

Child Well-Being Annual report to the board



December 2023



Introduction

Hennepin County envisions a community where all people are healthy and valued — and where all people thrive. We make those same promises specifically to the children and families we serve.

In 2017, we embraced a child well-being philosophy and took action to transform our system. In the years since, we've shared our successes, and continue to acknowledge our challenges and where we need to improve.

The next stage of our transformation in Children and Family Services will be guided by a strategic plan shaped by many voices within, across, and outside our system. Countywide, we're operationalizing our disparity reduction strategy with services shaped by our community's voice and decisions driven by data.

There is great power in acting collectively to transform our system, but this is really about making a difference for individual people. Every day, we are working with children and families in our community. It is our responsibility to serve them well.

This year's report begins again in the child protection system, examining practices throughout the case continuum and the health of our workforce. As we integrate work across disparity domains, the second half of the report highlights signature efforts to promote child and family well-being across all service areas.



Staying the course on what we know

At the core of our vision for child and family well-being is this foundational belief:
All children deserve to be safe at home, in healthy, stable families.
We continue to work toward that reality every day.

Trauma-informed through the case continuum

Prevention and PSOP

Challenges such as housing instability, difficulties with mental health, or the presence of family conflict can make it hard to parent effectively. All families face challenges, but the legacy of systemic racism means that these stressors are more commonly experienced by families of color.

Protective factors — things like resilience and attachment, concrete supports, and social connections — can help parents and families successfully navigate challenges and reduce these toxic stressors.

Our Parent Support Outreach Program (PSOP) focuses on increasing well-being and decreasing risk through voluntary services and a strengths-based approach. Last year, more than 2,500 individual residents were served through PSOP; more than half of those were children younger than 11.

PSOP outcomes continue to demonstrate that prevention works: More than 80% of families who complete services do not experience a future screened-in child protection report.

But effective prevention is broader than just one program. In addition to reducing the risk of child maltreatment, our goal is to truly stabilize families and promote well-being.

This year, we initiated work to establish Family Resource Centers, community-based spaces that provide services residents ask for. Our prevention area also offers services for older youth, including those at risk of sexual exploitation, as well as housing support services for families involved in child protection.

With an integrated approach to prevention, we hope to see continued and increased positive outcomes for families, in the child welfare continuum and beyond.

Out-of-home placement

We saw a slight increase in the number of children entering out-of-home placement last year, but the total number of children in foster care once again declined. That shift reflects years of sustained investment in child well-being from the Hennepin County Board, and continued commitment from our staff to transform our practice as we build a different kind of system.

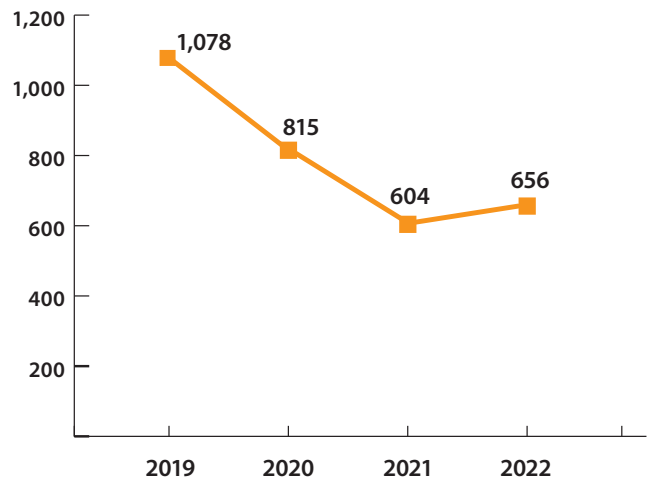
Through our Coordination Center, we continue to refine a “one placement” model, aiming to improve placement stability and minimize disruptions for children in care.

Our family-centered practice includes relatives and kin, too. When children must be separated from their parents, we work to identify relatives who can care for them. Our strong kinship practice has meant increased use of relative care year over year, reducing trauma for children entering placement and better preserving ties to family and culture — essential for children’s well-being.

