New York State Family Justice Initiative

Strategic Plan

Center
for
Justice
Innovation

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While this strategic plan was developed with input from multiple partners, the findings, interpretations, and conclusions presented are solely those of the authors and should not be attributed to any individual partner or organization. All recommendations contained herein are subject to availability of funding and the priorities of the Unified Court System.

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Introduction

In May 2024, the New York State Unified Court System (UCS) and the Center for Justice Innovation (the Center), launched the Family Justice Initiative: Court and Community Collaboration (FJI or the Initiative), funded by the Governor's Office. The Hon. Rowan D. Wilson, Chief Judge of the State of New York, signaled a strong commitment to the future of Family Court, including with the appointment of the Hon. Richard Rivera as the new Statewide Coordinating Judge for Family Court Matters to lead the Initiative. Primary goals were to reduce justice system involvement, empower communities to both strengthen families and interrupt intergenerational cycles of trauma, and to enhance court and community collaboration to build a more effective, trauma-responsive system that would extend across the state and be sustainable in the long term. UCS leadership made clear this endeavor would be solution-focused and in partnership with the communities and lived experts who are closest to the problems and therefore closest to the solutions.

Previous reports have documented the many challenges facing Family Court, which has long been overburdened and under-resourced. Recent strategic efforts to enhance problem-solving and promote equity in the courts have paved the way for a more effective, collaborative, and person-centered system; but that system is vast and complex, spanning 62 counties, nine judicial districts, and multiple case types, which are interconnected but often exist in silos. Too often, reforms are implemented in pockets of the state but remain out of reach for many and lack the investment needed to sustain them. The following strategic plan contains concrete recommendations to support systems change, as well as strategies to promote and sustain those changes throughout the state.

Strategic Planning Process

In the first phase of the Initiative, the Center was asked to begin a strategic planning process to develop a broad vision for what makes an effective family-serving system, as well as a comprehensive plan to support that vision. The preliminary report, published in February 2025, captured the vision, objectives, and initial recommendations for concrete solutions, some of which were ready for immediate action.

Also in February 2025, the Unified Court System announced the formation of the new Permanent Commission on Justice for Families (the Commission). The Commission is comprised of a diverse group of esteemed jurists, attorneys, advocates, community leaders, and experts with lived experience from across the state, and aims to promote equity, access, transparency, and understanding within New York State's family justice system. The Commission has established its initial priorities, and the recommendations included in this strategic plan may help to inform concrete and sustainable improvements to Family Court to further those priorities.

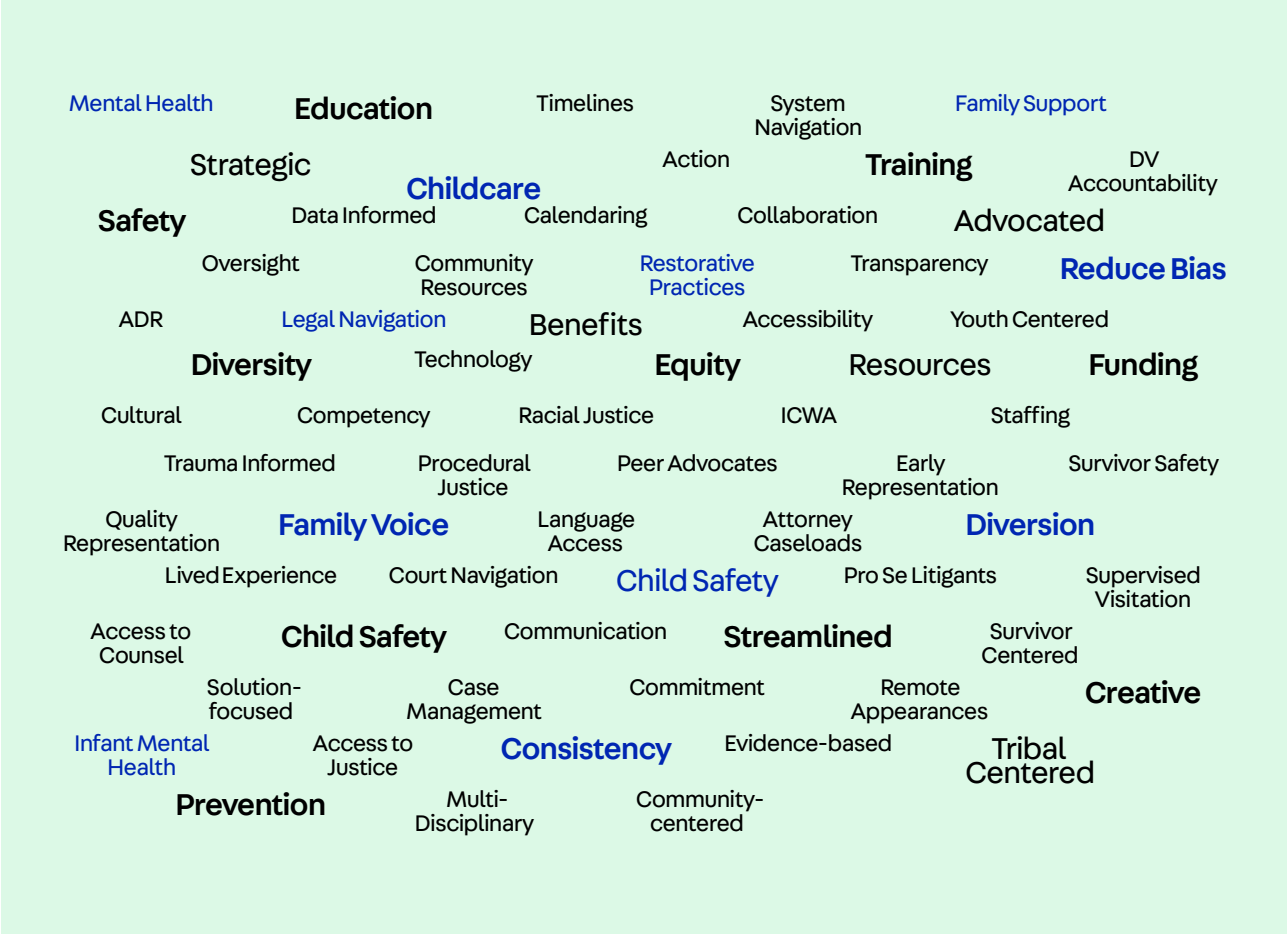
In the second phase of the Initiative, the Center established work groups to develop implementation plans for preliminary recommendations and explore additional ideas and plans to further the vision for Family Court.[1] The five work groups covered areas of focus identified in the first phase of the Initiative: Access to Justice; Child Welfare; Child Support (a joint workgroup with the Permanent Commission); Intimate Partner Violence/Custody/Visitation; and Youth Justice.

The work groups were subdivided into action teams to develop concrete plans and met monthly between March and December 2025. Work group members consisted of partners closest to the work, identified through a combination of outreach and invitation, including community members and leaders, jurists, attorneys, practitioners, and lived experts from across the state. The diversity of perspectives ensured a variety of viewpoints, but members engaged with one another civilly and productively to identify areas of consensus and concrete solutions for families. Discussions centered on the need to address the root causes of system involvement and investment in holistic responses as part of a broad problem-solving approach. Such efforts start in community to strengthen families and prevent system involvement, provide early off-ramps upon initial system interaction through court and community partnerships, and promote enhanced problem-solving approaches when family court intervention is unavoidable. The recommendations below emerged from and were developed by the action teams. Taken together, these recommendations form a strategic plan and practical guide for change to support a positive vision for the future of Family Court.

Vision for the Future of Family Court

Guiding the work of the Family Justice Initiative was the shared belief that our family courts should cultivate cultures of respect and understanding of the lived experiences of the people served. The following vision statement, developed and refined through many strategic planning discussions, informs and is woven through each recommendation in this strategic plan:

The Family Justice Initiative seeks to create a system that is family, youth, and survivor-centered; prioritizes trauma-responsive, community-based solutions to reduce or prevent system involvement and strengthen families; promotes cross-system problem-solving and collaboration; and ensures court processes that are fair, efficient, and accessible to all.



Word cloud from interactive poll question: What do you think the goals or areas of focus for this initiative should be?

Implementation, Evaluation, and Sustainability

Implementation Assistance and Ongoing Programmatic Support

Some of the recommendations contained in this strategic plan are ready for immediate action, such as support for legislation for a statewide supervised visitation program and specific funding requests for well-established services like holistic and high-quality legal representation. Other recommendations include piloting new programs and strategies or scaling existing approaches, which involve more detailed implementation planning.

While pockets of the state may currently benefit from existing innovative programs and strategies with demonstrated success, implementation has often been limited in geographic scope. One of the goals of the Family Justice Initiative is to ensure equal access statewide and across systems, so that benefits to families do not stop at city or county lines. However, adapting pilots that work in New York City to a rural location, for example, requires both an understanding of local context and an assessment of what can be adapted without sacrificing model integrity. Promoting model integrity long term and statewide requires intentional planning, which is why many of the recommendations include suggestions for partners who can not only aid implementation but also provide ongoing support to ensure the work and ideas captured are delivered and sustained.

The Unified Court System has a long history of piloting and scaling new innovations across the court system. Several of the problem-solving approaches referenced in this document originated as pilots that the Center helped to develop, implement, and test. As a result, the Center has the familiarity and expertise to support some of the recommendations contained herein. In addition, other agencies and organizations with specialized expertise have been suggested to provide similar support for certain recommendations.

Needs Assessment

Prior to implementation or expansion of any program or strategy, a needs assessment that takes the following questions into consideration should be conducted, to determine site readiness:

- [ ] Does the program or strategy meet a documented community need?
- [ ] Does the community have the necessary resources for effective implementation?
- [ ] Are the necessary community partners invested and/or engaged, including lived experts, and do they understand their roles?

Sample Project Planning Checklist and Key Considerations

The following is a general checklist to develop and implement new initiatives and scale existing programs and strategies. Specific considerations are noted in each of the recommendations contained in the strategic plan:

Establish a project planning structure and timeframe:

- [ ] Allow sufficient time to gather decision-makers, practitioners, and other key perspectives, including voices of lived experience
- [ ] Invest in local relationships and partnerships, which are essential to long-term success and need time to develop

Identify and hold ongoing convenings for all relevant project planning partners:

- [ ] Review and establish project goals
- [ ] Enlist programmatic support and refer to models or protocols/policies already established, as well as available data
- [ ] Create and refine timeframe for initial implementation

Document project planning:

- [ ] Where possible, adapt previously created materials to local context
- [ ] Set and review roles/responsibilities
- [ ] Establish markers for success and ongoing evaluation

Data Collection, Evaluation, and Continuous Quality Improvement

The cumulative intended impact of this strategic plan is to strengthen communities and reduce the prevalence of justice system involvement for families throughout New York State, and each recommendation contributes to that goal. While measurement of the strategic plan's success will rely on high-level community and system markers, successful implementation of individual recommendations should be assessed to determine whether specific programs or strategies are implemented as intended and achieving their intended impact on target populations. Evaluation and continuous quality improvement are embedded in the implementation plans for each recommendation, and those tasked with programmatic support can use the key considerations outlined below as a starting point for supporting their incorporation.

Structures for data collection, evaluation, and continuous quality improvement should be embedded in programs to ensure they include:

- [ ] A theory of change outlining a set of activities that lead to intended/identifiable outcomes[2]
- [ ] A documented data collection protocol that tracks those activities, outcomes, and demographics
- [ ] Data entry training and continual data quality monitoring
- [ ] Continuous program monitoring, including:

- Input measures such as number of clients served
- Demographic measures to ensure program participants are representative of the target population
- Process measures to better understand program activities and monitor model fidelity
- Outcome measures to help validate the theory of change

[ ] Mechanisms for qualitative feedback from program participants and community partners

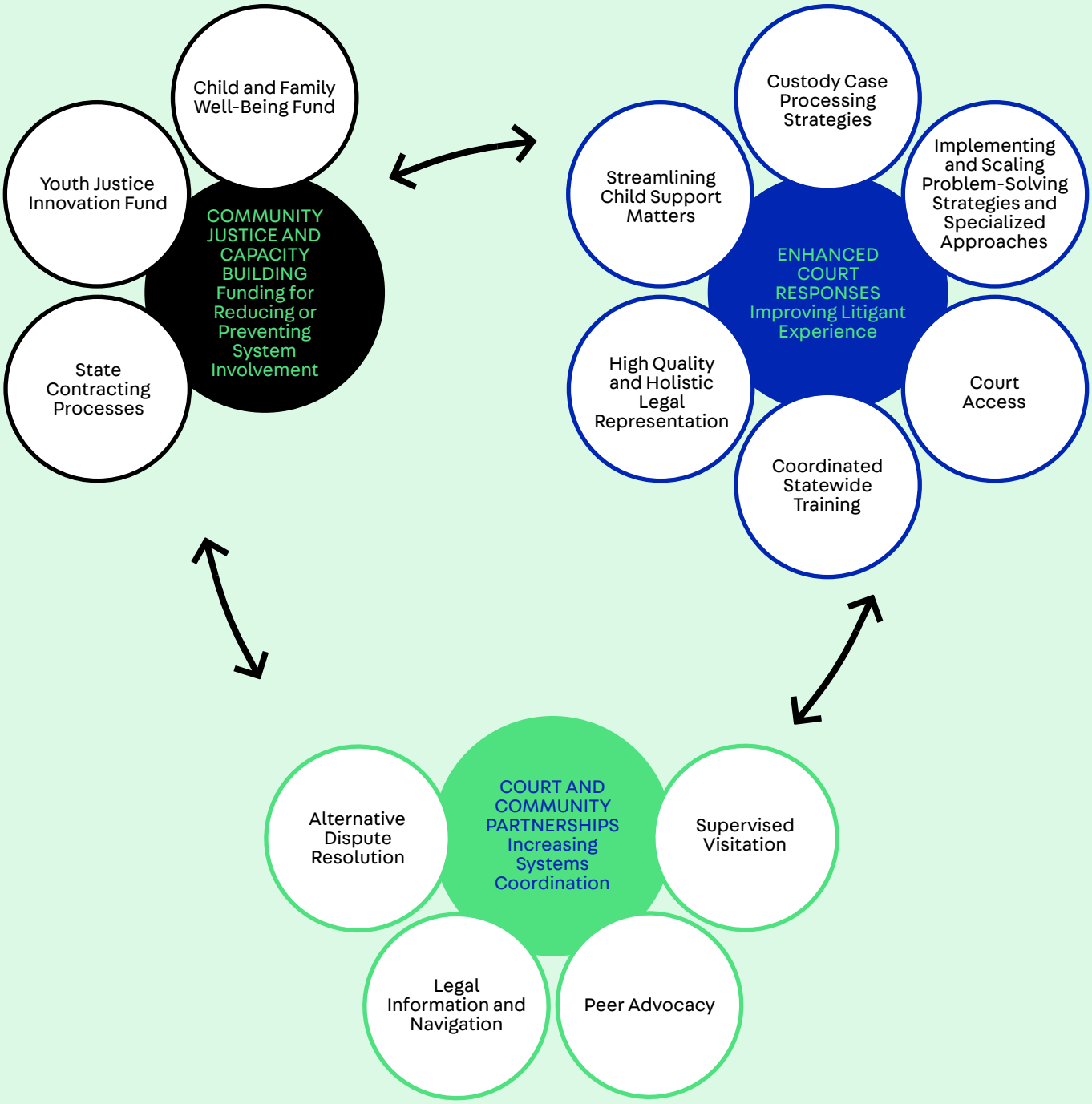
[ ] Data sharing and transparency: process, outcome, demographic, and qualitative measures should regularly be shared with community partners

[ ] Regular comprehensive evaluation audits to identify ongoing or emerging program needs, adjust the theory of change if necessary, and include demonstrated impact in plans to sustain and expand the program or strategy

[ ] Mechanisms for gathering feedback, monitoring pilots, and sharing what works to a broader statewide audience with the intention of replicating promising programs and practices

All program recommendations contained in this report operate under this framework but include specific considerations for recommendation type, implementation stage, and activities of the action team from which they originated.

Signature Recommendations



Family Justice Initiative: Coordinated Strategies

1
Community Justice and Capacity Building

Many reports have documented the challenges facing family courts and have rightfully highlighted an overburdened system with insufficient resources. However, the focus has too often been on managing an overwhelmed system rather than charting a path to address the needs of children and families at an earlier stage to prevent the need for court and system involvement in the first place. While additional court-based resources are necessary to support court functioning, resolve unavoidable case filings, and promote a broader, more coordinated problem-solving approach—suggestions for which will be addressed later in this strategic plan—Initiative partners first called for investing in community-based resources to support families and young people to reduce and prevent cycles of system involvement through the passage and adoption of the following legislation:

- Child and Family Well-Being Fund
- Legislation Governing Contracting Processes for Non-Profits Working with Government Agencies
- Youth Justice Innovation Fund

1.1 Child and Family Well-Being Fund

Initiative partners, including those with lived expertise, stressed that children and families deserve to live in communities that are empowered to support their well-being. Previous reports have documented the systemic racism that pervades the child welfare and family court systems[3] and trusted and credible community-based organizations, partners agreed, are best positioned to provide the solutions that prevent involvement in those systems.[4] Yet administrative burdens and complex application processes often complicate their access to existing funding streams. To address these barriers, partners recommend establishing a Child and Family Well-Being Fund (Well-Being Fund), a model that is outlined in proposed legislation,[5] specifically dedicated to building the capacity of community-based organizations through local grant-making in communities with the highest levels of child protective services involvement, centering the expertise of community members to identify trusted, grassroots groups to support children and families with new state funding.

