement that they pay back the amount of these benefits.

Kinship Care in New York

In New York, Kinship Caregivers may apply for Temporary Assistance (TA) for the child's financial support. The application for a non-parent caregiver grant is based on the child's needs and not on income. At the same time, Kinship Caregivers may apply for Medicaid to cover the costs of the child's health care. Kinship Caregivers may also be eligible to receive food stamps for the child and SSI if the child is disabled. If Kinship Caregivers work, they may apply for help with childcare costs.

LowCountry CRP Recommendations

LowCountry CRP Recommendation 1: The LowCountry CRP recommends the South Carolina Department of Social Services remove the time limitation to apply for licensing, as many new Kinship Caregivers are possibly in crisis mode, focused on getting the children settled, and not thinking at this time of applying to be a licensed Kinship Caregiver.

LowCountry CRP Recommendation 2: The LowCountry CRP recommends the South Carolina Department of Social Services make the path to licensing for Kinship Caregivers more accessible by taking into consideration the constraints that many Kinship Caregivers must deal with, such as no transportation, no internet service, etc.

LowCountry CRP Recommendation 3: The LowCountry CRP recommends the South Carolina Department of Social Services provide the same monthly stipend and clothing allowance that Foster Children receive to children in Kinship Care.

LowCountry CRP Recommendation 4: The LowCountry CRP recommends the South Carolina Department of Social Services provide the same ABC vouchers that Foster Children receive to children in Kinship Care.

LowCountry CRP Recommendation 5: The LowCountry CRP recommends the South Carolina Department of Social Services provide WIC vouchers that Foster Children receive to children in Kinship Care.

LowCountry CRP Recommendation 6: The LowCountry CRP recommends the South Carolina Department of Social Services provide the same access to healthcare through Medicaid that Foster Children receive to children in Kinship Care.

LowCountry CRP Recommendation 7: The LowCountry CRP recommends the South Carolina Department of Social Services removes the requirement that the parents of the children in Kinship Care pay child support and pay back any funds received through TANF, as this requirement has the effect of reducing support for Kinship caregivers.

MIDLANDS CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL

Mental Health Wellness of Child Welfare Staff

With as many policy and practice challenges and successes (relative to DSS Case managers) that can be named and researched, the Midlands' Panel decided to explore the topic of mental health, especially for case managers. The Midlands Panel, as with other aspects of the human service environment pressed forward through the challenges presented through COVID-19 Pandemic. The discussion around the chosen topic began in the early months of 2020. The topic seemed to be more relevant as the pandemic restricted year progressed.

Mental health has varied aspects and can be applicable to the many parts of the duties a caseworker executes. Specifically, Midlands' members sought data and information on:

1. SC DSS Policies and Resources Related to Wellness (i.e. trainings, self-care opportunities, employee assistance programs).
2. What other states were doing in support of their caseworker's mental wellness?
3. Are there any established evidence-based measuring instruments that will aid in developing surveys to gauge employees' opinions on mental health and organization promotion?
4. Programs and Resources to Address Secondary Traumatic Stress of Case managers.

The Children's Law Center offered the service of interns to conduct research on the four areas of interest. Research presented that there was no mention of staff wellness or secondary traumatic stress within the child welfare manuals on the DSS website. However, the topics were briefly addressed in the latest two training plans available under "Annual Progress and Service Reports." Furthermore, the plans provided a list of training events that workers can attend in addition to basic training.

Research also indicated that there were no guides or model programs for workplace wellness in a child welfare agency, specifically. However, there are many state public health agencies, small businesses and large fortune 500 companies that provide workplace wellness program for employees to address the growing healthcare costs associated with unhealthy lifestyles.

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), secondary traumatic stress (STS) is the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another person. Given the nature of their work, child welfare staff are at a very high risk of experiencing trauma

firsthand and STS. STS can affect organizational culture and the ability of staff to effectively help children and families. STS in child welfare does not just stem from exposure to traumatic stories of others. It occurs due to a culmination of factors.