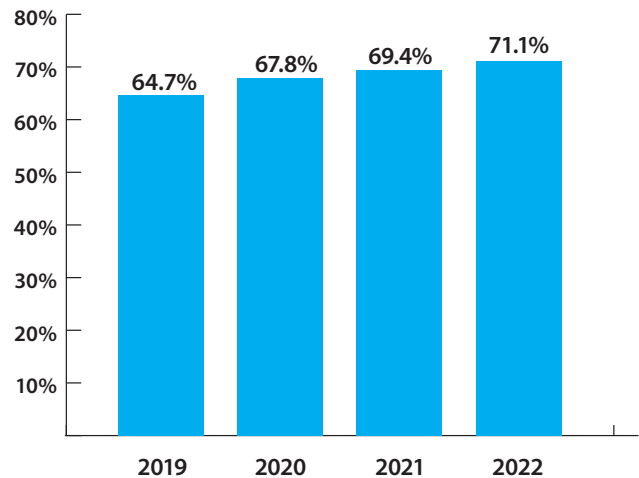
With that change in practice, we have an opportunity to do more to support those relatives, who are unexpectedly taking on a new role in their families. This year, we launched a peer support program for new relative foster providers. The program works to promote connection and understanding for new relative foster parents, with peer support parents walking alongside them.

Peer support parents either have lived experience as relative providers themselves or are nonrelative providers with strong skills and interest in helping new relative providers. As the program grows, we hope peer support can help stabilize placements and minimize disruptions for children.

Out-of-home placement entries



Relative care



Permanency

Our goal is to safely reunify families whenever possible. Going home remains the most common outcome for children involved in our system. Other outcomes include adoption, transfers of legal custody, or living with a previously noncustodial parent.

This year, a major shift in permanency outcomes appears underway: We're seeing larger numbers of Transfers of Permanent Physical and Legal Custody (TPLPCs) than adoptions. About 50% more children have experienced a TPLPC in 2023 compared to an adoption.

While transfers of custody have been increasing in recent years, they've never been more frequent than adoptions.

One known factor: In 2022, Minnesota statute changed to identify "permanency placement with a relative" as preferred permanency option. Previously, for children who could not return home, statute identified termination of parental rights and adoption as the preferred permanency option.

That change explains part of the big jump so far in 2023, with the year-over-year trend driven by other elements of our practice. Transfers of custody can happen without terminating parental rights — an important factor in preserving family ties. With our strong kinship practice, we see relatives and kin often prefer this path. In our Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) area specifically, our team and tribal partners advocate for transfers of custody to help preserve kids' ties to their culture and relatives.

We bring a family-centered lens to our practice, all the way through to permanency. Segmenting all outcomes by relatives and non-relatives shows how we're preserving family relationships. In 2022, 78% of children left out-of-home placement to live with family or people who are like family.

Children exiting out-of-home placement (OHP) to TPLPC vs. adoption, 2019–present

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023*
TPLPC	9.1%	12.4%	15.8%	15.6%	28.1%
Adoption	19.0%	18.0%	23.0%	24.1%	17.3%
Total number of OHP exits	1,181	1,037	941	751	512

*2023 data through September 30, 2023

Children exiting placement to TPLPC vs. adoption, 2023* by race

	America Indian / Alaska Native	Asian / Pacific Islander	Black / African American	Caucasian	Multiracial
TPLPC	51.3%	0.0%	22.2%	19.8%	30.1%
Adoption	6.6%	37.5%	11.9%	25.3%	23.0%

*2023 data through September 30, 2023

Children exiting placement: relative vs. non-relative, 2022 by race

	America Indian / Alaska Native	Asian / Pacific Islander	Black / African American	Caucasian	Multiracial
Relative*	77.7%	79.3%	78.5%	76.9%	80.1%
Non-relative**	22.3%	20.7%	21.5%	23.1%	19.9%

*Relative includes reunification with parents/caregivers, adoption or TPLPC — relative, living with other relatives

**Non-relative includes reached age of majority or emancipation, adoption — non-relative, transfer to another agency, runaway (placement no longer planned), death, guardianship to an unrelated individual

Caseloads and workforce development

Median caseloads remained at the upper end of our target range in 2022, but we knew we needed to intensify our workforce development efforts. Turnover had increased to 11.5% in 2022, and caseloads started to exceed targets early this year.