The Initiative supports the creation of the Well-Being Fund and the following components to aid implementation:

- An advisory board to be appointed by the Legislature and the Governor, representing a diverse combination of members with professional and lived experience, to guide the process and to appoint a director to manage the Well-Being Fund
- The Director, in collaboration with the advisory board, will identify 10 eligible communities with the highest levels of child protective involvement to participate in the Well-Being Fund
- Working with a statewide backbone entity providing administrative and technical support to local groups in these 10 communities, the Well-Being Fund will support a local asset-based community development process to identify both trusted resources and areas for state investment
- Following the community inquiry, the Well-Being Fund will support a local grant-making process that responds to community priorities
- The Well-Being Fund would operate for 5 years as a pilot, including annual reporting to document the impact on both the collaborative community process and the impacts on child and family system contacts

Research collected through the development of the Well-Being Fund[6] would identify a range of opportunities to support, including but not limited to:

- Grassroots organizations and promising programs that are trusted by local families, already accessed in times of crisis, and are not connected to local child protective services
- Programs that operate outside of traditional office space, that meet families where they are, and address challenges as they arise to prevent court involvement before it is needed
- Alignment with the services and resources families are actively seeking, including concrete support such as housing assistance and relief from food and clothing insecurity
- Programs that offer a single, accessible point of entry for multiple service needs, such as community centers or neighborhood-based care hubs with drop-in spaces providing free food and clothing
- Services that address urgent childcare and parenting needs, including afterschool programs, camps, and peer mentorship opportunities that help create the "village" of support that help families thrive
- Programs that offer medical, mental, behavioral health supports, and substance use services to address underlying needs that contribute to chronic instability and system involvement
- Holistic investments and programming that spans the interests of children and families and are not directly related to a court case but promote well-being and help prevent system involvement

The Initiative also recommends the structure for ongoing support included in the legislation. Namely, the Director, in collaboration with the advisory board, will identify a backbone organization through a separate RFP process to provide ongoing programmatic support and contract management for local community-based organizations to increase capacity and sustain programming long term. This will include establishing a 501(c)(3) entity if necessary, developing outcomes and measurement plans, supporting grant writing, identifying additional funding opportunities, and aiding financial management.

1.2 Contracting Processes for Non-Profits Working with State Agencies

Family Justice Initiative partners also recommended support for legislation[7] addressing the governance of contracts between state agencies and non-profit organizations. The bill proposed reforms to contracting practices that often create financial risks for smaller non-profits, including:

- Establishing consistent contracting procedures across state agencies
- Improving the timeliness of contract renewals
- Creating standardized payment schedules
- Providing contract advances
- Implementing mechanisms to eliminate payment delays, such as accrued interest

Governor Hochul has vetoed this bill, citing concerns that it mandated advance and interest payments without corresponding appropriations and could result in significant costs to the state. Despite the veto, partners continue to support reforms to contracting practices that would make it easier for smaller non-profit organizations to access city and state funding. The Governor has since directed the Office of Customer Experience to identify administrative burdens that can be reduced to improve contracting processes. Partners have emphasized the importance of addressing these challenges to remove barriers and promote equitable access to public funding.

1.3 Youth Justice Innovation Fund

Partners also emphasized the importance of investing in community-based support for young people to address underlying causes that lead to arrest and prosecution. The Initiative recommends passage of legislation to create a Youth Justice Innovation Fund, which would allocate Raise the Age funds directly to community-based groups serving youth through the age of 25 in all counties across New York State.[8]

The Raise the Age law was passed in 2017, effectively ending the practice of automatically charging 16 and 17 year olds as adults. Under the law, most 16 and 17 year olds have their cases heard in family court, where they can access age-appropriate resources and avoid a permanent criminal record.[9] However, most of the funds appropriated by the state each year to implement Raise the Age have not

been spent because of barriers to reimbursement faced by some counties, and others like New York City that are not eligible at all.[10] Through the 2025 State Fiscal Year, New York state has appropriated $1.71 billion for Raise the Age, and as of the end of the 2025 fiscal year, only $658.8 million (38.5%) of the funds have been disbursed.[11] Furthermore, community-based groups that are eligible are only able to access state funding through county plans, which vary greatly across the state based on local priorities.[12] As a result, access to critical funding for these groups is uneven, which creates gaps in services and supports for young people depending on where they live.

The Youth Justice Innovation Fund would oversee the distribution of $50 million of funding currently awaiting disbursement and provide a statewide grant-making infrastructure administered by New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) to support positive youth development, prevent justice involvement, provide alternatives to detention and incarceration, aftercare and reentry services, and promote public safety.

The purpose of the Youth Justice Innovation Fund is to invest in a proven vision of community safety, which requires access to community-based resources to support healthy development and economic opportunity for young people rather than criminalization.[13] Effective community-based resources—such as credible messenger mentoring, therapeutic supports, and restorative justice approaches—have been shown to improve public safety by addressing the underlying needs that lead to arrest and prosecution.[14] Similar to the Child and Family Well-Being Fund, a primary goal will be to create a statewide grant-making process to fund trusted grassroots organizations and community assets[15] that face barriers to accessing existing funding streams. The plan for the Youth Justice Innovation Fund should also include increasing family court awareness of quality local resources so that young people can be connected back to their communities if they do become system involved. Finally, the funding structure should be grounded in Risk-Need-Responsivity principles and prioritize funding of interventions for those youth who are at the highest risk of re-offending and interventions that are targeted to reduce youth risk factors.[16]

Following the successful implementation of Project RISE: Respond, Invest, Sustain and Empower—which has distributed millions to communities to address gun violence through public health strategies[17]—the Initiative recommends a similar statewide Request for Proposal (RFP) grant-making process. This process would be administered by DCJS, which would identify local Youth Justice Coordinating Agencies (YJCAs) informed by community partners, including young people, lived experts, service providers, community leaders, probation staff, family and criminal court judges, and attorneys. These Youth Justice Coordinating Agencies would contribute to a statewide vision of positive youth development and prevention, identify local goals and priorities, and serve in an ongoing capacity to advise DCJS. YJCAs will also initiate mapping and convene local partners to identify existing community resources and gaps, building on local data and previous collection efforts to avoid duplication.

A portion of the funds will be required to be sub-granted to grassroots initiatives to create opportunities for organizations that have traditionally been excluded. Selection criteria should include community groups and programs that:

- Are trusted and considered effective by the community, and are aligned with community needs
- Have a record of collaborating and co-designing programs with youth and community members, including lived experts
- Support positive youth development
- Incorporate culturally competent mental and behavioral health services for youth and families
- Include case management with wraparound services and a robust referral network
- Are developmentally appropriate and have demonstrated effectiveness based on state and national standards

These programs may include:

- Educational programs for youth and families that address:
    - Attendance issues or reconnections to school
    - School transfers for safety or other reasons
    - Credit deficiencies
    - Individualized Educational Program (IEP) evaluations and/or implementation of services mandated under IEPs
    - Supportive educational services
- Diversion and pre-arrest programs
- Credible messenger mentoring programs
- Violence interruption programs
- Education and job placement programs
- Restorative justice programs
- Family-focused therapeutic services

A process should also be developed to maintain current and accurate resource maps that are regularly shared with communities and system partners—including family courts—to increase awareness and use of high-quality local community-based resources for youth.

Evaluation Strategy for Both Funds

Both Funds have a process for identifying who will provide programmatic support to community groups to help build capacity and promote sustainability, including grant research and writing, financial management, participatory planning, co-designing with lived experts, partner engagement, program data collection and evaluation, and peer learning and support.

Both Funds should also consider identifying a partner to develop an evaluation strategy, including:

- A participatory process with community groups and youth to identify a shared evaluation framework across the state, such as positive youth development
- An assessment to ensure that programs are evaluation ready, including by ensuring the availability of data, program staff's ability to collect and maintain data, and leadership buy-in

- A process to clearly identify metrics of success for the process evaluation and outcome evaluation, informed by the shared framework
- An evaluation toolkit and training plan for steering committees and community-based groups to collect and interpret common measures shared across communities
- Guidance on evaluation methodologies, which can include mixed methods research design so youth and lived experts can share lived experience and contribute qualitative data
- A plan to continuously assess how impacts from both Funds, along with existing efforts before implementation, can be shown to inform prevention and justice efforts at large

Systems Coordination for Both Funds

While both Funds seek to build up local, grassroots capacity to support families without the need for child welfare or court system involvement, for those families who do come in contact with systems, there should be more coordination to ensure families can access high-quality supports to address underlying needs.

Resource coordinators, navigators, and peer advocates, included in recommendations below, can serve as liaisons between the court and community-based organizations to ensure that families are connected to these supports should they become system involved. These roles also offer opportunities to educate court staff about effective community-based services to promote a more holistic response and reduce further system involvement. Direct connections and timely coordination between court-based staff and community-based organizations ensure that high-quality services are available and delivered as quickly as possible.

Additionally, the Child Welfare Court Improvement Project convenes local collaborative community partner meetings to problem-solve on child welfare matters, which include the identification of community resources. These activities can be further strengthened through ongoing collaboration with organizations identified through the Child and Family Well-Being Fund that can provide up-to-date information on effective and available services, as well as the needs in the community.

Lastly, court and community partner meetings addressing issues on different case types, also described below, can help maintain alignment between court staff, leadership, and community partners. This, in turn, ensures shared awareness of high-quality programs and identification of gaps in services that need to be addressed in all parts of the system. Specific partnerships could also be considered with community-based organizations to provide resource coordination for families in community-based settings.

2
Court and Community Partnerships

Involvement in the family court system is often unwelcome, while at times a necessity for individuals who actively seek intervention to address issues such as interpersonal harm, resolve parenting conflicts, and secure financial support for their children. Such issues may be more holistically addressed in community-based settings, providing an option for those families seeking services or support without system involvement. The following court and community partnerships help support families to reduce or prevent further system involvement and streamline the process if some form of system involvement becomes necessary:

- Alternative Dispute Resolution
- Parent Peer Advocacy
- Legal Information and Navigation Programs
- Supervised Visitation

2.1 Alternative Dispute Resolution

Initiative partners have stressed the benefits of connecting families with alternative ways to resolve disputes as early as possible in the court process and ideally before ever having to come to court at all. Currently, New York's 18 Community Dispute Resolution Centers (CDRCs) serve all 62 counties and provide Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) services to more than 50,000 individuals annually, yet many families remain unaware of these services until they are already deep into court involvement.[18] Investing in ADR is consistent with other Initiative priorities to reduce and prevent system involvement, support families in their own communities, reduce court delays, and preserve resources for matters where judicial intervention is unavoidable. Expanding ADR access and capacity will strengthen the court system's ability to serve families holistically and provide additional options to reduce court involvement. ADR also helps to promote procedural justice and engage families, particularly when they are unrepresented, which in turn helps streamline the court process even if there is ultimately no settlement.

Initiative partners recommend funding for the Unified Court System's ADR Division for additional staff and consultants to replicate model programs recommended below, share best practices, and increase access through a statewide public awareness campaign. Partners also recommend increased funding for CDRCs to implement and strengthen programming to support families prior to court involvement or as early in the process as possible.

2.1.1 Custody and Visitation Programs

UCS's ADR Division should consider a statewide convening to share and promote best practices and replicate model programs for custody and visitation matters, helping to support judicial buy-in and summarizing takeaways in a written publication. The ADR Division should consider the creation of an implementation guide following this convening for ADR coordinators, judges, and clerks that include strategies for collaboration and raising litigant understanding of and access to ADR on these cases. The convening should include a discussion about best practices for scheduling and case management tools to streamline access to ADR programs, communication with courts, and case resolution.

2.1.2 Restorative Practices for Youth Diversion Programs

The Unified Court System's Office for Justice Initiatives, Youth and Emerging Adult Justice unit, in collaboration with the Commission's Juvenile Delinquency/Youth Justice Action Group, should consider an inventory of the current use of restorative justice practices in family courts as well as courts around the country. This information could be shared with family court judges handling Persons in Need of Supervision, Juvenile Delinquency, and Youth Part Felony cases with introductory training in restorative justice principles, and a court and community partner group could be convened to explore possible program pilots and expansion of existing programming.

2.1.3 Child Permanency Mediation

The Child Welfare Court Improvement Project (CWCIP) currently operates a program to resolve disputes that arise during child permanency proceedings. The Initiative recommends hiring at least two full-time staff members exclusively dedicated to operating and monitoring the program, promoting the program to judges, assisting judges in conducting outreach with key partners, developing local program protocols, and training new permanency mediators. Partnerships should include Supervising Judges, ADR Coordinators, and judicial district leadership to promote the program and community partners to provide feedback on local implementation through collaborative meetings. These partnerships can also be used to explore points in the process where it would be most helpful to offer mediation, including resolving caregiver conflicts and supporting parent-child relationships through meaningful and quality access schedules. If there are opportunities for pre-mediation planning sessions, this can set the tone for the discussion to ensure that parents' interests are represented. CWCIP could also conduct a process evaluation of the statewide program

to thoughtfully expand to more courts and to handle a larger variety of matters in the life of a permanency case, as well as to include measures such as the number of courts referring, number of cases, and issue variety.

2.1.4 Child Support Mediation Programs[19]

Legislation was recently signed by the Governor which provides for child support mediation pilots in at least three counties and includes navigation services to prepare litigants for court.[20] Partners recommended UCS leadership identify participating courts and the ADR Division support local implementation, including by developing common protocols/rules, training mediators, contracting with service providers, monitoring data, and developing a pilot program evaluation framework. The Mediation Pilots could also collaborate with the Child Support Triage parts in New York City, outlined below, to help identify mediation cases that can be referred directly to CDRCs and then provide mediation agreements directly to the Court to expedite the process of establishing the final order.

2.1.5 Court and Community Collaboration to Increase Access

Partners not only discussed the challenge of expanding and sustaining high-quality programming, but also of increasing awareness and access to ADR options, particularly prior to court involvement or as early as possible in the process for families seeking to avoid further system involvement where it is safe to do so. UCS's Division of ADR should consider partnering with ADR professional associations, such as the New York State Dispute Resolution Association (NYSDRA), the New York State Council on Divorce Mediation, and other groups to conduct a statewide public awareness campaign focusing on family matters. The campaign can use strategies such as utilizing standardized messaging, developing marketing materials, and conducting training, which should all be consistent while allowing for local program adaptations to specific community contexts when appropriate. The campaign should include a process for identifying and collaborating with key partners to raise awareness at the community level to ensure families are appropriately informed and have ADR made available to them. Awareness could be raised through various methods, including printed materials, videos, radio, public service announcements, morning shows, news programs, social media, podcasts, YouTube, and tutorials. Finally, the campaign should include a digital marketing component directing people to CDRCs, educational resources, and partner organizations.

Additionally, partners suggest the following system-based strategies:

- CDRCs and Courts should develop protocols that provide for easy and fast filing and judicial review of community self-referred cases that want to secure a court order
- Court Attorney Referees should be trained to talk about mediation at first appearance and make effective referrals for appropriate cases
- The Chief Judge's ADR Advisory Committee should consider developing

a plan for an internal litigant awareness campaign to educate litigants already in Family Court about their ADR options and how to prepare for participation

Ongoing Programmatic Support and Systems Coordination

UCS already has an ADR Advisory Committee and a Board of Governors who could help oversee implementation, review data, address barriers, and ensure alignment among partners. The ADR Division should also consider the following partners to facilitate communication and coordinate referrals:

- NYSDRA
- Volunteer Lawyers Program
- Family Legal Care
- Institutional provider attorneys for parents and children
- New York State Office of Indigent Legal Services (ILS)
- Appellate Divisions
- Family Court Practice Institute

Measurement, Evaluation, and Sustainability

Partners agreed that access to ADR options to resolve disputes will reduce court involvement, promote procedural and access to justice for families, and help streamline court processes. Process evaluations should be used for all programming and shared throughout the state to demonstrate impact and program effectiveness to achieve these goals. Program implementation should include a comprehensive data collection protocol and evaluation framework for continuous quality improvement and to share lessons learned, including the following specific measures:

- Increase in pre-court inquiries and cases proceeding to mediation
- Increase in the number of court-referred custody, visitation, child permanency and child support cases to mediation
- Number of courts that are showing an increase in referrals of appropriate cases to mediation
- Family satisfaction scores as measured by post-mediation participant surveys, which should include questions measuring procedural justice like understanding, voice in the process, and helpfulness[21]
- Standard ADR metrics such as agreement rates, time to disposition, average number of sessions, screened inappropriate rate, opt out rates, and contact rates to optimize program designs

2.2 Parent Peer Advocacy

Initiative partners across systems agreed that peer advocacy is an effective strategy for supporting parents to either prevent or help navigate child welfare and family court involvement. Parent peer advocates provide information, and guidance to parents/caregivers, and connections to community-based resources that strengthen families.[22] As caregivers with prior experience in the child welfare system, peer advocates are uniquely situated to engage parents and build trust.