Child welfare staff may experience the death of a child from a case, work in violent communities, encounter system frustrations, or confront physical assaults.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Department of Social Services consider the presented summary around mental wellness and use a reference to review the current practices around this most relevant topic. Additionally, it is recommended that a statewide survey is conducted to gauge the current perception of mental wellness among DSS child welfare staff.

UPSTATE CITIZEN REVIEW PANEL

The Upstate Panel formed a survey committee and surveys were sent out throughout the State through a partnership with the Department of Social Services and the SC Guardian Ad Litem Program to evaluate the relationships between the two entities. The results illustrated that there is a disconnect with communication throughout the State, and training is needed for new employees to continue to improve this partnership. The SC Children's Law Center offered to provide an online training when new DSS Case Workers and a new Guardian Ad Litem are hired to explain what both agencies provide and how beneficial it is with both agencies working together. The Panel also found that more children are returned home safely from Foster Care when the two entities work together. The Upstate Panel also lost a very valuable panel member due to COVID, Carolyn Robinson who has been on the panel for over ten years and put her heart and soul into making a difference in the community. She will truly be missed.

The Upstate Panel is going to continue to work hard on connecting the relationship between DSS and the Guardian Ad Litem Program. The panel feels that this relationship is very important for children being returned home safely throughout the State.

It is recommended that DSS make available to its staff the training prepared by the Children's Law Center for child welfare professionals and volunteer guardians ad litem.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The LowCountry CRP recommends the South Carolina Department of Social Services remove the time limitation to apply for licensing, as many new Kinship Caregivers are possibly in crisis mode, focused on getting the children settled, and not thinking at this time of applying to be a licensed Kinship Caregiver.
2. The LowCountry CRP recommends the South Carolina Department of Social Services make the path to licensing for Kinship Caregivers more accessible by taking into consideration the constraints that many Kinship Caregivers must deal with, such as no transportation, no internet service, etc.
3. The LowCountry CRP recommends the South Carolina Department of Social Services provide the same monthly stipend and clothing allowance that Foster Children receive to children in Kinship Care.
4. The LowCountry CRP recommends the South Carolina Department of Social Services provide the same ABC vouchers that Foster Children receive to children in Kinship Care.
5. The LowCountry CRP recommends the South Carolina Department of Social Services provide WIC vouchers that Foster Children receive to children in Kinship Care.
6. The LowCountry CRP recommends the South Carolina Department of Social Services provide the same access to healthcare through Medicaid that Foster Children receive to children in Kinship Care.
7. The LowCountry CRP recommends the South Carolina Department of Social Services removes the requirement that the parents of the children in Kinship Care pay child support and pay back any funds received through TANF, as there is no such requirement for the parents of the children in Foster Care.
8. It is recommended that the Department of Social Services consider the presented summary around mental wellness (See Midlands Panel report) and use as a reference to review the current practices around this most relevant topic. Additionally, it is recommended that a statewide survey is conducted to gauge the current perception of mental wellness among DSS child welfare staff.
9. It is recommended that DSS make available to its staff the training module prepared by the Children's Law Center for child welfare professionals and volunteer guardians ad litem.

LOOKING BACK: PREVIOUS RECOMMENDATIONS

The South Carolina CRP's 2019 recommendations and DSS' response¹ are as follow:

1. **That SCDSS review the letters from Beaufort County DSS to their non-offending/victim parents to explain their services to clients with a domestic violence case to consider use statewide.**

SCDSS Response: Over the last year we've reviewed our policies, procedures, and practice standards related to non-offending/victim parents and where necessary, revised those policies to enhance clarity for the field. Our policies continue to be available online.

2. **In the 2018 Annual Report, the Lowcountry Panel made seven recommendations pertaining to domestic violence with a focus on keeping children safe and together with the nonoffending/victim parent. We request an update on any progress made.**

SCDSS Response: As stated previously, policy related to domestic violence must be written in collaboration and consideration with all policy. Child Protective Services (CPS) intake policies are published and now the agency is working to finalize policies for CPS investigations.