We moved to a continuous hiring model for child protection social worker vacancies, offering weekly interviews to accelerate the hiring process. That’s meant those vacancies have steadily declined each quarter — we’ve hired more than 80 child protection social workers since January 2023, and retained more than 90% of those new hires. As of the end of 2023, we’re considered fully staffed.

Our hires go through an intensive eight-week training curriculum, aligned with on-the-job learning. The curriculum is informed by what we’re learning through community engagement and from families who experience our system. Redesigned this year to offer specialized “tracks,” the goal is to offer practical, relevant learning specific to hires’ eventual positions in each part of our system — meaning our new staff feel prepared and supported as employees, ready to engage with families.

Overall, the last few years have shown us that we need comprehensive and creative solutions to effectively address workforce needs and challenges, such as employee recruitment, retention, and development.

To do just that, we developed a comprehensive workforce plan this year, pulling together existing efforts and new priority initiatives. The plan includes 17 strategies within four overall priorities:

- Hiring the right employees
- Conducting onboarding effectively
- Investing in staff development
- Recognizing employees

We’re already seeing progress: Through the third quarter of this year, turnover is down to 6%. With a strong plan to guide our workforce development over the next two years, we feel confident our caseloads will return to target range — and that our dedicated, caring team members can do their best work with families.

Caseloads per worker

Measure	2019	2020	2021	2022
Ongoing child protection case management	13	10	10	10
ICWA* ongoing child protection case management	12	9	8	10
Child protection assessment/investigations	12	7	7	7

Note: Caseloads in December of each year
 *Indian Child Welfare Act

Focusing on disparity reduction

We hold an unwavering commitment to reduce disparities among our residents. In Human Services and across the county, policies, services and programs drive disparity reduction. This work is key to achieving our vision for child well-being.

Our child well-being transformation started in the child protection system. We continue to focus improvements and build on our successes to deliver the best outcomes for the children and families we serve.

The families we serve are commonly harmed by disparities in multiple domains — housing, education, health and more. Where disparities intersect, we are responding with integrated, family-centered solutions.



In the child protection system

A strategic plan for Children and Family Services

Finalized this summer, the Children and Family Services strategic plan will serve as our path for the next three years, and will guide how we show up for families, the community, and our teams.

Importantly, those who have experienced our system helped shape this plan for its future. We held 16 input sessions with stakeholder groups including staff, internal partners, service providers, African American community agencies, African American parents with lived experience of the child protection system, and American Indian community members. We also gathered input from current extended foster care and legacy youth through a survey, and the team drew on additional input from several 2022 focus groups.

Following three waves of reflecting and processing that feedback, four strategic directions emerged.

These strategic directions are focused on:

- Prevention
- Collaborative partnerships
- Workforce well-being
- Providing culturally responsive and trauma aware support

We have long recognized that racial disparities affect our residents' quality of life and their experience in the child welfare system. Disparity reduction is one of the key principles that shaped the plan, with the resulting strategic directions and success indicators highlighting the impact we aim to have for families disproportionately represented in our system.

While we completed the strategic plan this year, the work is far from over. This fall, we have begun additional planning for how we will achieve these strategic directions, and we will begin implementing the strategic plan in 2024.

Supporting mandated reporters

Most child protection reports come from school personnel, law enforcement, medical providers, and social services workers. These professionals are required by law to report instances of suspected child abuse and maltreatment.

It's a big responsibility, with wide-reaching impact. Mandated reporters play an important role in identifying children who may need help. At the same time, children and families of color are overrepresented in the child protection system — a disparity that begins at the point of reporting.

We offer specialized training for mandated reporters and agencies, in live sessions that allow for conversations and opportunities for participants to get questions answered in real-time. Redesigned this year, the training covers definitions of child abuse and neglect, what happens after a child protection report is made, reflections on child safety, and mandated reporter legal and ethical responsibilities.