There is already a workforce of parent peer advocates embedded in community-based

organizations, foster care and child protective agencies, and interdisciplinary legal practices. Partners with lived experience have stressed that when peer advocates work as part of a legal defense team on behalf of parents, the model works particularly well to ensure independence from the system. Where parents are represented by attorneys on the 18b panel, they typically do not have access to this type of holistic support. Therefore, the Initiative recommends that the Court partner with local community-based organizations who employ advocates to serve parents to reduce or prevent child welfare and court involvement and partner with 18b attorneys in family courts to support parents if they become system involved.

The primary purpose of this recommendation is to increase access to parent peer advocates to reduce and prevent system involvement; provide emotional support so that parents feel less alone and empowered to actively participate in their cases; improve service planning and support parent-child relationships; educate parents to understand their rights and navigate court proceedings; assist parents in communicating effectively with their attorneys and advocating for themselves and their children. The use of peer advocates will also help enhance communication amongst all parties, streamline the court and reunification process by addressing delays caused by parents not being connected to services, and reduce trauma for children.

Needs Assessment

The Unified Court System's Office for Justice Initiatives' Child Welfare Division (OJI) could consider a needs assessment to identify pilot locations to design and implement an effective parent peer advocacy model that would be independent from, but work in partnership with, the Court. OJI could work with a state or city-wide organization that already provides peer advocacy services, as well as the Appellate Divisions, to help identify pilot sites based on available child welfare data, such as 1028 petitions and removal rates.[23] In identified jurisdictions, there could also be a readiness assessment of whether the existing assigned counsel panel has an administrative structure that would allow for the incorporation of parent peer advocates onto their teams. In addition, the assessment should include an environmental scan to ensure there are available community-based peer advocates, or similar roles with varying titles, to serve as partners.

OJI, the local 18b panel, and the partner organization could then engage with the identified community to develop a program that is responsive to local needs, identifying and memorializing key components for success that would be necessary for eventual replication statewide. OJI may consider partnering with the New York State Office of Indigent Legal Services, which is already working with jurisdictions to enhance interdisciplinary supports for attorneys representing parents. OJI could also partner with the new Family Court Practice Institute to identify attorney needs across the state, provide training for advocates on the court process, and make connections between attorneys and advocates.

Pilot Development

Following the needs assessment and identification of a funding stream,[24] a local community-based organization could be selected to operate the peer advocacy program. The identified organization could serve caregivers

who have or are at risk of child welfare and/or court involvement in their community in the following ways:

- Support parents to prevent court and child welfare involvement and create a mechanism to connect parents to counsel in the event of an investigation
- Partner with the Appellate Division and local 18B panel[25] to create a structure like the one used by institutional providers to incorporate advocates into the legal defense team via a formal contract that would include the following:
    - Advocates designated as agents of the attorney and therefore protected by attorney-client privilege and not subject to mandated reporter obligations
    - Prohibition of the advocate's testimony in court, which would undermine trust in their relationships with parents
- Cultivate local partnerships, casting a wide net for relationships with both system- and community-based agencies
- Participate in court and community problem-solving partner meetings to support implementation, share updates, and collaborate on emergent needs or gaps
- Educate the court about community-based services to support families
- Coordinate with other court-based problem-solving programs, including resource coordination, legal information and navigation programs

Ongoing Programmatic Support and Training

OJI is best situated to provide the operations and training support to implement peer advocacy programs across New York State. In collaboration with OJI, community-based organizations—such as Families Together in New York State[26]—can create and oversee training efforts that support pilots. This leverages the existing training and credentialing system that Families Together already provides, including such essential training topics as education about the court process and the role of the peer advocate; peer engagement strategies; de-escalation techniques; safety planning; and system navigation.[27]

Measurement, Evaluation, and Sustainability

Family Justice Initiative partners believe that peer advocacy supports for litigants will lead to an increase in families' knowledge and engagement with appropriate and available community services. This added layer of support should lead to a decrease in child welfare involvement and rates of family separation. OJI should consider suggestions from the "Implementation, Evaluation and Sustainability" section at the beginning of this strategic plan for implementing the theory of change. The metrics and outcomes tracked should include but not be limited to:

- Total number of families served
- Number and type of resources accessed by families
- Child welfare case outcomes
- Satisfaction with peer advocacy services
- Greater awareness and connections to community resources

- Greater understanding of parental rights and advocacy tools
- Prevention of additional future child welfare involvement
- Rates of Child Protective Services involvement
- Rates of family separation

2.3 Legal Information and Navigation

Partners consistently raised challenges regarding a lack of legal information and support to help unrepresented court users successfully navigate court processes. Unrepresented litigants often do not understand basic legal information such as what to include in petitions, what to expect when they appear in front of the jurist, how to effectuate service of process, know how their case might evolve, or know how to access needed services, including mandated ones. Initiative partners stressed the ways in which the lack of basic legal information and unfamiliarity with navigating court processes causes both case delays and needlessly exacerbates negative experiences as reported by litigants. However, the use of non-attorneys to provide legal information and court navigation support in both community-based and family court-based settings has proven to be effective in promoting procedural justice by addressing these issues. Legal information and/or court navigation services improve litigant experience, reduce case delays, facilitate case resolution and increase litigant access to services. Such programs also aid in identifying legal issues, increasing connections to attorneys and community resources, reducing the need for court involvement and avoiding unnecessary delays if individuals become court involved.

For example, Family Legal Care[28] and Community Justice Connect[29] work in close partnership in New York City to support individuals seeking family-related legal help. Community Justice Connect identifies and supports community members with civil legal questions more broadly. Family Legal Care provides specialized family law information and guidance for court users, including online and through on-site presence at Community Justice Connect's community offices when appropriate, with ongoing coordination to ensure people are connected to the right support at the right time. There are also a small number of family courts which house a legal Help Center on site, such as Onondaga County. Expanding such efforts recognizes the scale of the need and acknowledges that legal information and navigation are complementary to and in service of a more just system, whereby litigants are empowered to make informed decisions about how to engage with local community resources or systems-based interventions like family court.[30]

Non-attorney navigators included in these models are properly trained and supervised to provide families with information, emotional support, and procedural guidance that empower them to engage meaningfully in their cases. This model draws on a longstanding precedent of effective non-lawyer advocacy, such as domestic violence advocates and peer counselors, whose lived experience and community trust have been

essential to expanding access to justice. The Initiative views the development of non-attorney navigator roles as part of a continuum of support, complementing the efforts of attorneys, peer advocates, and court-based resource coordinators.

An important value of providing legal information and limited-scope legal advice is that litigants are better-prepared to more effectively make their case, while avoiding procedural mistakes that cause delays and can have a ripple effect. Addressing these gaps will require coordinated investment in staffing, helpline integration, training, technology, and cross-system protocols that create new and bolster existing connections between courts, communities, and legal partners.

Needs Assessment

Legal information and navigation programs are consistent with the Office for Justice Initiatives' mission to increase access to justice. Therefore, OJI should provide oversight and consider partnering with Family Legal Care, which already provides this service in New York City and statewide through its helpline, to support implementation and expansion. Family Legal Care could provide technical assistance and ongoing support for local implementation outside of New York City and statewide expansion and Community Justice Connect could provide support for implementing community-based legal information and resource coordination that is connected to the court programming.

The Initiative recommends that OJI identify community-based organizations and legal services partners—including those that effectively use a remote model to provide services—to collaborate with family courts in implementing both community and court based legal information and court navigation programs as part of a statewide expansion of these services. The needs assessment should include determining where court-based programs are needed and where access to a remote model would be sufficient. The court and community-based sites identified would therefore vary depending on local needs and resources. Factors to determine need may include the size and needs of the jurisdiction, travel considerations, rate of in-person versus remote appearances, and courthouse traffic.

Ongoing Programmatic Support, Evaluation, and Systems Coordination

Statewide expansion will depend on ongoing programmatic support to establish a coordinated statewide model to ensure clear definitions of the boundary between legal information and legal advice, consistent supervision, and shared accountability mechanisms.

OJI should consider partnering with Family Legal Care to create a Legal Navigation Implementation toolkit to support rollout and ensure statewide consistency and quality. The toolkit might include training curricula; guidance on legal information boundaries; referral and confidentiality protocols; protocols for helpline integration and follow-up coordination; templates for hybrid and digital navigation; and data collection, outcome tracking, and evaluation protocols that include a mechanism for user feedback. Program sites could also be connected to the Family Legal Care statewide helpline infrastructure to promote access to technological tools across regions, particularly in rural communities, and focus on multilingual

access and trauma-informed engagement to ensure holistic support for families.

The Office for Justice Initiatives could coordinate training for non-attorney navigators that emphasizes equity, language access, and cultural responsiveness to reflect the diversity of New York's families and in coordination with other training bodies, such as the Family Court Practice Institute, the Permanent Commission on Justice for Families, and the Judicial Institute. Legal information and court navigation sites should also coordinate with the Justice Coordinator in each Judicial District, to leverage existing access to justice programs and activities and integrate navigation services with other problem-solving programs, such as resource coordination and peer advocacy.

2.4 Supervised Visitation

It has long been established through previous reports prior to the launch of the Initiative that there is an urgent need for safe, affordable, accessible, and sustainable supervised visitation programs on custody and visitation cases in every county.[31] Furthermore, increasing the availability of these services was consistently raised in Initiative partner meetings, as well as included in the initial priorities for the Permanent Commission, which led to the creation of the New York State Coalition for Supervised Visitation (Coalition). The Coalition consists of members from both the Initiative and the Commission and has an impressive roster of support from jurists and court actors, legal services, advocacy agencies, and other system and community-based partners across the state.

The Coalition recommends the creation of a free, high-quality statewide supervised visitation program to support safe contact between children and parents involved in family court custody and visitation cases. Such matters may involve intimate partner violence, substance use, and mental health issues that create a risk of harm to both children and survivors of violence. However, because there is no attendant child protective proceeding filed in these custody/visitation matters, local child welfare agencies cannot provide supervision of visits.

Currently, there are 32 counties that do not have a supervised visitation program for custody/visitation matters, up from 28 counties as of the writing of the Preliminary Report.[32] Those programs that do exist continue to be limited and have long waitlists—some stretching as long as six months or more. Additionally, existing programs are often cost-prohibitive for litigants and limited in terms of the number of visits that they can provide. Access to these services may be further impacted by limited hours of operation, available languages, and transportation challenges.

While a select few agencies have received funding through the Office of Children and Family Services, the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, the Office of Violence Against Women, or private sources, more consistent funding is needed to stabilize the patchwork of temporary grants and local appropriations.

A bill to establish state-funded supervised visitation was reintroduced in the 2025-2026 Legislative Session.[33] The bill passed the

Assembly, but a version of the bill needs to be incorporated into the budget with a state appropriation.[34] This legislation would amend the Social Services Law to establish a supervised visitation program statewide administered by the Office of Victim Services, in consultation with the Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence. However, the components of the bill can be adapted to whichever executive agency is tasked with implementing the program. While the Initiative does not take a position on which agency should be selected, it does note that it should be an agency willing to champion the bill and negotiate with the Executive for inclusion in its budget. The identified agency would be required to distribute state funds appropriated for this purpose from the Executive Budget, as well as any available federal funds, to local program providers. The bill also requires programs to provide affordable, culturally sensitive services with language access for non-English speakers.

The Coalition is currently organizing to engage members of the Executive and Legislature to support this important legislation and advocate for funding from the state budget for implementation.

3
Enhanced Court Responses

People come to family court for many reasons. When they do, the courthouse should be a safe and welcoming place for them to seek and access justice. Court environments need to account for the trauma in those being served as well as the impact of that exposure on practitioners. A more trauma-informed system benefits families and staff alike. And family courts need not do it alone. Leveraging the strength of local community in providing linkages to resources empowers individuals and promotes bottom-line benefits, resulting in the quicker resolution of court cases and reducing future court involvement. Ultimately, such connections promote the long-term healing and strengthening of families. Therefore, the Initiative recommends the following programs and strategies to create a more consistent, trauma-responsive court culture; promote best practices across the state; and increase access to justice for families coming to court:

- High-Quality and Holistic Legal Representation
- Coordinated Statewide Training
- Specialized Problem-Solving Models
- Problem-Solving Strategies Scaled Across the System
- Custody/Visitation/Orders of Protection Case Processing Strategies
- Problem Solving in Child Support Matters
- Court Access Strategies

3.1 High-Quality and Holistic Legal Representation

State investment to enhance high-quality legal representation—including resources for holistic interdisciplinary practices and timely defense—is vital to effective court responses to the needs and rights of families. Initiative partners consistently identified ways in which effective legal representation can reduce system involvement, increase efficiency, and serve as a cornerstone of an equitable and fair system of justice.

Throughout the strategic planning process, Family Justice Initiative partners identified access to effective, holistic, and high-quality legal representation as fundamental to protecting the constitutional rights of parents and children, promoting child and family well-being, and preventing future family court involvement. Meaningful and effective representation is key to ensuring access to justice and to helping jurists, on all case types, make decisions that prioritize safety and keep families together whenever possible.

Furthermore, Initiative partners uniformly identify as pervasive problems across New York State delays in resolving cases and addressing complex family issues. Attorneys play a critical role in reducing those delays and promoting court efficiency. To improve the ability and capacity of attorneys to consistently deliver quality legal represen-

tation, it is critical to provide them with training, support, and mentoring resources to enhance their practice; a rate of pay that attracts them to the field and retains them; manageable caseloads and the resources to allow for holistic, interdisciplinary representation; and a court culture that is efficient and trauma responsive.

Partners also raised substantial concerns about deep and chronic inequities and biases that exist in family-serving systems, which are well substantiated in prior reports.[35] While New York State is a national leader in providing assigned counsel to parents and children in family court,[36] insufficient resources to ensure manageable caseloads and best practices often contribute to the disproportionate harm systems can create for Black and Brown families.

Therefore, the Initiative makes the following recommendations to improve access to quality legal representation:

3.1.1
New York State Office of Indigent Legal Services Proposal

Partners support the New York State Office of Indigent Legal Services proposal, which provides for an increase in statewide funding through the state budget process for attorneys representing parents in family court matters to implement caseload standards, promote interdisciplinary representation, and provide timely right to counsel.[37][38] County Law Article 18-B requires the assignment of counsel to adults who cannot afford representation in certain family court cases, including child custody and visitation, child protective proceedings, family offense cases, paternity proceedings, termination of parental rights, and contempt charges for violating a prior court order.[39] To assist New York State counties and New York City in funding improvements to the quality of representation under County Law Article 18-B, the Indigent Legal Services Fund was established pursuant to State Finance Law 98-b, though the funding cannot be used unless appropriated through the state budget process each year.[40] The New York State Office of Indigent Legal Services (ILS) was created via Executive Law 832 to study, monitor, and make efforts to improve the quality of representation mandated under County Law Article 18-B.[41] While the State has appropriated significant funding for improved quality mandated criminal defense representation, the State's investment in improved quality Family Court representation has been comparatively small. For example, in SFY 2025-26, the State appropriated $274 million to ILS' Aid to Localities budget for criminal defense, but only $25 million for Family Court representation.[42][43]

ILS estimates that the State needs to invest $150 million to implement the caseload standards for parent representation that it promulgated using a data-driven method and recommends a three-year roll-out of this amount, beginning with $50 million in the FY 2026-2027 budget.[44] If appropriated, ILS would disburse the $150 million of state funding, again using a data-driven method to determine how much funding would be allocated for each county and New York City for their mandated Family Court representation.[45][46]

This funding would also allow ILS to promote interdisciplinary models of rep-

resentation. Approximately 90 percent of child protective cases are brought to the court for matters of neglect, often related to needs that could be supported by community-based resources.[47] Interdisciplinary approaches provide the opportunity to resolve these matters and reduce system involvement. The consensus among Family Justice Initiative partners is that the use of social workers, parent advocates, and other service providers results in better outcomes for families and preserves resources.

Since 2007, several New York City legal services organizations have adopted an interdisciplinary model of parental representation where attorneys and their clients are supported by other professionals, including social workers, parent advocates, paralegals, and investigators to provide more effective representation in child welfare cases.[48] This interdisciplinary "family defense" approach is regarded as a best practice model by national child welfare experts.[49] Some models provide access to additional expertise in areas like criminal defense, housing, immigration, and more. However, there are few examples of such a model outside of New York City. ILS recently launched two upstate Model Family Defense Offices—one in Monroe County and the other in Westchester County—that replicate the model used in New York City and ensure manageable caseloads and sufficient resources to represent parents during investigations by local departments of social services.[50][51] Additional funding pursuant to the ILS proposal could allow for statewide expansion of this model.

Access to counsel is also essential to preserving the rights of parents during a child welfare investigation. Investigation representation is consistent with principles of equal protection and due process. It also prevents unnecessary and prolonged separation of children from their parents, mitigates the disruption and trauma that accompanies state intervention, and reduces the disproportionate percentage of children of color in New York's foster care system. Moreover, it furthers the goals of reducing unnecessary system involvement, as it prevents petitions from being filed by helping to identify community-based resources that obviate the need for court involvement. If a petition still must be filed, this timely representation model enhances communication at the first court appearance so that initial release or placement orders are based on full and accurate information.

