

LSBA Children's Law Committee Meeting
May 21, 2025 at Noon
<https://lsba-org.zoom.us/j/85929410104>

Attendees

Alexandra Kamp, Southeast Louisiana Legal Services, Co-Managing Attorney
Caitlin Glass, Pelican Center, Chief Legal Program Officer
Cherrilynne Thomas, Department of Children and Family Services
Courtney Schroeder, Juvenile Court, Deputy Judicial Administrator
Curtis Nelson, LDAA
Guy R. Lain, Department of Children and Family Services
Josephine Vanderhorst, National Association of Council for Children
Judge Bernadette D'Souza, Family Court Judge, Orleans Civil District Court
Judge Ernestine Gray (ret.), Juvenile Court
Judge Jennifer Womble, Juvenile Court Judge, Jefferson Parish
Kathleen Richey, State of LA Child Ombudsman, co-chair
Kellie Johnson, MHAS, co-chair
Linda Ryland, MHAS
Mark Harris, Pelican Center
Monte Mollere, LSBA
Rachel Nastasi, Acadiana Legal Services, Staff Attorney
Richard Pittman, LSU, Assistant Professor of Professional Practice
Sarah Stone, Loyola Center for Social Justice
Storm Ehlers, LASC
Tina Darnesbourg, Office of the Public Defender

MEETING MINUTES

- 1) Welcome & Introductions** Kathleen Richey and Kellie Johnson welcomed the group.
- 2) Approval of Meeting Minutes from February 19, 2025.** The minutes were approved without objection.
- 3) Workgroup Updates**
 - a) Trauma Informed Care** - The group has compiled a draft guide on trauma-informed practices for lawyers. The goal was to develop a resource about trauma-informed practices that attorneys can reference and learn from. An initial draft has been completed, and the next steps involve reviewing it and making edits.
 - b) Education** - This workgroup conducted a survey of attorneys across the state on educational advocacy. It has now closed, receiving 55 responses. The next steps involve analyzing the results and determining which resources or training the group should focus on next.
 - c) Crossover Youth** - This group has created a resource on custody and detention. It's meant to be the first in a series of resources that compare the dual delinquency and welfare child systems.
 - d) Diversity** There are no updates with this workgroup.

4) Other Items

- a) **Children's Law Pro Bono Award Nominations** – Congratulations to Judge Womble and the Pelican Center

- b) **Truancy issues** - Storm Ehlers provided a comprehensive overview of Louisiana's approach to addressing truancy. The state is taking a multi-faceted approach, beginning with a Teacher Leader Summit on June 12 that includes a dedicated attendance track day. This will be followed by a more extensive Truancy Solution Summit on September 8, which will build upon the previous year's efforts. The initiative is driven by Chief Justice Weimer's concern over rising truancy rates and involves a multi-disciplinary task force including judges, task centers, and FINS programs.

The long-term strategy involves ongoing collaboration between the Louisiana Supreme Court's Division of Children and Families and the Department of Education. They plan to develop continuous professional development opportunities and create consistent communication channels between schools and the justice system. The goal is to understand the root causes of truancy, develop collaborative intervention strategies, and share best practices across different jurisdictions. Storm emphasized the importance of collaborative problem-solving and invited participants to contribute ideas and participate in these upcoming events. The approach reflects a holistic, proactive method to addressing student disengagement and supporting educational success.

- c) **Task Force on Child Sexual Abuse** - Led by Senator Barrow, the task force is exploring complex issues surrounding child sexual abuse investigations and their implications in legal proceedings. Judge Womble noted that meetings are extensive, often running well beyond the scheduled time due to the depth and complexity of discussions. Key concerns include the handling of unsubstantiated abuse findings in child custody cases. Kathleen Richey shared disturbing examples where unsubstantiated reports were used to manipulate custody decisions, including instances where mothers were prevented from reporting suspected abuse or even held in contempt of court. Judge Bernadette D'Souza expressed particular concern about cases where serious abuse allegations were dismissed without thorough investigation.

The task force is considering several potential legislative changes, including modifying how unsubstantiated abuse reports are treated in court, exploring the possibility of appointing guardians ad litem for children in contested custody matters, and creating more robust protections for reporting suspected abuse. The group is particularly interested in developing mechanisms to ensure children's safety and prevent misuse of investigative findings. The [task force meetings are video recorded and archived](#), allowing broader participation. They welcome written submissions from professionals unable to attend in-person, demonstrating a commitment to comprehensive input from various stakeholders in child protection.

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5) Children's Law Legal Updates Kathleen Richey gave an overview of numerous child welfare bills that are currently pending before the Louisiana Legislature.

- HB 451: Requires school resource officers to receive and report child abuse allegations
- HB 617: Reorganizes DCFS into three units: Executive Office, Child Welfare, and Child Support
- HB 486: Mandates mental health assessments in public schools (grades 4-12) with parental consent
- HB 344: Allows school principals access to juvenile court records
- HB 445: Permits creation of interoperable criminal justice information systems
- HB 268: Replaces language "pornography involving juveniles" with "child sexual abuse materials"
- HB 37: Enhances online protection for minors against grooming
- SB 41: Comprehensive child abuse investigation reform (changes terminology, expands caretaker definitions, requires abuse registry checks)
- SB 121: Allows mental health screenings in schools with parental consent
- SB 207: Enables students to enroll in vocational/technical courses through local colleges
- SB 74: Addresses jurisdiction for delinquent acts in district court
- SB 158: Creates Communities Aligned to Help Educate Youth Fund

Additional Bills:

- Tax benefits for foster care adoptions
- "Cajun Night Before Christmas" as official state children's book

6) Training and Education Opportunities

a) 48th National Child Welfare Law Conference

- <https://naccchildlaw.org/conference/48th-national-child-welfare-law-conference/>
- Cleveland, Ohio: 8/11 – 8/13 (Pre-conference 8/10)
- Online Conference in November: 11/12 – 11/14

b) June 2025 CIP Café: The Defense Never Rests: The Role of the Defender in Delinquency Proceedings

- June 26, 2025, 12 pm - 1 pm
- <https://teamdynamicsweb.com/event-6081473>

7) Future Meetings – This is the last meeting of the Bar Year. The committee will meet again in August.

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8) Adjournment The meeting was then adjourned.