To provide an additional level of support to mandated reporters, we started a technical assistance program this year. The six-month program includes the mandated reporter training, a customized snapshot of each agency's reporting trends, connections with community partners, and follow-up support and consultation.

That consultation is key. Even with training, mandated reporters might feel unsure whether a given situation is an assignable report. We encourage consults with our intake experts, and see this as an important partnership to help keep kids safe while reducing racial disparities in the child protection system.

Race equity in permanency outcomes

The cross-system effort to improve race equity for families in the child protection system continues, involving Adult Representation Services, Children and Family Services, and the Hennepin County Attorney's Office. Led by the American Bar Association (ABA), the project emphasizes family preservation and timely reunification for African American and American Indian families.

The project team completed an assessment of child placement practices and policy this year, with the work now moving into a second phase. The goal is to provide direction and recommendations for improvements in court processes, service plans, community engagement, training, and more.

Workgroup members including sitting judges from Hennepin County Juvenile Court, the Public Defender's office, tribal leadership, staff from the Indian Child Welfare Act Law Center, and members of the community with lived experience in the child protection system. This group is charged with developing a sustainable action plan to deliver on project goals.

Along with the CFS strategic plan and other related projects underway to reduce racial disparities and transform our system, we're working to strategize and align across efforts to bring meaningful change to children and families.

Improving the foster care experience

Following the results of the foster care needs analysis presented by Wilder Research in fall 2021, we've been working through a series of projects and related efforts to reimagine the experience for children in out-of-home placement.

By the end of 2023, 39 projects will have been completed, with ongoing implementation. Notable efforts this year include the completion of the Children and Family Services strategic plan, as well as implementation of recommendations from the 2022 trauma-informed services assessment.

Ensuring accurate, real-time and useful data for everyone involved in the foster care system was a key theme in the needs analysis. With our partners in Health and Human Services IT, work continues on a comprehensive new out-of-home placement application expected to be completed in early 2024. With this new system, we will be better able to match children's needs to providers who can care for them.

Settlement Subcommittee annual report

Since 2020, the Settlement Subcommittee has provided additional guidance and oversight for reform efforts. This is guided by the settlement agreement that concluded a federal class action lawsuit naming Hennepin County and the Minnesota Department of Human Services over child maltreatment and child placement concerns.

This marks the final year of the settlement agreement, with the settlement period concluding December 31, 2023.

The Settlement Subcommittee makes its own report to the board.

Integrating work across disparity domains

Promoting student engagement

Improved family stability and well-being often means improved student attendance and engagement in school.

A continuum of services across county touchpoints includes Be@School through the Hennepin County Attorney's Office and Education Support Services in the county's Disparity Reduction line of business. Our Connect for School Success team — housed in Human Services' Well-Being service area — builds connections between families, school, and the community.

Connect for School Success is a voluntary, parent-driven program to support families whose children have significant barriers to school attendance and engagement. Social workers support families for up to one year, helping families achieve self-identified goals with a holistic, strengths-based approach.

During the 2022–2023 school year, Connect for School Success expanded to include partnerships with 10 elementary schools in two districts. The program served more than 130 families, with 191 students across all elementary grades.

Aligned with the county's disparity reduction strategy, 89% of the students served in the program are Black, Indigenous or students of color. The Connect for School Success team also includes two social workers who are bilingual in Spanish.

Now in the second school year of operation, new capacity for data collection and analysis will help us better understand outcomes for Connect for School Success families and drive future program improvements.

Empowering young parents

We're working to help young parents get off to a good start, promoting the next generation of children's well-being. With the right tools, young parents in Hennepin County can reach their academic goals and gain economic independence, stability and mobility.

Hennepin County started delivering TeenHOPE services in January 2023, assuming operations from Hennepin Healthcare. TeenHOPE works alongside public health home visiting nurses and Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) case workers to provide support and services for parents younger than age 20, as well as in partnership with other agencies. This holistic approach works to improve academic and health outcomes for young parents and families.

Services include supporting youth in working toward a high school diploma or GED, as well as exploring post-secondary education or careers. The program also helps stabilize young families by helping with paperwork and requirements for economic benefit programs. Parenting education and partnership with family home visiting services support young parents as their children's first and best teachers.