In addition to funding, proposed legislation introduced in the 2023-2024 Legislative Session, which passed the Senate and was reintroduced in 2025, would codify a timely right to assigned counsel, including during an investigation initiated by Child Protective Services.[52][53] To facilitate both greater access to and quality of this representation, SSL § 422 would be amended to provide prospective attorneys for parents and children with access to information from the State Central Registry, enabling them to check for conflicts of interests that prevent representation and prepare for initial court proceedings.[54]

Finally, the ILS Proposal includes funding for robust training, recruitment, and mentorship opportunities, which could be implemented in partnership with other efforts underway including those of the new Family Court Practice Institute described below.[55]

3.1.2
Attorneys for Children

Consistent with the ILS proposal, partners also recommend exploring caseload standards and funding necessary to promote interdisciplinary representation, increase pay and support manageable workloads for attorneys for children (AFC). In New York State, children receive independent legal representation in Family Court from AFCs who are appointed by the Court. These AFCs work within one of two entities: they are either employed by a state-contracted institutional provider agency, or they are solo practitioners who become members of AFC panel programs, which are operated under the aegis of the Appellate Division Departments in New York State. To provide their child clients with effective representation, all AFCs must not only have legal expertise across all case types but must also have specialized training in areas such as child and adolescent development, trauma, medical and mental health, disability, gender and sexuality, and domestic violence. Initiative partners, including AFCs from both the Appellate Division panels and institutional provider agencies, reported unmanageable workloads and insufficient resources to provide the holistic representation necessary to effectively promote the rights and well-being of children.

To promote holistic models of representation and recruit and retain the attorneys needed to support that overarching goal, partners stressed the need to reduce workloads for attorneys representing children. Initiative partners continually highlighted that overwhelming workloads are a major barrier to quality legal representation and directly contribute to the challenges in recruitment and retention of attorneys. Current caseloads, such as the AFC standard of 150 children per attorney, are not only unsustainable, but are also out of alignment with professional standards of practice for quality legal representation and national caseload standards.[56] As a result, attorneys are forced either to wrestle with unmanageable workloads, thereby sacrificing the quality of their work, or to decline family court assignments, which in turn causes case delays and impedes timely access to counsel.

ILS has developed and promulgated caseload standards for the mandated representation of parents under County Law Article 18-B, and the $150 million they propose in increased state funding is designed to implement these caseload standards, which the Initiative supports.[57] For Attorneys for Children, Initiative partners support the establishment of a new, feasible caseload standard to address unmanageable workloads. This standard would consider case type differences and other caseload differentials and would include a phased approach to complying with that more realistic standard. It is recommended that a study be completed in 6 to 12 months by a workgroup designated by the Unified Court System to support a sustainable plan to fund long-term practice improvements related to professional performance standards. While adherence to a new standard will not be possible immediately, committing to establishing standards would serve as an important guidepost for understanding the specific funding amount necessary to support legal providers in achieving manageable workload standards, including pursuing the recruitment and retention strategies mentioned above.[58]

Therefore, the Family Justice Initiative recommends exploring new caseload standards for all Attorneys for Children and the dollar amount necessary to achieve those standards. Such increased resources would support the expansion of holistic interdisciplinary representation within AFC contract agency offices. They would also enable AFC panel members to incorporate social workers/case managers, parent and peer youth advocates, and paralegals into their practices, and engage in additional training/mentorship programs. Such expansions could occur under the auspices of UCS because it, rather than the Office of Indigent Legal Services, funds and supervises the AFC contract agencies and panels.

3.1.3 Assigned Counsel for Parents and Children

Partners also frequently discussed the need for increased compensation rates for legal representation of parents and children on all case types in Family Court, including representation provided by the Assigned Counsel Programs. Therefore, the Initiative recommends the amendment of County Law 722-b and Judiciary Law 35 to provide for periodic review of pay, as well as enhancing the pay structure for the Assigned Counsel panels to include regular cost-of-living adjustment increases.[59]

Effective legal representation in child protection cases is often appropriately highlighted in these conversations, yet litigants and children involved in other case types also require effective representation. The decisions made in these cases can have enormous consequences for families, including where a child will live, who will have access to them, and who will make the decisions that shape their lives.

These complex issues require investments in training and staff to not only achieve manageable workloads, but also to provide the holistic representation needed to address complex family dynamics and needs, improve outcomes, and prevent future system involvement. The recruitment and retention of high-quality attorneys to serve on panels for all case types will require adequate compensation. While the legislature increased assigned counsel hourly rate compensation in the FY 2024 budget for the first time in 19 years,[60] panel attorneys raised concerns that the current increase will not be sufficient by itself to address inflation or keep up with rising costs of living. Partners suggested adopting legislation incorporating a periodic cost-of-living adjustment into Article 18-B of the County Law and Judiciary Law 35 to ensure that the rates are competitive and promote ongoing recruitment and retention of attorneys.

3.1.4 Continuity of Representation for Youth on Raise the Age Matters

Raise the Age (RTA) as implemented prescribes a court process but does not ensure youth have consistent representation following removal to the Juvenile Delinquency (JD) intake process from the Superior Court Youth Part. Since the assignment of counsel is generally court-driven, there is often a gap in representation when a case is removed from the Youth Part to Probation Adjustment and prior to a petition being filed in Family Court. Distinct, stage-dependent funding

streams for Raise the Age youth representation adds additional complications.[61]

The Initiative recommends that the Office for Justice Initiatives ensure youth have continuous and quality representation from Superior Court to Probation intake to Family Court, with peer support throughout the process. This will require identifying funding mechanisms for continuity of representation and peer support across the state. OJI could also prescribe a collaborative implementation structure for representation beginning in the Youth Part through removal and Family Court process under Raise the Age that can be adapted to meet the specific needs of individual counties. Specifically, the Office should consider the following to support consistent processes throughout the state:

- Requiring the annual county-level Raise the Age plan[62] process to map the current pathway, available resources, and gaps in community-based services for youth whose cases proceed in the Youth part or the Family Court under Raise the Age
- Requiring robust programs and services to be provided through community-based organizations instead of Probation Departments, preferably with support from a technical assistance provider[63]
- Ensuring representation for youth at adjustment[64]
- Developing a process that optimizes continuity and availability of representation for youth, with adequate support and funding
- Developing a plan for implementation and continuous quality improvement
- Maintaining the process for all counties across the State in a central location and promoting promising practices
- Using the annual County Raise the Age plan process and conference to support continuous quality improvement and share lessons learned

Some counties have successfully ensured continuous quality representation that meets the enumerated standards by using the following strategies, which could be replicated in other parts of the state:

- A single continuous provider (either an institution or panel attorney)[65][66] that is eligible for both Youth Part and Family Court funding streams
- A coordinated and immediate handoff between Youth Part and Family Court representation, requiring a collaborative relationship and information sharing between the Youth Part provider and AFC, and a plan to provide funding for representation during adjustment following Youth Part removal[67]

The Initiative also recommends identifying funding to provide peer support for youth to institutional provider offices and 18b panels, like the parent advocate recommendation discussed previously. The Office for Justice Initiatives could partner with Families Together to build the roster of peer advocates for youth and their families and collaborate with the courts and attorney groups to implement. OJI could ensure robust training for advocates so there is clarity on their roles and understanding of the court process to better support youth.

3.1.5
Representation Gaps on all Case Types

As noted previously, access to counsel is an essential right of parents and children in Family Court. It is therefore critical that people who cannot afford to retain counsel are assigned counsel. However, the practical application of standards to determine financial eligibility for assigned counsel can vary across counties and case types. A survey process administered by UCS through individual judicial districts was recommended to help identify when counsel is assigned, the consistency of counsel once assigned, how frequently litigants waive the right to counsel and why, what information about assignment of counsel is provided to litigants, and how financial eligibility for assigned counsel is determined. Initiative partners highlighted that despite Office of Indigent Legal Services standards and the uniform rule 205.19,[68] there is inconsistent practice when it comes to a process for assessing eligibility and assigning counsel. This may result in litigants having to unnecessarily represent themselves, which contributes to delays since unrepresented litigants are unfamiliar with court rules and procedures. And in some cases, even where a request for an attorney is approved, there are often delays and multiple appearances before an attorney is assigned. The Permanent Commission on Justice for Families may be well positioned to establish this process and determine who would be surveyed.

3.2
Coordinated Statewide Training

Partners consistently raised the importance of training but cautioned against a "one and done" approach that does little to influence practice and improve systems. Instead, training should be developed and delivered to further the priorities articulated by the Initiative and support the broader vision for Family Court. This includes enhancing holistic legal representation and supporting recruitment and retention efforts; cultivating mentorship, community, and learning collaboratives for practitioners; promoting problem-solving approaches that employ specialized knowledge; informing policies and practices that promote safety and a trauma-responsive court culture; and coordinating and measuring impact for sustainable systems change. All training plans should consider the following strategies for implementation, systems coordination, and evaluation, with specific considerations by case type outlined below to promote more holistic responses to families across professional roles.[69]

Systems Coordination

To deliver training consistently across case types statewide, the Family Justice Initiative recommends staffing structures to catalog existing training and resources, coordinate with partners to continually assess needs, deliver training in a variety of ways, and measure impact on practice. These may involve the following strategies:

- Conducting a full review and analysis of CLE offerings of the four Appellate Division Departments and ongoing review of offerings for respondents and agency counsel to identify training gaps and needs
- Coordinating with local court and community partner groups to identify county-specific training gaps and needs
- Capturing the current landscape across the state regarding family court proceedings, available legal services, and the scope and nature of resources and training available to lawyers and advocates
- Conducting ongoing assessment of training needs, identifying target audiences, determining and varying the modes of delivery, and developing written or multimedia resources to support and reinforce training concepts where possible
- Developing training on a regional level and considering small groups and training across roles and disciplines
- Incorporating the perspectives of people with lived experience into training and resource materials and coordinating training on universally relevant topics, including language access, bias, cultural responsiveness, trauma and secondary trauma, and procedural justice
- Coordinating with partners/entities already providing training, such as those listed under the Family Court Practice Institute recommendation below
- Establishing an advisory board or workgroup structure to guide efforts for training and support for practitioners, including providing input on local and regional needs, curricula content and delivery, and mentorship cultivation
- Developing trial handbooks, checklists, bench cards, and other resource materials to provide ongoing support for practitioners
- Providing peer support for professionals, including training on vicarious trauma and self-care to complement training efforts and build community for family court practitioners
- Working with partners to develop protocols/guidance for court staff, including clerks and court officers, on providing information to litigants, promoting safety in courthouses, and improving court culture
- Considering additional partners to support training across family court, child welfare, criminal, and housing systems
- Collaborating with local court and community partner groups

Evaluation, Sustainability, and Impact on Practice

Family Justice Initiative partners believe that providing better training and support for practitioners, jurists, and court personnel will lead to an increase in retention, attract more professionals to careers in Family Court, and elevate overall practice. Practice improvements that result from the training will not only lead to improved job satisfaction but also increase the quality of representation and support for children and families, which promotes a safer, more efficient and trauma-

responsive court culture. Metrics, strategies, and outcomes tracked should include but not be limited to:

- Number of attorneys/judges/court staff trained and/or mentored
- Feedback from trained and/or mentored participants
- A pre and post knowledge survey to determine what the participant will do differently after the training and how it has impacted their work after six months
- Metrics to assess changes to court culture (surveying parents, court staff, attorneys, etc.)
- Trauma audits to assess trauma informed practice in the courthouse by sending lay people in to assess what the interactions and culture look like (e.g., court watchers)
- A process evaluation to determine if protocols are followed in a trauma-informed manner and center the experiences and needs of each parent and child
- Measures and/or evidence indicating that training is effective, promotes safety, and supports skill and knowledge development
- Recurring mechanisms to include feedback from family court users and community-based organizations serving families
- Trends that community-based organizations are seeing to inform training and practice change, which can be collected through local court and community partner groups

3.2.1
Family Court Practice Institute

Initiative partners consistently highlighted that family court attorneys and practitioners need easy access to an array of streamlined interactive training and resources designed to support high quality, trauma-informed, holistic legal practice. This call for comprehensive and coordinated statewide training aligns with established priorities of the Unified Court System. To that end, UCS has partnered with the Center to build the Family Court Practice Institute to train, support and connect family court lawyers and practitioners across the State and, in so doing, to advance access to justice for children and families.

In keeping with the principles articulated by Initiative partners and UCS, the Family Court Practice Institute will educate and uplift attorneys and practitioners in all regions of New York State; infuse its curricula and resources with the perspectives of individuals with lived experience; promote racial equity and incorporate trauma-informed, culturally responsive and disability-sensitive practices in its training and resources; apply dynamic "state of the art" adult learning principles to its trainings; and draw upon contemporary social and medical science regarding child and adolescent development, trauma and evidence-based practices to inform its training and materials.

In collaboration with the NYS Permanent Commission on Justice for Families, the Family Court Practice Institute has established an Advisory Board comprised of judges, lawyers, practitioners and individuals with lived experience. Guided by the Advisory Board, as well as a Youth Council currently

under formation, the Family Court Practice Institute holds promise to significantly change New York's family court legal service landscape. Incrementally, the Practice Institute will develop and deliver in-person and online module-based training on family court practice fundamentals, specialized role-specific and interdisciplinary academies on select topics, (such as immigration, education, disability, mental health, youth and the AI landscape); and intensive skill-based bootcamps (such as courtroom/trial skills and dispute resolution)—with a roll-out of initial trainings anticipated in 2026.

Simultaneously, the Practice Institute anticipates a soft launch of its website, designed to incorporate an array of robust resources, including practice manuals and videos, checklists, templates, toolkits, a "bulletin board" of legal alerts and policy and caselaw updates, a training and research clearinghouse, and more. By 2027, it is anticipated that the website will further include access to an online learning management system, offering free on-demand self-paced CLE and CEU program credits for attorneys and social workers. The Practice Institute is also presently building a corps of consultant experts to provide technical assistance to attorneys and practitioners and/or litigation support to attorneys upon request. To promote individualized professional development, over time, the Practice Institute will support effective mentorship programs, learning collaboratives in localities or by subject matter, and optimize recruitment and retention of practitioners by cultivating innovative partnerships with law schools, social work schools, and people with lived experience.

The Family Court Practice Institute is committed to collaborating and consulting with a range of state and local partners, casting a wide net to identify and assess training and resource needs, to develop training opportunities, and to gather data and input on ways to measure impact. Such partners include:

- Lived experts
- Office for Justice Initiatives
- NYS Defender Association
- NYS Judicial Institute
- NYS Youth Justice Institute
- The Permanent Commission on Justice for Families
- Appellate Divisions
- Local 18b panels
- New York State Office of Indigent Legal Services
- Attorney for Children Institutional Providers
- Parent Attorney Institutional Providers
- NYS Court Appointed Special Advocates
- NYS Bar Association and its Committee on Children and the Law
- NYS Women's Bar Association
- Child Welfare Court Improvement Project
- NYS Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence
- Office of Children and Family Services and local departments
- New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence

- Town and Village Justice Resource Center
- Peer advocate programs

On a national level, the Practice Institute has taken steps to forge programmatic ties with the American Bar Association Center for Children and the Law, the National Council on Juvenile and Family Court Judges, the National Association of Counsel for Children, the National Institute for Trial Advocacy and large-scale training providers in other States.

3.2.2 Intimate Partner Violence Training

Families often come to court having experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) and trauma, characterized by complex histories and cycles of power and control with serious risks of danger and lethality for survivors and children. And yet the system response is often limited by the incident alleged in the petition, which does little to shed light on the complicated dynamics underlying it. Some survivors are particularly vulnerable because of age, sexual orientation, or immigration status, which their partners causing harm can exploit. The system can be inadvertently complicit with these harms if there is not consistent understanding of and responses to these dynamics. Compounding these challenges are the ways IPV shows up in different case types and disparate responses from attorneys, jurists, and court staff across the system. Finally, according to Initiative partners, ensuring that jurists, attorneys, and court staff have access to ongoing training is a persistent challenge that needs to be addressed.[70]

The Initiative recommends that the Unified Court System develop a more coordinated approach to training on intimate partner violence across case types and professional roles, one that is informed by the experience of IPV survivors and promotes a systems change approach across the state. Family court cases that involve IPV require a deep understanding of complex and nuanced power imbalances, safety risks, and the often-unseen coercive control influencing an individual survivor's choices. Training should ensure that IPV is considered consistently by jurists, court staff, and attorneys across case types to improve decision-making for families, enhance court culture, and promote a more coordinated response. As mentioned previously, training also has the potential to help promote quality legal representation to better serve families and contribute to recruitment and retention efforts by addressing the impact of secondary trauma that often stems from cases involving IPV. Training should address the complex behaviors that transcend demographics, as well as specific dynamics and issues that exacerbate harm for vulnerable communities, such as LGBQIA+ survivors, immigrants, and young people. UCS should also consider how training can inform the development of specific policies and protocols to assess lethality and promote safety in the courthouse and process; address biases in custody decision-making; and better respond to IPV across the system.