3. **That SCDSS continues to develop a collaborative relationship with community stakeholders, which can aid in increasing and maintaining a positive image in the community. Continuously, it is recommended that a volunteer program is established to engage the public in efforts to assist youth involved in the child welfare system.**

SCDSS Response: Over the last year we've been steadfast in our commitment to developing collaborative relationships with community stakeholders. We have several advisory groups to aid the agency in strategic and programmatic planning. Currently, we've chartered the following groups:

- *Child Welfare Advisory Group*
- *Youth Advisory Council*
- *Kinship Advisory Group, and*
- *a Private Provider Advisory Group (a subgroup of the Child Welfare Advisory Group)*

We are committed to continuing and expanding our relationships with community stakeholders to better support children and youth in our care.

4. **That SCDSS continues its efforts in training its staff and promoting a culture that provides the highest level of service to kinship care families. It is also recommended that outreach is done beyond the awareness of caregivers, but to the larger community to educate on best practices in servicing kinship caregivers and the children in their care.**

SCDSS Response: ... We've continued to be responsive in efforts for training staff to promote the highest level of service to kinship care families. Kinship care training has been developed and delivered

¹ DSS response presented by Karen Bryant at the Citizens Review Panel Retreat, February 11, 2021.

statewide to current case managers and supervisors, which explains the differences between kinship guardianship and kinship foster home licensing and applicable legislation. Additionally, the training's focus is to highlight the added benefits of kinship for children in out-of-home care and provide additional understanding around trauma and how placing with kin lessens many harmful effects for children in the foster care system.

- 5. That SCDSS establish a stand-alone, child-centered policy on domestic violence, to include measures that will keep children safe and together with the non-offending/victim parent. Additionally, it is recommended that SCDSS collaborate with domestic violence professionals who serve as liaisons to the agency and the South Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault to provide effective and efficient services to families who experience domestic violence.**

SCDSS Response: Policy related to domestic violence must be written in collaboration and consideration with all policy. I would ask that you all go onto our website and review the policies recently approved and posted and please provide us with feedback. Additionally, we are also providing domestic violence training to our staff (the Safe and Together) and thus far we've trained almost 1200 staff thus far.

- 6. That SCDSS continue its efforts to improve the treatment planning process, with a particular focus on the involvement of families in developing the plan.**

SCDSS Response: We've actually revised our Family Permanency Plan policy and have revamped the form and process for completion in CAPSS. We hope to deploy the new form and policy within the next three months.

LOOKING AHEAD

In looking ahead to the coming year, new chairpersons for each of the three panels have been voted by their respected Panels to serve as Chairs. Kim Janha served her term as Executive Chair and Chair of the Midlands Panel. Nina Spinelli and Brooke Wymer-Ellis were elected to serve as Co-Chairs of the Midlands Panel. In the Upstate, Angela Pruitt served her term as chairperson and Michael Gaskin was elected to serve as Chair. Donna Xenakis will continue as Chair of the Lowcountry Panel.

In an effort to fill the Coordinator position, the Children's Law Center was able to combine this part-time position with a part-time training position to create a full-time position. It is hoped that more qualified candidates will be interested in a full-time position.

With this leadership in place the Panel looks forward to the coming year with optimism and sets the following goals to strengthen its long-term efficiency and effectiveness:

- Fill the coordinator's position with a well-qualified professional to support the Panel's work
- Finalize the bylaws to clarify methods of operation statewide and for each panel
- Develop and implement a recruitment plan to expand and diversify panel membership
- Expand and improve the website to include information for prospective members and methods for citizen input
- Formalize an orientation program for new members
- Hold one or two statewide planning events
- Send representatives to the national CRP conference, depending on funding
- Begin steps to add a fourth panel in the Pee Dee area of the state

Citizen Review Panels were established to gain citizen input in assessing each state's fulfillment of its responsibility to protect children. The South Carolina Panel looks forward to embracing this purpose in the year to come.

THANK YOU.



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