In a collaboration across Human Services areas, an early intervention program for young parents offers case management services at the point of MFIP application, rather than after it's been approved. Data shows that the approval rate for these applications is much higher and the approval timeline has shortened, meaning increased financial stability and support for young parents.

Earlier this year, 41 TeenHOPE participants were recognized at the county's annual Recognition of Success ceremony for young people who complete a high school education or GED while parenting, in foster care, or involved with the juvenile justice system. It's an important moment to step back, and revel in the inspiring, resilient young people we serve.

Helping families heal from substance use

Parental substance use remains the most common reason children enter foster care, accounting for 40% of entries in 2022. Yet research on effective treatment models suggests that parents do better when their children remain in their care. We also know that separating children from their parents is traumatic.

We need new solutions that stabilize families while supporting parents in their recovery journey.

In-Home Family Recovery is an intensive, in-home program that provides substance use and mental health services, parent-child therapy, plus family and parenting support and case management — all while parents and children stay together, in their own home.

There are other practical benefits for families. For example, since services are delivered in the home, there's no need for parents to arrange transportation.

Relationships and connection promote healing and success in recovery, so In-Home Family Recovery also offers a 24–7 support phone line and a weekly social club for families.

In the first year of In-Home Family Recovery:

- More than 45 families served, including 50% who identify as Indigenous
- 95% of children stayed in-home

Two-thirds of parents served through the program identified a need for support with multiple substances — for example, opioids and stimulants. Those complex and co-occurring substance use disorder diagnoses and the prevalence of fentanyl are consistent with data in other county programs and service areas.

Importantly, several families who successfully closed their child protection case continue with In-Home Family Recovery services for ongoing support, promoting continued recovery and well-being.

Of course, not all families need the level of care offered through In-Home Family Recovery. We need tiers of support to best serve families' individual needs, and peer support is one of those key strategies. We've connected more than 100 parents to trusted peer recovery support specialists who have the lived experience and expertise to walk alongside them.

Responding to whole families

As we continue building a system of care for children's mental health, we've heard families clearly express a need for upstream, easy-to-access, culturally responsive services. Expansion of our Family Response and Stabilization service is driven by those same goals and values.

There are no required criteria to initiate Family Response — families ask for help, and we respond. To increase access, we expanded hours this year. The service now operates daily from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m., and promises families an in-person response within one hour or at the time of their choosing.

We've responded to families in 38 Hennepin County cities, most frequently with children ages 11 to 14. Common experiences include family conflict or signs of aggression, but we respond to all needs.

With the first phase of the service — an initial 72-hour initial response — we're successfully supporting youth and families in addressing immediate concerns, and interrupting escalation. Of those families we served:

- 90% had no emergency room visits
- 92% had no law enforcement involvement
- 97% preserved their same living arrangement

In another 2023 expansion, families now have the option of connecting with a culturally specific provider for up to eight weeks of stabilization following the initial response. Goals of the stabilization service are to support healthy, safe behavior and build connections within the family and broader community.

Following the stabilization service, families report feeling hopeful in the plans they've co-created for support and stability. In follow-up surveys, caregivers say that their child was respected and listened to, and that the service built upon their family's strengths. And 100% of families agree that Family Response responded in a way that was appropriate to their gender, language, cultural, and spiritual needs.

Family Response takes an intentionally different approach than is typical for most mental health services. We believe in families, and in the power of culturally responsive support. We're continuing to learn from our partners and community in delivering this service, and where we need to go next.

Reducing barriers to care and support

Family home visiting is a voluntary service for parents who are prenatal, postpartum, and caring for young children. Nurses and other professionals visit families in their homes or other chosen location, providing social, emotional, health and parenting support.

Along with continued contracts with community agencies to provide family home visiting services, Public Health began a county-operated family home visiting program in January 2023, serving more than 500 families each month.