Needs Assessment, Systems Coordination and Training Topics

Initiative partners recommend a training structure within UCS's Office for Justice

Initiatives, in collaboration with the Judicial Institute, to coordinate IPV training across the State for all professional roles. This effort could also be coordinated with the new Family Court Practice Institute and partners included in that recommendation to address training needs across case types and break down silos. Partners identified the following topics, but recommend ongoing assessment and coordination with court and community partner groups, advocates, and community-based providers to be responsive to the needs of local jurisdictions:

- Firearms training and seizure protocols
- Cyber/Artificial Intelligence issues—forms of abuse and evidence, as well as people causing harm using AI for retaliatory purposes
- Trauma and vicarious trauma
- Risk assessment for intimate partner violence
- Restitution in family offense cases, child/spousal support
- Immigration issues and their intersection with IPV
- Impact of gender-affirming care on co-parenting that intersects with IPV dynamics
- Dating violence and its impact on young people
- Family violence issues, such as parents filing orders of protection against their children and the relationship to Persons in Need of Supervision matters
- Impact of IPV on survivors with disabilities
- Bias against victims and survivors
- Strategies and protocols to promote safety in the courthouses and throughout the process
- Language access issues, including protocols for judges working with interpreters
- Coordination between courts to avoid inconsistent orders
- Litigation abuse, including how to manage retaliatory litigation; balance between safety and due process
- Separation abuse and coercive control by proxy
- Understanding nuances in different case types (e.g., Article 10 cases and how IPV dynamics impact neglect allegations)
- Procedural justice

Each training should also provide concrete tools and approaches to address patterns of behaviors and dynamics.[71] In addition, UCS should consider tailored support and advanced training for judges on how to address issues on cases as they arise, including a peer support component.

3.2.3 Youth Justice Training

Partners discussed the importance of training to promote youth justice throughout the system but also to develop shared values that center adolescent well-being, community safety, and strategies to change the external narrative regarding court-involved young people. Therefore, partners recommend a coordinated, ongoing, and comprehensive

training plan; a structure for regular court and community partner meetings at the local level to inform training and promote shared values; and a data collection strategy to inform practice and counter negative perceptions in the media regarding adolescents.

Needs Assessment and Training Topics

Specifically, the Initiative recommends creating a training structure within UCS to coordinate youth justice training across the system. Partners identified the following considerations, but there should be ongoing assessment and coordination with court and community partner groups, advocates, and community-based providers to be most responsive to the needs of local jurisdictions:

- Incorporate values, motivational interviewing practices, and brain science into a trauma-informed statewide training for everyone across the youth justice system, including first responders/law enforcement, which will help change the narratives and assumptions about young people involved in juvenile delinquency matters[72]
- Promote a better understanding of Raise the Age and Youth Parts, including both the letter and the spirit of the law
- Include training on Alternative to Detention models and the benefits of diversion, which should be in coordination with the Youth Justice Innovation Fund if adopted
- Coordinate with partners/entities already providing training as enumerated above, but also include issue-specific partners such as Probation, DCJS, Raise the Age Coalition, Families Together, and You Gotta Believe
- Ensure training includes up-to-date and helpful "Know Your Rights" materials for youth, and trained practitioners have a plan for disseminating these materials to young people

Youth Justice Court and Community Partner Meetings

Partners also recommend the re-establishment of local court and community partner meetings for practitioners working with court-involved youth.[73] A strong collaboration between the courts, local agencies, youth advocates, child-serving systems, and community-based social services maximizes the effectiveness and efficiency of each partner's response. This coordinated approach ensures that youth-serving systems work together toward common goals, identify challenges, and collaborate to address gaps. Recommendations include the following components:

- Provide a forum for coordination, value setting, and collaboration
- Ensure meetings are held at least quarterly with court and community partners, but may meet more frequently as needed
- Solicit ongoing feedback, measure progress, conduct training or promote training opportunities, identify training needs, and enhance court and community partnerships
- While a specialty part for cross-over cases is a possible strategy where volume of cases supports it, partner meetings could provide an opportunity to think through system coordination[74]

- Work to establish more of a bridge for services between the adult system and Family Court
- Ensure ongoing collection and analysis of data to demonstrate successes and identify areas for improvement
- Use existing data to shift the narrative, especially with respect to Raise the Age and youth violence, through reports or op-eds and collaboration with The Coalition to Protect Raise the Age[75]
- Engage elected officials to host community events and learn more about the elected officials that support youth justice; campaigns such as the Right to Remain Silent campaign[76] should have materials serve as a connection to advocates/champions
- Sharing success stories from Youth Part and Family Court judges to humanize system-involved young people and counter misconceptions
- Explore the expansion of diversion programs, including alternatives to placement and pre-arrest diversion

3.3 Problem-Solving Principles and Specialized Approaches

Partners across Initiative work groups expressed a strong desire to reaffirm and strengthen the foundational problem-solving principles that have made New York State a leader for court innovation.[77] Many of the problem-solving approaches within the state have historically focused on criminal court, with less attention and resources allocated to Family Court. Under current Unified Court System leadership, there is a renewed commitment to address the overdue needs of Family Court. Chief Judge Rowan D. Wilson spoke movingly in his 2025 State of the Judiciary about the importance of problem-solving courts and the effort to address the "long-neglected family courts," saying: "all of New York's courts should consider themselves problem solvers."[78] In the 2026 State of the Judiciary, Chief Judge Wilson focused exclusively on Family Court, centering the voices of parents and young people with lived expertise, to highlight some of those problem-solving approaches.[79] The recommendations in the following sections seek to advance such problem-solving interests by centering the needs of families, fostering multi-agency and court and community collaboration, and delivering justice that is trauma-informed, holistic, responsive, and allocated equitably across the state.

In short, problem-solving principles include:

- Centering the experience of each individual and family to address the full spectrum and complexity of their lives
- Recognizing the importance of specialized knowledge and expertise in particular areas, such as substance use, child and adolescent development, and intimate partner violence
- Relying on strong relationships and leadership to foster and maintain system and community-based coordination to improve efficiency and drive resources and support to the highest need populations

- Advancing both individual and system accountability so that the court as an institution and as the sum of its individual players achieves its ideals regarding access and justice

Current court-based specialized problem-solving models that address Family Court cases and operate across multiple counties include the Integrated Domestic Violence (IDV) or "one family, one judge" Court, specialized Domestic Violence Parts in Family Court, Family Treatment Courts, Human Trafficking Courts, the Strong Starts Court Initiative, and the Parent Support Program.[80] The Family Treatment Courts not only operate as a specialized model, but UCS has formally committed to promoting its' underlying principles throughout the system with the Better for Families Initiative.[81] The UCS taskforce on Mental Health has recommended a Mental Health Part for juvenile delinquency matters as well and is working with the Permanent Commission and the new UCS director of Behavioral Health, as well as a coalition of external partners, to implement that recommendation.[82] UCS has also begun to pilot a Mental Health Part for adults in family court proceedings based on the model developed for criminal court. The Family Justice Initiative is not endorsing or recommending the replication of any particular model. The decision to implement a particular problem-solving program should be made locally, in partnership with the community; but if a well-established program is implemented, there should be ongoing support to ensure fidelity to the model while also adapting it to local needs and feedback.

Partners offered historical perspectives for how commitment to problem-solving models has eroded incrementally over time. First, budget cuts in 2008 led to the loss or merging of Resource Coordinator positions in IDV courts in many counties, resulting in the inability to perform essential functions like maintaining a strong community liaison presence. Additionally, parent defense attorneys in New York City were reluctant to have clients participate in treatment courts, resulting in UCS making treatment approaches available without the formal court structure—a practice that has continued through the Better for Families Initiative. Finally, the COVID pandemic saw a wave of retirements that accelerated the loss of institutional knowledge, with high turnover remaining a persistent challenge.

The Initiative recommends a renewed commitment to serving families holistically by strengthening existing specialized court models to ensure consistency and efficacy across the state where there is a need and support for these models.

Each problem-solving model mentioned previously has its own purpose and goals, with the common aim of providing specialized knowledge and interdisciplinary support to litigants and cases, and to connect families with resources to address underlying issues that lead to court involvement. Another key feature is the use of dedicated non-legal staff, who serve as a primary liaison and point of contact between the court and community, support training events, and help facilitate court and community partner meetings to problem-solve at the local level and raise issues up to the state level. Ongoing programmatic support is also a key feature of

problem-solving courts, as it ensures fidelity to the model, the ability to adapt to local needs and concerns, and the avoidance of mission creep that can happen over time as historical knowledge and priorities shift.

Therefore, the Initiative recommends a concentrated statewide commitment to problem solving in Family Court through the following key activities to bolster specialized models:

- Ongoing support and oversight by the Unified Court System, a designated technical assistance provider with expertise in implementing and operating the model program, and a clear mandate to effectuate systems change
- Outreach to local jurisdictions to assess need and readiness to implement model programs, as well as strategies to leverage expertise and incorporate underlying principles of the model into regular court practice
- Transparency in judicial selection and appointments in specialized parts with opportunity for input from practitioners
- A selection process for judges and staff that considers both quantifiable and less quantifiable skills that are important to success in the role, including:
    - Relevant experience in practice involving complex cases, specialized expertise, and ability to manage a significant and time-intensive workload
    - Strong interpersonal and leadership skills, a demonstrated track record of holding productive interdisciplinary convenings, investment in personal learning and growth in the specialized area, and openness to feedback
- Investment in onboarding and ongoing training for judges and staff, particularly within the first year of placement, with opportunities to observe nationally recognized peers and leaders in other courts as well as required attendance at both national and statewide conferences for specialized training
- Ensuring appropriate staffing in each specialized part statewide with consideration for competitive pay to help with recruitment and retention

3.4 Problem-Solving Strategies Scaled Across the System

In addition to strengthening existing problem-solving court models, the Initiative also recommends investment in the underlying principles of specialized problem-solving approaches, which can be utilized to support all case types across the system, including the following strategies:

3.4.1 Court and Community Partner Meetings

Both specialized problem-solving models, as well as more general problem-solving approaches described below, will benefit from regular and ongoing local interdisciplinary court and community partner meetings to problem-solve around specific issues. Such partner engagement has

proven to be a valuable, low-cost solution to enhance collaboration, identify challenges and solutions, address resource gaps, and effectuate systems change. Achieving such benefits depends on ensuring that these efforts are taking place in the true problem-solving spirit, requiring the skilled leadership of a local judge who sets the tone for openness to feedback, interest in ongoing growth and learning, and collegiality. UCS leadership should encourage and support these meetings at the local level and provide training for judges to support their role as judicial leaders and convenors. These partner meetings are also referenced in other recommendations discussed throughout the strategic plan, and should include the following to support their structure:

- A forum for coordination, value setting, and collaboration
- Meetings that are held at least quarterly, but may meet more frequently as needed
- Solicitation of ongoing feedback from partners to measure progress, conduct training or promote training opportunities, identify training needs, and enhance court and community partnerships
- Resource coordinators or other court staff to support agenda-setting, meeting logistics, and follow-up activities
- Appointment of judicial leadership, including judges sending invites and facilitating the meetings, and Unified Court System training and support to cultivate such leadership
- A process established by UCS to raise issues up to local and statewide leadership

3.4.2 Resource Coordination Across Case Types

The resource coordinator role has been utilized by UCS in a variety of problem-solving contexts. For example, the Integrated Domestic Violence Court model includes a dedicated resource coordinator to provide linkages and referrals for survivors of intimate partner violence and people causing harm. These referrals aim to promote safety and accountability, enhance coordination, and prevent unnecessary adjournments and delays. Resource coordinator responsibilities include ensuring survivors have access to advocates, assessing the quality and appropriateness of mandated programming using their specialized expertise (often with a clinical background), assessing compliance for people causing harm, liaising with the community, and convening court and community partner meetings to troubleshoot ongoing issues and challenges as part of a court-led coordinated community response.[83]

Initiative partners frequently mentioned the need for resource coordinators to assess needs and connect litigants with community-based supports as well as connect litigants with both mandated and voluntary services to address underlying challenges. Those with lived experience emphasized the challenges of accessing these services which often help resolve issues on all case types and reduce further system involvement. There were many examples raised in these conversations about judges or court staff lacking knowledge of available resources, of litigants being directed to services with long waitlists or services that were unable to address their

specific needs. This leads to unnecessary delays and frustrates litigants attempting to navigate a disconnected system. Court models that include either a resource coordinator or a mental health professional were mentioned as potential solutions, bridging gaps between courts and community-based organizations and ensuring that recommended and mandated services are tailored to the needs of individuals and families.

3·4·3 Resource Coordination Hub for Custody/Visitation/Orders of Protection

The need to connect families with community-based support to reduce and prevent system involvement has been highlighted throughout this report. However, partners have noted that when it comes to custody, visitation, and orders of protection matters (CVO), family courts lack personnel to help identify existing resources that can address the often complex and intersecting issues families face. The result is a system that is unable to address the issues that brought litigants to Family Court in the first place, which in turn can contribute to delays and further court involvement, including investigations leading to Article 10 filings.[84]

Therefore, the Initiative recommends that the Unified Court System develop and pilot a centralized Resource Coordination Hub to enhance the court responses to families on CVO cases. This approach would build on the proven efficacy of the resource coordinator role utilized in the Integrated Domestic Violence Parts and other specialized court models, by enhancing collaboration between the court and the community, identifying existing resources to support service provision—including by directly connecting families to voluntary resources or providing follow-up on court-ordered services—and contributing to a more trauma-informed court process.

Resource Coordination Hubs can also be part of a broader approach to differentiated case processing or a specialized Family Court Domestic Violence Part, to assess need and not only connect families with community-based support, but also to streamline the process and preserve court resources for high-risk and high-need families.[85]

The primary purpose of this recommendation is to address the needs of families by coordinating referrals to community-based services, either identified by the family or recommended by the Court, that mitigate risks and prevent further court involvement. Resource coordinators will also serve as community liaisons to assess and educate the court about available community-based resources, build relationships, and track evolving training needs and resource gaps. This recommendation will contribute to more efficient court processes and improved case timelines, as greater access to services for families and ability to submit the corresponding documentation to the court to substantiate service provision reduces unnecessary delays and obstacles to case resolution.

Needs Assessment and Planning Process

The Unified Court System may choose to identify pilot locations to develop this Resource Coordination Hub model with the following considerations:

- Developing a timeline for a planning process
- Assessing interest and readiness through Administrative Judges and local court and community partner meetings
- Coordinating with local Justice Coordinators who work under the Office for Justice Initiatives
- Reviewing court data on volume of CVO cases
- Reviewing geographic considerations and population density and considering the need for local or regional models depending on population, geography, and availability of transportation
- Coordinating with other problem-solving approaches, including triage pilots where applicable, to leverage resources and expertise
- Identifying partners and cataloging community-based resources
- Reviewing local policies and caseload data
- Co-designing a model including developing goals, policies, and procedures, as well as metrics to present to local court and community partner meetings for feedback
- Considering gaps in resource coordination on Article 10 cases and ways that this model can either include those cases or coordinate with existing efforts to streamline services for families across case types

Staffing Structure

UCS may want to consider a statewide coordinator to support the needs assessment and provide oversight if the model is piloted in multiple sites, and to support expansion. The Resource Coordination Hub could then be piloted at the court locations identified during the planning process. Staffing needs should be determined based on local needs. Regional models may be considered in lower population areas and additional staffing for high volume jurisdictions. A supervisory structure should also be included depending on the number of resource coordinator staff.

Resource coordinators would have the following responsibilities:

- Identifying and vetting new services, programs, and/or resources to share with the court and families
- Creating and regularly updating a resource manual
- Referring parties and supporting their access to services, programs, and resources
- Maintaining an active presence within the community to serve as a primary liaison between the community and court by cultivating relationships with court partner agencies, community-based organizations, and culturally specific services; becoming familiar with the needs and resource capacities of the communities served by Family Court; and attending listening sessions and community events consistently
- Providing ongoing information and support to courtroom staff on programmatic issues
- Overseeing the submission of required reports and compliance-related paperwork

- Tracking ordered or voluntary services in UCS's Universal Court Management System (UCMS)
- Supporting judges' facilitation and coordination of court and community partner meetings by maintaining an updated list of partners to attend meetings (including community members with lived experience, parent leaders, and community ambassadors); creating agendas based on input from partners; supporting training events; and facilitating productive problem-solving conversations

Systems Coordination

To implement a Resource Coordination Hub effectively, resource coordinators will require court, peer, and community support and the ability to maintain those relationships. Court support will be required from a broad range of roles, including the local clerk's office and other court staff. Resource coordinators should also collaborate with civil legal service providers for direct referrals and petition filing support, and with parent advocate and legal information and navigation programs to ensure coordination and holistic support for families.

Measurement, Evaluation, and Sustainability

Initiative partners believe that the enhanced support a Resource Coordination Hub offers to families on custody, visitation, and orders of protection cases will help address complex issues underlying court involvement, better prepare litigants for court appearances, and improve the quality and timeliness of information used by all parties for decision making. To measure impact, ensure ongoing quality improvement, and support sustainability and expansion, Resource Coordination Hubs should work with their partners to implement a continuous quality improvement process as outlined in the evaluation section of this strategic plan. At a minimum, any data collection protocol should track case type, demographics, referral types and outcomes, length of time to case disposition, rates of return filings, and other case outcomes. Feedback from litigants about their experience with the Hub should also be incorporated. Finally, results from the evaluation plan could be used to demonstrate impact, share lessons learned, and attract additional funding streams to replicate the model and ensure consistency throughout the state.

3.5 Custody/Visitation/ Orders of Protection Case Processing Strategies

Partners discussed the importance of efficient court processes on all case types as part of an overall problem-solving approach to assess the issues that bring families to court; connect families to community-based resources, legal navigation, and peer advocacy programs early in the process; determine the appropriate process for resolving disputes, streamline the court process, and promote procedural justice; and preserve judicial resources for high-risk and high-need cases. The following recommendations include specific considerations and ideas for custody/visitation/orders of protection and child support matters, but the Initiative also recommends a longer-term plan that could be explored and implemented by UCS and the Permanent Commission on Justice

for Families to coordinate across case types, promote consistent practices statewide, and support implementation at the local level.

