

CWAC 8.21.25 Minutes

Members Present: Christopher Cox (in person), Ronica Patel (in person), Dr. Tiffany Johnson (virtual), Stephanie Franklin (in person), Nancy Dorfman-Schwartz (in person), Kimberly Jones (virtual), Andrea Durbin (in person), Jason Keeler (in person), Jere Murry (virtual), Patrick M. Phelan (in person), Evelyn Smith (virtual), Lisa Nicklas (virtual), Andrea Hall (in person), LaTasha Roberson (in person), Kara Teeple (virtual), Emily Rawsky (virtual), Clete Winkelmann (virtual), Sarah Tunning (virtual), Dr. Mitchell Sandy, Emily Medere (in person), Mark Becker (virtual), Malia Arnett (in person), Elena Xhalexington Duncan Velez (virtual), Melissa Smith (virtual), Mary Savage (virtual).

Vote: The team approved the minutes for the May 7, 2025, meeting with a few amendments. Andrea Hall and Nancy were added to the attendance list, and a spelling error was corrected. June Summit minutes have been tabled. The team realized the full day included both a formal business meeting and other activities. A new plan was established to create two separate documents: one for the official meeting minutes and a second, separate document to detail the overall summit actions and discussions.

Director's Remarks

The Director announced that the FY25 permanency rates reached 36.1%, surpassing the FY24 record of 34% and the BH consent decree target of 32%. This success is attributed to the team's hard work and a general decrease in caseloads. The new stable funding formula has been released to recognize and reward agencies for their good work, even as caseloads decrease. The federal government has accepted the plan amendments for the Title IV-E claiming related to the KIND Act, which will allow for reimbursement of implementation costs. A report on the breakdown of permanency outcomes (reunification, adoption, and guardianship) is available. The director noted increases in adoption and guardianship in FY25, while reunification numbers saw a slight decrease. Action Item: The report will be shared with the team.

CWAC Summit recap and update on structure

The new structure, designed to enhance collaboration and streamline processes, was unanimously approved by the 49 attendees. The team received an "overwhelming response" to a survey for co-chair and member volunteers. A "crosswalk" document was created to show how the old committees fit into the new structure, ensuring no work is lost. A new automated system will be developed for storing committee information and files, improving efficiency and preventing redundant work. Gabby is a key part of this initiative.

Advisory Group Presentation

Kara Hamilton walked us through a presentation on DCFS advisory groups with the intent of level-setting expectations for new members. It highlighted the mission, vision, and goals of DCFS, and clarified that there are about 20 advisory groups, some mandated by law and others created by the director. All advisory groups follow Robert's Rules of Order. Most meetings are open to the public, with a few exceptions like the Youth Advisory Board.

Youth Advisory Council:

The Youth Advisory Board (YAB) provided an update on their recent work. They have new officers in all four regions and have hired eleven ambassadors and four interns. A new "lived experience expert" role has been created to mentor younger members. YAB was praised for their successful advocacy, having led the charge to pass the **Haircare Bill**. The bill's success demonstrates the importance of listening to the voices of young people and allowing them to lead legislative and policy-making efforts. The **Haircare Symposium on December 13th** at Governor's State University. The event will provide information and hands-on training for caregivers and foster parents, following the youth-led legislative effort that passed the Haircare Bill. The YAB encourages everyone to help spread the word about the event.

Insurance Liability Update: The team is actively addressing the issue of child welfare agencies receiving non-renewal notices from insurance carriers, specifically from **Berkeley**. A new, reputable carrier has entered the market, though at a higher cost. A legislative workgroup around this issue is being resumed to seek long-term strategies. A significant point of contention is the practice of "lending homes" between agencies. Insurance companies are unwilling to cover liability for children placed in homes not directly licensed by the agency holding the case, creating a major barrier for inter-agency cooperation. The **Illinois Department of Insurance** has engaged a professor from the **Katie School of Insurance and Risk Management at Illinois State University (ISU)**, a subject matter expert, to advise on strategies to navigate the insurance market crisis.

Proposed Solutions & Technology: The discussion explored how technology could mitigate risk and improve accountability. Ideas included:

- **GPS-based visit verification** for staff to document client visits, which could also enhance worker safety.
- **Electronic medication monitoring systems** for foster parents to ensure accurate and timely administration, which could make the entire state more attractive to insurers.
- Using **predictive analytics and AI** to improve decision-making.

Background Process Dialogue

The primary cause of background check delays is a significant backlog at the **Illinois State Police (ISP)**, which is taking 30 days or more to process fingerprints. DCFS Director Mueller is in direct contact with the ISP Director to investigate the root cause—whether it's due to the fingerprinting vendor's formatting, a technical issue, or a staffing shortage. Members raised critical issues, including delays in hiring and onboarding due to the long wait times for background clearances. The interpretation of Family First Act regulations, which some believe are being applied too broadly, preventing new hires from starting even remote or non-child-contact training. The inefficiency of the current background check portal, which agencies find difficult to use and lacks two-way communication. The need for a statewide solution for out-of-state clearances and their associated costs. DCFS is taking a multi-pronged approach to improve the process on its end, including 1) Building a new relationship with ISP and aiming for quarterly meetings to ensure sustained progress. 2) Working with the IT team to get data on where

bottlenecks occur in the background check process. 3) Developing a new HMR unit with four new staff to specifically handle the increase in certifications due to the TIME Act legislation. 4) Intentionally hiring for key positions, such as a Background Check Portal Manager, to improve system efficiency. 5) CMS's Rapid results process was also cited as a resource tool for licensing to look into.

Cross Advisory Board updates (Statewide Foster Care Advisory Council, Illinois Adoption Advisory Council, Statewide Parent Advisory Council): It was noted that cross advisory updates would be included as a standing agenda item in future. There were no updates for this meeting.

Public Comments: No public comments were made.

Action Items:

- Co-Chairs/DCFS will finalize and communicate leadership positions by end of September.
- All new committees and subcommittees will hold their first meetings to draft their charters, which will include key data points to track by end of October.
- Permanency report to be sent out with the meeting minutes.
- Director will get a status update from the ISP Director regarding the backlog and potential solutions.
- Anika Todd and licensing team will
 - Continue to work on the action plan focusing on ISP relations, data analysis, staffing, and operating procedures.
 - Finalize and implement a virtual training program on background check processes for DCFS and CWCA staff, with a target date of late September.
 - Develop a list of states and their associated costs for out-of-state clearances and share this information with providers via a new informational transmittal.
 - Explore using the "rapid results" process from CMS to streamline and modernize the entire background check system.
- DCFS and CWAC Agencies
 - Re-examine the interpretation of the Family First Act to determine if it's being applied too broadly and limiting creative onboarding solutions.
 - Continue providing feedback and ideas to Anika Todd and Darryl Johnson regarding the portal and other process improvements.
- November 15, 2025: The next full meeting will be held to report on the progress. The meeting time is tentatively scheduled from 11:00 AM to 1:30 PM.

Meeting Adjourned at approximately 3:34pm