Partners suggested differentiated case processing strategies as an important piece of a more trauma-informed, safe, respectful, and efficient court process on Custody/visitation/orders of protection matters. This approach includes an assessment of the needs of each family to make early connections to community-based support and determine if the matter would be appropriate for an alternative dispute resolution track. Standardized screening for domestic and intimate partner violence should be conducted early on, as well as assessment of the parties' capacity to participate in an ADR process. If it is determined that judicial intervention is unavoidable, court staff can help litigants prepare paperwork and explain how to navigate the court process. This approach could be modeled after the triage pilots being implemented in child support matters in New York City, as well as CVO pilots being considered in other NYS counties and national models. Court and community partner meetings, established as part of several other recommendations in this strategic plan, could help determine the specifics of this process in individual counties, as well as support implementation and ongoing problem-solving as issues arise. This approach could also be part of broader efforts to address case delays, including calendar management training, model practices for judges, and referrals to other specialized approaches such as Domestic Violence Parts where appropriate.

Needs Assessment

The Commission and/or the Unified Court System could first consider a long-range case processing study through a partnership with a consulting technical assistance organization like the National Center for State Courts to assess needs across the state and readiness for piloting model approaches. UCS and the Commission, along with the identified technical assistance provider, could further develop model practices for the piloting and expansion of this differentiated case processing triage model and help support local implementation throughout the state based on the needs of each court and community. In determining the local adaptation, UCS staff, with support from the consulting organization, could convene or attend local court and community partner meetings to determine how the model should be implemented locally and consider the following criteria:

- Size of the jurisdiction
- Case volumes
- In-person vs. virtual appearances
- Courthouse foot traffic
- Data on case outcomes
- Existing problem-solving programs
- Existing community-based resources
- Current court structures and processes
- Court staff and resources

Pilot Development

The Unified Court System and its designated partners may then develop the pilot triage process on CVO matters and consider including the following components:

- Initial meeting with court assistant and/or court attorney
- Screening for intimate partner violence

and capacity to resolve disputes and determine appropriateness for mediation, structured settlement, or a specialized Domestic Violence Part if available

- Assessment of family needs to facilitate connections with resource coordination and legal information and navigation programs
- Identification of opportunities for settlement
- Help prepare paperwork and answer questions to streamline the court process and promote procedural justice

Ongoing Programmatic Support, Evaluation and Sustainability

Initiative partners believe that a differentiated case processing model on CVO cases—including an assessment of family needs, connection to resources, referrals to Alternative Dispute Resolution early in the process, and navigation for families if judicial intervention is unavoidable—will have a positive impact on litigants, families, and the efficiency of the court process. Overall, this approach should contribute to a more trauma-informed court response and help strengthen families. The following are some of the measures UCS should consider tracking to assess the impact of the approach, provide continuous quality improvement, and support expansion and sustainability of these model practices:

- Number of referrals to community-based resources, including legal information and navigation services
- Number of referrals to mediation
- Rate of settlement
- Time to completion of service of process
- Number of adjournments before settlement
- Temporary orders issued at first appearance
- Feedback from families on their experience with the process

3.6 Problem-Solving in Child Support Matters

Partners on the joint Family Justice Initiative and Permanent Commission on Justice for Families Child Support Workgroup all agreed with the need to provide centralized oversight and coordination for a more unified child support system. This would streamline court processes, support families in navigating the process, ensure equitable allocation of resources, and provide training and ongoing support to Family Court Support Magistrates (Magistrates) statewide. The following recommendations promote consistency across the state, but also provide ways to address the distinct challenges that arise in individual counties:

3.6.1. Statewide Staffing Structure

UCS would be responsible for the creation of a new staffing structure to provide increased support to Child Support Magistrates, including whether the positions would be statewide or assigned to specific regions. UCS recently appointed the Honorable Peter Passidomo (Ret.) as Chief Magistrate for New York City Family Courts, a role that also has the respon-

sibility of Court Attorney Referee oversight. The Initiative recommends that this position be maintained and that two similar positions be created in Districts and/or counties outside of New York City (for Magistrates only), with one shared administrative position to support the Chief and Deputy Chief Magistrates. This new recommended staffing structure would support the creation of statewide standards and practices and assist local jurisdictions to implement those practices based on identified needs, including:

- Comprehensive review of materials provided to the litigants from the Court to ensure information is uniform and consistent, where possible, and legally accurate across courts
- Regional or statewide assessment of court processes, including identifying opportunities to replace paper-based workflows with automation, such as the petition-filing process
- Feedback processes to assess pro se litigants' experience in the child support system
- Assessment of interest and readiness for court pilots (i.e. triage, Alternative Dispute Resolution)
- Consistent protocols statewide with input from local court and community partner groups and the Permanent Commission (e.g., e-signatures, UCMS usage and forms, NYS Courts Electronic Filing (NYSCEF) implementation)
- Creation and distribution of standardized resources and information to support families' access to information (e.g., summons information, how to petition and file, how to use NYSCEF, how to effectuate service)
- Support for implementation of court and community partner groups to problem solve at the local level and inform local and state-level practices
- Maintenance of positive relationships with statewide partners, including the other Chief Magistrates and outside agencies such as the New York Office of Child Support Services

Chief and Deputy Chief Magistrates would also be responsible for developing and updating a statewide child support training plan, including:

- Creation and distribution of a training manual, booklet, and online library of materials
- UCS's mandatory training topics, as well as topics that have been developed for the extensive orientation training provided to New York City Magistrates
- Regular court observations across the state to address local challenges in training design and implementation

All Magistrates could receive this training within their first year and have access to the Judicial Institute's annual in-person training and electronic library.

Chief Magistrates, in coordination with Judicial District Offices could oversee the hiring and onboarding process for all new Magistrates and provide ongoing oversight, including by:

- Providing input into the hiring process and participating on the hiring panel

- Tracking completion of mandatory onboarding and regular ongoing training activities to promote consistency across the state
- Coordinating immediate opportunities for multiple court observations
- Staying up to date on case law changes to provide timely support for all Magistrates
- Designating and cultivating mentor Magistrates who have demonstrated excellent judicial demeanor, courtroom management, commitment to procedural justice, and leadership skills
- Receiving copies of complaints filed against Magistrates and incorporating feedback into training plan

3.6.2 Local Administrative Positions

The Initiative recommends creating child support specialists in each region to promote implementation of statewide standards, protocols based on local needs, and to provide support for Magistrates. The Unified Court System could determine where these positions are implemented based on volume and needs of the jurisdiction. The recommended position could be a Deputy Chief Clerk of appropriate grade based in the District Office to oversee and support processes at the local Family Court Clerk's Offices.[86] Responsibilities should include:

- The development and implementation of consistent policies and procedures
- Calendar management support for Magistrates
- Court assistant training
- Court and litigant support
- Technology support
- Addressing local barriers to case resolution, including personal service issues, protocols for uploading documents, and communication with the court
- Identifying court staff training needs
- Supporting court processes including integration of cases into NYSCEF, staff training to support litigants' access to NYSCEF, and uniform requirements for e-signatures
- Coordinating and partnering with local clerks' offices and Chief and Deputy Chief Magistrates

3.6.3 Triage Pilots and Protocols

New York City Family Court developed a triage pilot in Kings County that is in the process of replication and expansion in all five boroughs. The primary purpose of this pilot was to address the large volume of cases and reduce backlog resulting from pandemic disruptions to court operations. Goals identified for the triage pilot and shared by partners include:

- Identification of cases appropriate for alternative dispute resolution
- Resolution of cases early in the process
- Support for litigants to effectuate service, prepare financial documents, create Support Collection Unit accounts, make

connections to legal and navigation services, help families understand the process, and promote procedural justice

- Establish orders at the first appearance and when appropriate ensure orders are "right sized" so that it is clear what is owed from the outset before arrears accumulate
- Reduce delays and shorten times to case resolution
- Increase support collection and address barriers to payment

Court attorneys and staff meet with litigants prior to their first appearance in a low-stress environment to do the following:

- Assess service paperwork and financial information provided
- Upload information for the Court prior to appearance with the Magistrate
- Determine if an agreement can be reached based on W-2 wage documentation or other financial or government information and the Child Support Standards Act (CSSA)
- Help litigants address gaps in financial information or refer to programs that can assist further
- Explain relevant procedures and laws, including service of process and the CSSA
- Provide referrals to legal and/or other services where needed
- Schedule the initial appearance in front of a Magistrate for after this initial meeting to ensure progress is not stalled
- If case can be resolved with an agreement, develop an expedited process for the Magistrate to issue an order

While the initial goal for the triage process was to address volume and backlog in a large jurisdiction, the protocols that have been developed for the Kings County triage pilot are creating efficiencies that could be adapted to streamline court processes in smaller jurisdictions as well. In lower-volume jurisdictions where Magistrates already manage the responsibilities described above, an alternative is to add additional staff, such as a dedicated Court Assistant in addition to the one assigned to the courtroom, to file and upload paperwork, handle email correspondence for Magistrates, implement the text alert system, and distribute resources about court processes, like personal service and financial disclosure.

To assess the impact of the triage process, partners recommend robust and coordinated data collection and sharing between the Court and the Office of Child Support Services, including the following information:

- Time between filing and case resolution
- Time between file date and first hearing
- Rate of final order issued at first appearance
- Rate and length of adjournments
- Magistrate caseloads
- Rate of agreements
- Rate of noncustodial parent and custodial parent appearance at court hearing
- Rate of objections

- Child support order compliance, including amount of support collected (rate of collection vs. owed) and rate of agreements
- Number of default orders, if service is completed
- Difference between temporary order and final order of support
- Date of hearing and temporary or final order to date of first payment
- Objections to orders and decisions
- Estoppel issues that proceed to a Judge

To expand the triage pilot, the new Chief Magistrate(s) and Deputy Chief Magistrate(s) should consider:

- Coordination with NYC Chief Magistrate on triage lessons learned
- Collaboration on additional standards for measuring outcomes and processes for continuous quality improvement and sustainability
- A statewide needs assessment to determine readiness for additional pilots
- Adaptation of pilot based on local need and court structures

3.6.4 Local Problem-Solving and Statewide Advisory Structures

Partners identified the need for local court and community partner groups to address challenges and problem-solving to improve practice. The Chief Magistrate(s) and Deputy Chief Magistrate(s) can play a role in working with jurisdictions to support local implementation, including identifying local leadership to form partnerships, convening regular meetings, and developing protocols for raising issues up to the state level. Topics could include the following:

- Consideration of implementing a triage model or incorporating select components depending on local needs
- Discussion of challenges and opportunities to improve court practice
- Advisement on protocols for implementing consistent procedures at the local level and coordinating at the state level where appropriate, including
    - personal service
    - document preparation and submission
    - appearance standards
    - transparent distribution of court rules
    - implementation of the CSSA
- Identification of training needs and measures to impact practice
- Creation and implementation of processes to ensure information is accessible and distributed uniformly (e.g. automated texting, flyers with QR codes, updated website, centralized emails)

The Initiative also recommends leveraging the Permanent Commission on Justice for Families' Child Support Action Group to support implementation of the recommendations generated by the joint work group, as well as to provide a forum for ongoing problem-solving and collaboration on additional

strategies to streamline the court process, recruit and retain Magistrates, and support families on child support matters.

3.6.5 Alternative Dispute Resolution for Child Support and Parenting

Partners recommend that the Unified Court System's Alternative Dispute Resolution Division develop a statewide plan for implementing pilot ADR programs that address child support and provide navigation services for families, including:[87]

- Training for mediators on the child support process, the role of the local child support program, and compliance with the CSSA
- Partnering with the Community Dispute Resolution Centers to provide access to mediators and court-based programs to deliver training
- Recruiting retired Magistrates to serve as mediators
- Including child support programs in statewide public awareness campaign promoting ADR services
- Coordinating with community-based programs for referrals to legal and social services
- Developing criteria for referrals and coordinating with triage process where applicable, including recruiting non-W2 wage earner cases or shared physical custody cases to ensure orders are right-sized and agreed upon
- In New York City, linking the mediation pilots to the triage pilots so that families can be connected to mediation early in the process
- Conducting a process evaluation on pilot programs to measure impact on practice and inform ongoing quality improvement to replicate programming
- Considering inclusion of the intersection between parenting time and support[88]

This recommendation also provides the opportunity to explore combining child support and custody/visitation issues more broadly and to consider modifying court operations so that one jurist can review and issue orders on both matters to create a coordinated approach.[89] When custody and visitation is heard separately from child support, it excludes considerations of deviations from the order due to shared parenting responsibilities, eliminates opportunities for creative parenting agreements, and creates additional issues when custody changes between parents/guardians. If these matters can be heard by one jurist, this shifts the focus of the conversation to the needs of the children, engages parents in important conversations about shared parenting time and costs to care for the children, and ensures the order issued is right-sized, effectively preventing the need for additional court intervention.

3.7 Court Access

Courthouses and court hearings should be welcoming, safe, accessible, and tailored to meet the needs of families. Strategies to increase physical and virtual court access should be part of a broader access to justice

plan, which includes many of the other recommendations in this report, such as legal information and navigation, resource coordination, differentiated case processing strategies, and training. It should also include court and community partner meetings to problem solve locally to ensure family courts are safe, collaborative, and trauma-responsive, and that they address the needs of families to reduce further court involvement and increase access to justice.

During the first phase of the Family Justice Initiative, meetings were held with external partners whose work focuses on access to justice beyond Family Court. It became clear during these meetings that efforts underway in the State's other civil courts could also be applied in family courts. As a result, partners from the Permanent Commission on Access to Justice and general civil legal services organizations were invited to join the Access to Justice Workgroup to collaborate with Family Court practitioners on shared strategies, and to develop the following recommendations that could be applied to all civil and family courts. Given limited time and numerous possibilities, the Initiative also recommends that the Commissions on Access to Justice and Justice for Families continue to collaborate to not only support implementation of these recommendations but also to promote a broader, more coordinated access to justice plan for New York State Civil and Family Courts.[90]

During the second phase of the Initiative, partners identified three concrete recommendations aimed at improving families' overall court experience and increasing access to justice in the courtroom, both physically and virtually:

3.7.1 Language Access

More than 150 languages and dialects are spoken in New York State, and more than 30% of New Yorkers speak a language other than English at home.[91] In 2025, 29,106 interpreters were assigned to support litigants in family court cases across New York state.[92] Spanish is the most requested language in the state for translation and interpretation services, while other requests include Mandarin, French, Russian, Haitian Creole, and a wide range of West African and Asian languages.[93]

Courts have a clear mandate to provide quality interpretation for any litigant who "is unable to understand and communicate in English to the extent that he or she cannot meaningfully participate in the court proceeding."[94] Yet partners consistently raised the challenge of adequate court-based interpretation services, which is not only a barrier to access but also contributes to delays. Other concerns included a lack of accurate interpretation, both in court-based programs and through Language Line. Due to the increase of migrants in many communities, the number of available interpreters has not kept pace with the growing need for interpretation services in additional languages. There is also a limited availability of American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters. Furthermore, while ASL does not always represent the primary sign language of the individual seeking interpretation services, it is oftentimes the only one for which interpretation is available.

Partners identified the limited availability of interpreters to appear in court, as interpretation is provided largely by independent

contractors that prefer to operate remotely. There is an even more limited availability of interpreters for languages in specific dialects and sign language. Therefore, Initiative partners recommend that the Office of Language Access build on existing efforts to implement the following strategies to increase recruitment of qualified interpreters:

- Publicize opportunities for interpreters through a variety of institutions and through their career services programs, including undergraduate programs, vocational schools, high schools, and the National Institute for the Deaf
- Collaborate with the Unified Court System's Office of Civic Engagement that works with schools to advertise interpreter opportunities
- Add job listings to other recruitment platforms that focus on employment opportunities in the public and nonprofit sectors

In addition, with the launch of the Virtual Court Appearance Platform,[95] the Office of Language Access has an opportunity to assist in evaluating the effectiveness of the platform's automated interpretation services. Certified interpreters can be provided to review transcripts and/or monitor live appearances recorded by the platform to assess accuracy of the services. If the services are useful, this provides an opportunity to use automated interpretation services and reduce the need for interpreters virtually, encouraging availability for in-person appearances. Family Justice Initiative partners also recommend exploring innovative technology that provides interpretation services as additional tools.

3.7.2 Children's Centers

The usage of Children's Centers across the State has changed significantly due to the impact on courthouses from the COVID pandemic and the corresponding reduction of in-person appearances. Overall, Children's Centers went from seeing 35,000 children per year to just 11,000, with an average stay of 20 minutes.[96] The need for Children's Centers is very location-specific, as some courts have returned to more in-person appearances while others continue to have less foot traffic. While some counties do not require a robust Children's Center, other counties are working to add capacity. Due to the varying needs statewide, partners recommend conducting a needs assessment to assess usage at each Family Court location, particularly as more appearances return to in person. Metrics may include:

- Population density
- Accessibility
- Number of court filings
- In-person requirements for court appearances
- Available space
- Capacity for visitors
- Court hours

Where it is identified that Children's Centers are needed, adequate funding should be allocated to support those sites. Each Children's Center is operated by a different local nonprofit organization; therefore, the costs and budget vary statewide. However, the estimated budget needed for one site costs

approximately $175,000 annually, with most of the costs dedicated to personnel.[97]

In courthouses where there are Children's Centers that are underutilized, UCS should encourage their use. Parents may be reluctant to place their children in the care of Children's Centers if they are unfamiliar. They may also distrust staff who are associated with the Court due to fears of further system involvement. Those parents may be unaware that Children's Center supervisors are trained to support families with, for example, identifying developmental delays or accessing resources like early intervention services.

Children's Center staff could be encouraged to engage in an outreach process with court staff, which includes identifying and participating in local court and community partner meetings to share information about the availability of their Center and services provided. They may also set up dates and times for court staff to visit the Children's Center to learn more about staff services and expertise. Court leadership and Children's Center staff may also consider other opportunities for disseminating information, including connecting with local organizations, legal service providers, and/or those with lived experience to learn about effective ways to disseminate information about the Children's Center. Available information for parents could include:

- Adult to child ratio
- Staff responsibilities
- Activities and services for children
- Food and drink provision
- Referrals to community-based services
- Age range for children
- Pick up and drop off procedures

3.7.3 Virtual Court Access

Court Protocols for Virtual Proceedings

Partners agreed that, since the pandemic, the benefits of virtual proceedings have become clear. Some case types and appearances are particularly conducive to a virtual model and can lessen childcare concerns, reduce the need to take time off from work to attend court, and enhance accessibility for individuals with disabilities. Virtual proceedings are also more likely to be scheduled for specific rather than general time frames, which reduces the likelihood that litigants will spend all morning or day waiting for their case to be called.

Virtual appearances may promote safety for children and survivors in cases involving intimate partner violence by reducing time spent in physical proximity to those who have caused harm. Attending court virtually may also reduce anxiety and trauma experienced during in-person proceedings. Some jurisdictions have developed initiatives that permit remote filing of family offense petitions and virtual hearings on the initial temporary order of protection, which Initiative partners recommend expanding.

Partners also agreed that while there are some types of proceedings that are better adjudicated in person—such as trials where the court needs to assess the credibility of witnesses and navigate evidentiary matters—virtual access should continue with some improvements. While statewide best

practices have been established to improve access to virtual platforms and provide clear instructions for litigants, this guidance is discretionary for jurists. Therefore, the Initiative recommends that all jurists adopt these protocols with adaptations to meet local needs and incorporate into individual part rules.

Access to New York State's Electronic Filing System

New York State Court Electronic Filing System (NYSCEF) has been made available in an increasing number of Family Court jurisdictions across the state for custody/visitation, guardianship, parentage, paternity, and child support matters. While efforts are underway, Initiative partners continue to encourage the increase of availability to all jurisdictions and for eligible family court case types as NYSCEF provides opportunities for litigants to file timely amid work and childcare demands, even outside of court hours.

The court's current system for file and record management, the Universal Case Management System (UCMS), is not linked to NYSCEF, creating delays and barriers to the progression of family court cases. A linkage between NYSCEF and UCMS would create a pathway for all forms that are entered in NYSCEF to become filed in real time, bringing each case closer to a quicker resolution. If NYSCEF documents were immediately transferred to UCMS, court staff would not have to spend time transferring documents between the two systems, wasting valuable court resources. It would also increase opportunities for jurists to prepare in advance of the appearance as they would have quicker access to all documents filed. Therefore, the Initiative recommends that all family court jurisdictions be provided with NYSCEF access with a linkage to UCMS to ensure seamless processes between the electronic systems.

Virtual Court Access Network Sites (VCAN)

Needs Assessment

Partners discussed the challenges surrounding access to virtual proceedings for litigants without reliable cell phone or Wi-Fi service. Many litigants do not have smartphones, which makes it difficult to join virtual platforms or to communicate with their attorney during virtual proceedings. These issues not only impact meaningful access for litigants but also contribute to court delays.

Virtual Court Access Network sites (VCAN) have been developed in partnership between UCS and external organizations to provide remote access through safe and secure community-based locations for litigants who struggle to access virtual court appearances and may need more support. VCAN sites include court-trained staff, computers, and/or internet service in a friendly, safe, and secure environment that is closer to their home and in community spaces. In addition, some VCAN sites offer direct connections to community-based resources, like legal services, do-it-yourself documents, and other informational materials about court cases. VCANs are a promising strategy, but they are limited to specific locations and need to be assessed to ensure they are effectively serving the public to thoughtfully expand. VCAN sites currently use voluntary feedback surveys to assess usage and effectiveness, but partners recommended developing additional tools to capture more information at each site and develop consistent protocols to replicate the

model. For example, each site should capture how many litigants use VCAN services, the number of visits, case matter types for each appearance, and any service referrals made.

A statewide needs assessment could also be conducted to identify additional locations that would benefit from VCANs. Factors to consider are transportation availability, Wi-Fi access, staffing needs, and availability of family court staff. The assessment can also identify existing VCAN sites that do not provide access to family court appearances and, where appropriate, expand access to family court at that location. Only three VCAN sites provide full family court services as of this writing, including filing services, dedicated family court assistance, and access to family court appearances.

In counties with limited Wi-Fi availability and less capacity for a VCAN site, partners recommend providing mobile Wi-Fi units to local and accessible sites that litigants can reserve and take with them to a private space to attend a virtual appearance. As each VCAN site is assessed for usage, active sites should also be equipped with both the technology and technical assistance to support the launch of the Virtual Court Appearance Platform.

To ensure access to all sites, the Unified Court System could develop a VCAN map and an online statewide directory of existing sites to add to its website. Each location on the directory should include location, hours, and services available. The directory can provide links to a site with information about each VCAN and may include a sign-up form to reserve the location for specific appearances. The statewide VCAN directory can be modeled after CourtHelp's Help Center guide or embed VCAN locations into the following site: Help Centers & Community Organizations | NY CourtHelp.[98]

To ensure this information is shared effectively, brochures or fliers with more information for families about local VCAN sites could be distributed to each Family Court, local community and faith-based organizations, and legal services providers. In addition, the materials distributed can expand on the services provided, such as:

- Court system and case type assistance with links
- Legal service assistance
- Services offered
- Contact and appointment information
- Legal resource guide

Next Steps

Next Steps

The Family Justice Initiative's strategic planning process took two years to complete, including a six-month needs assessment process, extensive and ongoing outreach to partners from across the state, and dozens of collaborative workgroup meetings that served as engines of reform to further the Initiative's shared vision and goals for the future of Family Court. This collaborative process led to consensus on the many priorities outlined above and served as proof of what can be accomplished when a diverse group of partners comes together with the shared goal of making changes that strengthen families, reduce system involvement, and interrupt cycles of trauma. Each recommendation also includes concrete suggestions for how to continue that collaboration to ensure successful implementation, measure impact, and sustain these recommendations long term.

Fortunately, the Permanent Commission on Justice for Families was established in 2025 and shares many of the goals identified by the Initiative. The Commission, which employs the same collaborative spirit as the Initiative, plans to explore implementation of the recommendations contained in this strategic plan that align with Commission priorities, as well as develop new ideas, and to oversee and track the overall impact that these changes will have on the families served in Family Court. The intent is that this plan serves as a living document that the Commission can use to inform its work as it continues to promote sustainable change for the State's family justice system.

The ultimate goals of the Initiative will be measured in its long-term impact on systems and communities, including:

- Increased utilization of recommended/ implemented upstream community services
- Development and passage of recommended legislation
- Increased utilization of recommended/ implemented non-court/ community-based interventions
- Increased quality of representation for family court litigants
- Increased legal, peer, and navigational support for family court litigants
- Increased incidence of timely and optimal outcomes through the court process

Together, these measures aim to create a family justice system in which court involvement is a last resort, rather than the default response, and in which contact with the system provides an opportunity for families to receive the support and care they need to break cycles of intergenerational harm and to thrive.

Appendix

Family Justice Initiative, Center for Justice Innovation Participating Partners

- New York State Unified Court System
- New York State Executive Chamber
- Anita Rojas Carroll Esq., Rower LLC
- Appellate Division Departments
- Assigned Counsel Panel Members
- Astor Services
- Brooklyn Defender Services
- Brooklyn District Attorney's Office
- Casey Family Programs
- Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services
- Center for Dispute Settlement
- Center for Elder Law and Justice
- Center for Family Representation
- Chief Defenders Association of New York
- Child Welfare Court Improvement Project
- Children's Rights Society, Inc.
- Children's Defense Fund
- Children's Rights Inc.
- Citizens' Committee for Children of New York
- Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies
- Empire Justice Center
- Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition
- Families Together in New York State
- Family Legal Care
- Fathers Alive in the Hood
- Healing New York
- Help Me Grow New York
- Her Justice
- Indian Child Welfare Act Roundtable for Central and Northern New York
- Jewish Child Care Association of New York
- Kim Susser, Esq., Nonprofit Consultant
- Lawyers Committee Against Domestic Violence
- Lawyers for Children
- Legal Aid Society of Buffalo
- Legal Aid Society of New York City
- Legal Aid Society of Rochester
- Legal Aid Society of Rockland County
- Legal Services of the Hudson Valley
- LGBTQ Commission of the New York State Courts
- Lived Experience Advisory Group for Child Welfare and Family Court Practices
- Members of the New York State Judiciary

- Neighborhood Defender Services
- New York Adoptive and Foster Family Coalition
- New York City Administration for Children's Services
- New York City Bar Association Committee on Children and the Law
- New York City Bar Association Council on Children
- New York City Department of Probation
- New York City Family Court Agency Heads
- New York City Family Court Judges Association
- New York City Law Department
- New York City Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence
- New York City Office of Child Support Services
- New York Family Court Advisory and Rules Committee
- New York Family Court Non-Judicial
- Operations/Forms Working Group"
- New York Gender Justice Task Force
- New York Legal Assistance Group
- New York State Alternative Dispute Resolution Coordinators
- New York State Association for Infant Mental Health
- New York State Bar Association
- Committee on Families and the Law"
- New York State Bar Association Committee on Children and the Law
- New York State Children's Alliance, Inc.
- New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence
- New York State Coalition for Supervised Visitation
- New York State Council on Children and Families
- New York State Court Appointed Special Advocates
- New York State Department of State
- New York State Dispute Resolution Association
- New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services
- New York State Education Department
- New York State Family Court Judges Association
- New York State Judicial Institute
- New York State Office for Justice Initiatives
- New York State Office for People With Developmental Disabilities
- New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence
- New York State Office of Addiction Services and Supports
- New York State Office of Children and Family Services
- New York State Office of Indigent Legal Services
- New York State Office of Mental Health
- New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance

- New York State Office of Victim Services
- New York State Permanent Commission on Access to Justice
- New York State Permanent Commission on Justice for Families
- New York State Support Magistrates Association
- New York State Youth Justice Institute
- New York Statewide Advisory Committee on Counsel for Children
- Office of New York State Assembly Member Andrew Hevesi
- Office of New York State Senator Jabari Brisport
- Office of Ontario County Conflict Defender
- Office of Ostega County Public Defender
- Office of Rensselaer County Conflict Defender
- Queens Defenders
- Raise the Age New York Coalition
- Retired Judges
- Retired Support Magistrates
- Rise
- Safe Horizon
- Sanctuary for Families
- Marguerite Smith Esq., Attorney at Law
- Social Enterprise and Training Center
- Strong Starts Court Initiative Statewide Advisory Committee
- The Bronx Defenders
- The Children's Law Center
- The Fortune Society
- The Legal Project
- The State University of New York Upstate Medical University
- Unity House
- Urban Justice Center
- Veteran Advocacy Project
- Westchester Children's Association
- Westchester County Office for Women
- Womankind
- You Gotta Believe
- Young New Yorkers
- Youth Represent

Endnotes

[1] All recommendations are subject to availability of funding and UCS priorities.

[2] *What is Theory of Change?*, Center for Theory of Change, What is Theory of Change? - Theory of Change Community, (last visited March 2, 2026).

[3] *Report and Recommendations on Racial Justice and Child Welfare*, New York State Bar Association Committee on Families and the Law, (March 2022), https://nysba.org/new-york-state-bar-association-finds-child-welfare-system-replete-with-systemic-racism-pushes-for-reforms/?srsltid=AfmBOooteput9ExJXdpt0O8LxDgI5ExxT85pQnH629i6VPe5_1R3izKd.; Jeh Charles Johnson, *Report from the Special Adviser on Equal Justice in the New York State Courts*, (October 1, 2020), SpecialAdviserEqualJusticeReport.pdf.

[4] Naashia B., Halimah Washington, Mary Holiman, & Rashida Abuwala, *From the Ground Up: How Investment in Grassroots Organizations Supports Family Well-Being*, Rise. (Nora McCarthy eds., February 2025), https://mcusercontent.com/2e530d82630079f696a128b82/files/af01f6f8-0306-5dcd-39f1-4bad75d5e389/Rise_Community_Brief_FINAL.pdf.; American Bar Association, Res. 606, Racial Justice Resolution (August 2022)

[5] 2025 NY Senate-Assembly Bill S6431, A63A

[6] *The Child and Family Well-Being Fund: New State Funding to Support Community-Led Investments*, (March 2025), https://scaany.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/The-Child-and-Family-Wellbeing-Fund-New-State-Funding-to-Support-Community-Led-Investments_March2025.pdf

[7] 2025 NY Senate-Assembly Bill S7001, A76716

[8] 2025 NY Senate S643

[9] 2017 NY Senate-Assembly Bill S2009-C, A3009-C

[10] 2017 NY Senate-Assembly Bill S2009-C, A3009-C; Steven Yoder, *Key Youth Justice Reform in NY Faces Scrutiny in the New Legislative Season*, The Imprint (Feb. 25, 2025, 12:00 AM), Key NY Youth Justice Reform Faces Scrutiny

[11] *Economic and Policy Insights: Spending on Raise the Age Programs in New York*, Office of the New York State Comptroller, (May 2025), https://www.osc.ny.gov/files/reports/pdf/spending-on-raise-the-age-programs-in-new-york.pdf.

[12] Letter of Support of Youth Justice Innovation Fund A767 (Solages)/S643 (Cleare), Youth Justice Innovation Fund Letter of Support.

[13] 2025 NY Senate-Assembly Bill S643, A767

[14] Richard Mendel, *Effective Alternatives to Youth Incarceration*, The Sentencing Project, (June 2023), Effective-Alternatives-to-Youth-Incarceration.pdf.

[15] A community asset was defined by Initiative partners as an unfunded community support that could be expanded or strengthened with funding (e.g. a community member starting a boxing program).

[16] Elizabeth Seigle, Nastassia Walsh & Josh Weber, *Core Principles for Reducing Recidivism and Improving Other Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice System*, Council of State Governments Justice Center, (2014), Juvenile-Justice-White-Paper-with-Appendices-1-1.pdf.

[17] Rebecca Balletto, Jeffrey A. Butts, Sheyla A. Delgado, Justice Evans, Gina Moreno, Michael Rempel, Rene Ropac, Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricia & Kathleen A. Tomberg, *Community Safety Investments: Violence Prevention Initiatives Across New York State*, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, (February 2025), https://datacollaborativeforjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/NYSinvestments.pdf.

[18] *Community Dispute Resolution Centers (CDRCs)*, New York State Dispute Resolution Association, NY Community Dispute Resolution Centers | Find CDRC (last visited March 4, 2026).

[19] See also 3.6.5 Alternative Dispute Resolution for Child Support and Parenting Recommendation; 2025 NY Senate-Assembly Bill S8374, A8297 (administered by the CDRC program under Article 21A of the Judiciary Law).

[20] 2025 NY Senate-Assembly Bill S8374, A8297

[21] All ADR programming should ensure appropriate screening and case selection using risk tools developed for intimate partner violence and child lethality, which could be part of a triage process that includes identifying families who would not be appropriate for mediation but perhaps could benefit from a specialized court process to address high-risk and high-need disputes. *See also* 3.5 Custody/Visitation/Orders of Protection Case Processing Strategies

[22] *See also* 3.1.4 Continuity of Representation for Youth on Raise the Age Matters regarding peer support for youth in the High-Quality and Holistic Legal Representation recommendation

[23] Examples of peer advocacy organizations include Rise (an organization by and for parents impacted by family policing that provides parent advocacy services to families impacted by the system) and Families Together in New York State (represents and supports youth and families voice in policy and systems change through peer advocacy, training and peer advocacy credentialing, and workforce development Home - Families Together in NYS).

[24] Possibilities include funding for enhanced parent representation administered through the ILS Fund; Medicaid reimbursement for advocacy services supported by the training and credentialing provided by Families Together; and Title IV-E funds to support interdisciplinary child welfare practice.

[25] In NYC, Appellate Divisions First and Second Departments administer, screen, recertify, train, and handle discipline for single 18-B panels of attorneys for parents (paid by the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice) and Attorneys for Children (paid by Appellate Divisions). However, outside NYC, the Appellate Divisions only manage AFC matters and the 18-B panels for parents are managed by the counties.

[26] Families Together, Home - Families Together in NYS (last visited March 4, 2026).

[27] Family Peer Advocate Credential Overview, Families Together in New York State, Family Peer Advocate Credential Overview - Families Together in NYS (last visited March 4, 2026).

[28] Family Legal Care, Homepage | Family Legal Care (last visited March 4, 2026).

[29] *Community Justice Connect*, Center for Justice Innovation, Community Justice Connect - Center for Justice Innovation (last visited March 4, 2026).

[30] Research on procedural justice in a wide variety of contexts demonstrates a connection between how litigants experience the legal process and their willingness to engage the system as a resource regardless of the individual outcome. This foundational research, consistent with what Family Justice Initiative partners discussed, shows that justice-involved individuals are more likely to view the legal system as fair if they feel they: 1) had a chance to be heard; 2) were treated with respect; 3) understood the process; 4) were treated fairly; and 5) received help to resolve the issues that brought them into court. See Tom R. Tyler, Why People Obey the Law (2006).

[31] *Report from The Working Group on the Future of Supervised Visitation in New York State*, (Rev. July 2025), Report from NYS Working Group on Future of SV in NY July 2025.; *CLC Releases Report on Barriers to Supervised Visitation Implementation*, The Children's Law Center (Mar. 4, 2026), CLC Supervised Visitation Report - The Children's Law Center.

[32] *Report from The Working Group on the Future of Supervised Visitation in New York State*, (Rev. July 2025), Report from NYS Working Group on Future of SV in NY July 2025.

[33] 2025 NY Senate-Assembly Bill S3938, A65

[34] Since the drafting of this report, the legislation referenced was introduced in the Senate and passed both Houses. It is awaiting the Governor's signature and still needs to be incorporated into the state budget.

[35] Chief Judge Janet DiFiore, *Equal Justice in the New York State Courts: 2020-2021 Year In Review*, New York State Unified Court System, October 2021) Equal Justice in the New York State Courts (October 2021); Jeh Charles Johnson, *Report from the Special Adviser on Equal Justice in the New York State Courts*, (October 1, 2020), SpecialAdviserEqualJusticeReport.pdf.; *Report on New York City Family Courts*, Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission of the New York State Courts, (Jan. 28, 2022), Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission of the New York State Courts.

[36] *Right to Counsel Activity/Status Map*, National Coalition for Civil Right to Counsel, Map (last visited March 5, 2026).

[37] Notably, the funding for ILS' proposal need not come from the general fund but is available via the Indigent Legal Services Fund.

[38] Patricia Warth, Testimony of the Office of Indigent Legal Services Before the N.Y. Sen. Fin. Comm. and Assembly Comm. on Ways and Means, (2024) (https://www.nysenate.gov/sites/default/files/admin/structure/media/manage/filefile/a/2024-01/nys-office-of-indigent-legal-services.pdf).

[39] N.Y. County Law Article 18-B (1965).

[40] Patricia Warth, Testimony of the Office of Indigent Legal Services Before the N.Y. Sen. Fin. Comm. and Assembly Comm. on Ways and Means, (2024) (https://www.nysenate.gov/sites/default/files/admin/structure/media/manage/filefile/a/2024-01/nys-office-of-indigent-legal-services.pdf).; About the ILS Fund, New York State Office of Indigent Legal Services, New York State Office Of Indigent Legal Services (last visited March 5, 2026).

[41] *About ILS*, New York State Office of Indigent Legal Services, About ILS (last visited March 5, 2026).

[42] Patricia Warth, Testimony of the Office of Indigent Legal Services Before the N.Y. Sen. Fin. Comm. and Assembly Comm. on Ways and Means, (2024) (https://www.nysenate.gov/sites/default/files/admin/structure/media/manage/filefile/a/2024-01/nys-office-of-indigent-legal-services.pdf).

[43] Since the drafting of this report, the State appropriated $274 million in the SFY budget for 2026-2027 to ILS' Aid to Localities budget for criminal defense, but only $30 million for Family Court representation.

[44] Patricia Warth, Testimony of the Office of Indigent Legal Services Before the N.Y. Sen. Fin. Comm. and Assembly Comm. on Ways and Means, (2024) (https://www.nysenate.gov/sites/default/files/admin/structure/media/manage/filefile/a/2024-01/nys-office-of-indigent-legal-services.pdf).

[45] Patricia Warth, Testimony of the Office of Indigent Legal Services Before the N.Y. Sen. Fin. Comm. and Assembly Comm. on Ways and Means, (2024) (https://www.nysenate.gov/sites/default/files/admin/structure/media/manage/filefile/a/2024-01/nys-office-of-indigent-legal-services.pdf).

[46] ILS estimates that the State needs to invest $150 million to implement the caseload standards for parent representation that ILS it promulgated using a data-driven method and recommends a three-year roll-out of this amount, beginning with $50 million in the SFY 2027-28 budget.

[47] N.Y. State Unified Court System, Child Welfare Court Data Metrics, (2025) (data from N.Y. State Universal Case Management System).

[48] *Interim Report to Chief Judge DiFiore*, Commission on Parental Legal Representation, 13 (Feb. 2019), PLR_Commission-Report.pdf.

[49] *Interim Report to Chief Judge DiFiore*, Commission on Parental Legal Representation, 13 (Feb. 2019), PLR_Commission-Report.pdf

[50] Some Attorneys for Children raised the scenario where there is an investigation of a family who previously had a court case, and an AFC was previously assigned. In this case, they would want a mechanism for the child to be able to contact their lawyer at this stage.

[51] *Family Defense*, Legal Services of the Hudson Valley, Family Defense | Legal Services of the Hudson Valley (last visited March 5, 2026).; Adilia Watson, *New Legal Advocacy Model Aims to Better Support Rochester-Area Parents in New York Family Court*, The Imprint (Nov. 14, 2023, 2:00 AM), Rochester's New Advocacy Model for Parents in NY Family Court; Patricia Warth, Testimony of the Office of Indigent Legal Services Before the N.Y. Sen. Fin. Comm. and Assembly Comm. on Ways and Means, (2024) (https://www.nysenate.gov/sites/default/files/admin/structure/media/manage/filefile/a/2024-01/nys-office-of-indigent-legal-services.pdf).

[52] 2024 NY Senate 9695, 2025 NY Assembly 8272 (codifies Family Court Rule 205.19, which incorporates NYS ILS financial eligibility standards, including reimbursement for assistance during the CPS investigative stage)

[53] Since the drafting of this report, the legislation referenced has not been advanced but will be reintroduced during the 2027 Legislative session with a new Bill number.

[54] 2024 NY Senate 9695, 2025 NY Assembly 8272

[55] Patricia Warth, Testimony of the Office of Indigent Legal Services Before the N.Y. Sen. Fin. Comm. and Assembly Comm. on Ways and Means, (2024) (https://www.nysenate.gov/sites/default/files/admin/structure/media/manage/filefile/a/2024-01/nys-office-of-indigent-legal-services.pdf).

[56] *See* Section 127.5 of the Rules of the Chief Administrator of the Court.

[57] *Caseload Standards for Parents' Attorneys in New York State Family Court Mandated Representation Cases*, New York Indigent Legal Services, (June 4, 2021), Caseload Standards Parents Attorneys NYS Family Court.pdf.

[58] *Legal Representation of Children in New York State: The Crisis of Chronic Underfunding and High Workloads for Attorneys For the Child in Family Court* (March 11, 2024), AFC-White-Paper-FINAL.pdf. (AFC providers are requesting $60 million in funding to be able to achieve a reduced interim caseload standard of 75, including enhancements for interdisciplinary representation.)

[59] County Law Article § 722-b, Jud. Law § 35 (regulations that establish the rate for compensation to assigned panel counsel).

[60] *18-B Assigned Counsel Rate Reimbursement*, New York State Office of Indigent Legal Services, New York State Office Of Indigent Legal Services (last visited March 5, 2026)

[61] Youth Part representation is county funded (see County Law Article 18-b), while Family Court Juvenile Delinquency representation is state-funded via UCS (*see* Judiciary Law 35).

[62] Annual RTA plans are created by the county and require both OCFS and DCJS to review and approve.

[63] *See* 1.1.3 Youth Justice Innovation Fund recommendation

[64] UCS may consider amending the Family Court Rule 205.19 to also include pre-petition assistance for Juvenile Delinquency matters, specifically Youth Part cases removed to Family Court where youth are being screened for or are engaged in adjustment (diversion) programs. This stage is technically pre-petition since New York City Corporation Counsel or County Attorney has not yet filed a petition and could still decline to do so.

[65] The New York City Legal Aid Society (LAS) has contracts for youth representation in both the criminal and family courts. As a result, they can provide support and represent youth from initial superior court appearance through adjustment into family court. Youth are often represented by different attorneys in different courts, but having a single organization provide the representation guarantees continuity of representation and information sharing. The LAS's status as a non-profit allows the organization to contract with New York City to deliver criminal defense services under County Law Article 18-b, and to contract with the Unified Court System to deliver representation services in Family Court under the Family Court Act and Judiciary Law 35.

[66] Some counties have attorneys who are dually qualified to serve on the criminal court assigned counsel panel and the attorney-for-the child (AFC) panel. These attorneys are uniquely situated to represent youth in criminal court and, if the case is removed, in Family Court, though they must work with two different payment systems—i.e. the county/NYC-based system while the case is in criminal court, and the state (Unified Court System) system when the case is in Family Court.

[67] If the attorney is an assigned counsel panel attorney/AFC rather than an institutional provider, there is currently no mechanism for the attorney to be paid while the case is in adjustment, as there is no court involved (the criminal court no longer has jurisdiction, and because there is no petition filed in Family Court, the Family Court does not have jurisdiction). In jurisdictions currently using this model, funding is provided by the jurisdiction. UCS could develop and implement rules that provide for AFC and panel attorneys to be compensated for representation they provide to youth whose cases are removed from the youth part during adjustment under family court process.

[68] 22 § N.Y.C.R.R. 205.19 (regulation that establishes and defines eligibility for publicly funding counsel)

[69] Kathryn Ford and Kate Wurmfeld, *Tip Sheet for Planning Court-Based Domestic Violence Training*, Center for Justice Innovation, https://www.innovatingjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/DV_Training_Guide.pdf.

[70] While N.Y.C.R.R. 17.4 outlines training requirements for jurists, training plans should consider adherence to this rule and coordination with other professionals to promote a consistent and holistic approach to serving families.

[71] *See* Safe and Together Institute, Safe & Together Institute | Strengthen Your Practice & Improve Family Outcomes; Children and Domestic Violence - BWJP (last visited March 5, 2026) (example of training curricula addressing patterns of behavior and dynamics).

[72] NYS Department of Probation training, for example, has moved to incorporate motivational interviewing, adolescent brain development, and a focus on how to address areas of concern. This is an approach to training that partners recommended could be applied to other groups of practitioners.

[73] *See* also 3.3 Problem-Solving Principles and Specialized Approaches recommendation.

[74] Crossover cases involve youth who are involved in both child welfare and juvenile justice systems. New York City and some counties outside New York City have implemented the Georgetown model for crossover cases, which could be considered for replication; *Implementation of the Practice Model*, Center for Youth Justice, https://cyj.georgetown.edu/our-work/crossover-youth-practice-model/implementation-of-the-practice-model/ (last visited March 5, 2026).

[75] Raise the Age New York, https://raisetheageny.org/ (last visited March 5, 2026).

[76] *#Right2RemainSilent*, Bronx Connect, https://bronxconnect.org/right2remainsilent/ (March 5, 2026).

[77] Home of Problem-Solving Courts | NYCOURTS.GOV

[78] Hon. Rowan D. Wilson, *State of the Judiciary Address*, N.Y. State Unified Ct. Sys. (Feb. 10, 2025) (webcast), https://www.nycourts.gov/ctapps/news/soj_2025.html.

[79] Hon. Rowan D. Wilson, *State of the Judiciary Address*, N.Y. State Unified Ct. Sys. (Feb. 9, 2026) (webcast), https://www.nycourts.gov/ctapps/news/SOJ_2026.html.

[80] IDV (Integrated Domestic Violence Part), N.Y.S. Unified Court System, https://ww2.nycourts.gov/courts/1jd/criminal/IDV.shtml (last visited March 6, 2026).; *Family Treatment Courts*, N.Y.S. Unified Court System, https://ww2.nycourts.gov/courts/problem_solving/FTC/index.shtml (last visited March 6, 2026).; Human Trafficking Intervention Courts - Overview | NYCOURTS.GOV; *Strong Starts Court Initiative*, Center for Justice Innovation, https://www.innovatingjustice.org/strong-starts-court-initiative/ (last visited March 6, 2026).; *Family Court Initiatives*, Center for Justice Innovation, https://www.innovatingjustice.org/program/family-court-initiatives/ (last visited March 6, 2026).; *BFF: Better for Families*, N.Y.S. Unified Court System, https://ww2.nycourts.gov/bff-better-families-home-36746 (last visited March 6, 2026).; *Mental Health Courts*, N.Y.S. Unified Court System, https://ww2.nycourts.gov/mental-health-courts-overview-27066 (last visited March 6, 2026).

[81] *BFF: Better for Families*, N.Y.S. Unified Court System, https://ww2.nycourts.gov/bff-better-families-home-36746 (last visited March 6, 2026).

[82] *First Annual Report and Recommendations of the New York State Judicial Task Force on Mental Illness*, N.Y.S. Unified Court System Judicial Task Force on Mental Illness, (February 17, 2026), https://www.nycourts.gov/LegacyPDFS/advisory-groups/task-force-on-mental-illness/report-judicial-taskforce-mental-illness.pdf.

[83] Developed in the field of intimate partner violence, a Coordinated Community Response brings together a diverse group of community partners to develop a shared vision to collectively and consistently address the widespread impact of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking, and provide multiple pathways to support, healing, and accountability for families. *See Coordinated Community Responses*, Center for Justice Innovation, https://www.innovatingjustice.org/resources/coordinated-community-responses-fact-sheet/ (last visited March 6, 2026).

[84] N.Y. Fam. Ct. Act. Art. 10.

[85] *See also* 3.5 Custody/Visitation/Orders of Protection Case Processing Strategies and 3.6 Problem Solving in Child Support Matters recommendations.

[86] Example: The Sixth Judicial District recently added a Deputy Chief Clerk II to support all Family Court Clerk's Offices within the district. An additional Deputy Chief Clerk II should be added to divide the Family Court Clerk's Office processes by case type. One Deputy Chief Clerk II would manage all Judge-heard matters, including custody, visitation, family offense, and neglect/abuse processes and procedures; the other would manage all support and parentage processes and procedures.

[87] *See also* 2.1 Alternative Dispute Resolution recommendation; 2025 NYS Senate S8374 (establishes a pilot program in at least three counties to provide child support mediation and navigator services, administered by the CDRC program under Article 21A of the Judiciary Law. CDRCs will provide both mediators and navigators, but NYC may provide ADR as part of its Triage pilot and consider training some of its roster mediators.)

[88] *See also* 2.1 Alternative Dispute Resolution recommendation (consideration of a single jurist to hear both matters or coordination between jurists.)

[89] The single jurist issue is complex and court leaders, as well as the Commission, are looking into it. Current law prohibits support magistrates from hearing custody/visitation issues, so two jurists need to approve the order, which is possible but cumbersome. Part of the State plan to Health and Human Services is to institute support magistrates that resolve all child support cases is so New York State Office of Temporary Disability Assistance may have to request a federal waiver if a different jurist job title handles a portion of the cases. See N.Y. Fam. Ct. Act. Art. 10. § 439; 42 U.S.C. § 666; 45 C.F.R pts. 302-303.

[90] Members of the CVO workgroup discussed additional strategies for a more trauma-informed courthouse, including signage to create a more welcoming environment and assist with navigation and enhanced protocols for court parts and waiting areas to promote safety and accessibility. The Initiative recommends that this be further explored, including by hiring a consultant with expertise in procedural justice, to develop model practices and examples to be implemented throughout the state as part of a broader access to justice plan.

[91] *Ensuring Language Access: A Strategic Plan for the New York State Courts*, New York State Unified Court System, (March 2017).

[92] N.Y. State Unified Court System Division of Technology & Court Research, *2025 Court Interpreter Assignments by Court Type*, Limited English Proficient Legislation Dashboard (2025) (Microsoft Power BI).

[93] N.Y. State Unified Court System Division of Technology & Court Research, *2025 Court Assignments by Language*, Limited English Proficient Legislation Dashboard (2025) (Microsoft Power BI).

[94] *Access to Justice in Virtual Court Proceedings: Lessons from Covid-19 and Recommendations for New York Courts*, New York Legal Assistance Group, (July 21, 2021), https://nylag.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/NYLAG_CourtsDuringCovid_WP_FINAL2.pdf.; 22 N.Y.C.R.R. § 217.1(a).

[95] A Virtual Court Appearance Platform is an online platform dedicated to remote court proceedings that provides virtual hallways, private side bars and conferences, meeting management, calendaring, among other features including automated interpretation services. New York launched a VCAP system as a pilot in 2025.

[96] *Children's Centers in the Courts: Overview*, N.Y.S. Unified Court System, https://ww2.nycourts.gov/ip/childrenscenter/index.shtml (last visited March 6, 2026); Additional data maintained and provided by the Unified Court System's Children's Center Statewide Program Manager.

[97] Additional data maintained and provided by the Unified Court System's Children's Center Statewide Program Manager.

[98] *Court Help Centers & Community Organizations*, N.Y.S. Unified Court System, https://www.nycourts.gov/courthelp/goingtocourt/helpCenters.shtml, (last visited March 6, 2026).

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