As a preventative and early intervention strategy, family home visiting reduces barriers and supports family and child well-being. That could look like connections to prenatal care, help creating a healthy and safe environment at home, and promoting parents' role as their child's first teacher. And as a disparity reduction strategy, family home visiting serves communities that have been economically, socially, and environmentally disadvantaged.

Family home visiting programs are associated with reduced child maltreatment and more broadly, have been shown to mitigate the adverse childhood experience that can have lifelong impacts. With expanded family home visiting services, we're working upstream across the county to change the trajectory for families.

School to Housing

Research indicates students experiencing housing instability or homelessness experience higher rates of absenteeism and poorer school performance. Among families that are homeless or highly mobile, 66% are doubled up with another household.

To prevent families from becoming homeless, we're partnering with public school districts to identify and support families at risk of homelessness with housing navigation, rental assistance, and support services.

These partnerships include two existing programs in Minneapolis Public Schools and in the Osseo and Brooklyn Center school districts. For the 2023–2024 school year, we're implementing new School to Housing programs with partner districts Bloomington, Eden Prairie, Hopkins, Intermediate District 287, Richfield, and Robbinsdale.

Supportive housing strategy

We know that safe, stable housing is essential for children's well-being. For kids, stable housing means stronger connections to school and neighbors, and a sense of community.

Hennepin County's supportive housing strategy is part of our overall efforts to make homelessness rare, brief, and nonrecurring. With capital, operating, and service funding, our goal is to create 1,000 new supportive housing communities over 10 years. These projects serve specific populations of Hennepin County residents for whom housing instability leads to the worst health and safety concerns.

Partners broke ground this spring at Vista 44 in Hopkins, the first supportive housing strategy project to begin construction that will specifically serve families. The project includes 20 units for families prioritized for housing by Children and Family Services, 25 units for families experiencing homelessness, and five additional units at a slightly higher income to allow families to stay in stable housing as their income rises.

Another groundbreaking — Emerson Village in north Minneapolis — took place this fall. Of the 40 affordable housing units, 12 will be reserved for families referred by Children and Family Services, and 20 for families experiencing homelessness.

At both Vista 44 and Emerson Village, on-site supportive services will help ensure that families are receiving the resources they need to get back on their feet for the long-term and create a healthy, loving environment for kids to grow up in.

Child Well-Being Advisory Committee, 2023

Established in 2017, the Child Well-Being Advisory Committee helps guide and advise county staff and updates the county board on progress toward child safety and well-being outcomes. The committee is comprised of community and child welfare system experts.

October 2023

Member	Title	Organization	Term expires
Angela Conley	Commissioner, Chair	Hennepin County Board	Board
Debbie Goettel	Commissioner, Co-chair	Hennepin County Board	Board
Lola Adebara	Founder and CEO	Partnerships for Permanence	2024
June Barker	Community member and Living Skills Counselor	Connections 2 Independence (C2i)	2024
Jeanette Boerner	Adult Representation Services Director	Hennepin County	∞
Tikki Brown	Assistant Commissioner	Minnesota Department of Human Services	∞
Josephine Dorsey	Foster care provider		2024
Eric Fenner	Managing Director	Casey Family Programs	∞
Nancy Harper	Medical Director	Otto Bremer Trust Center for Safe and Healthy Children	2024
April Harrison	Pastor	Church of New Life Bloomington	2023
Dianne Heins	Attorney	Faegre Baker Daniels, LLP	Special appointment through 2024
Rosa Herrera	Resident with lived experience	Partnership Academy School	2023
Brandon Jones	Executive Director	Minnesota Association for Children's Mental Health	2025
Mark Kappelhoff	Judge	4th Judicial District	∞
Traci LaLiberte	Executive Director, Center for the Advanced Study of Child Welfare	University of Minnesota	2024
Anne McKeig	Justice	Minnesota Supreme Court	2025
Laura Newton	Program Director	Minneapolis American Indian Center	2024
Jessica Rogers	Executive Director	Connections 2 Independence (C2i)	2024
Mike Scholl	Director	Casey Family Programs	∞
Ada Smith	Resident with lived experience		2023
Michael Thomas	Behavioral Health Director	NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center	2025

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Child Well-Being Advisory Committee, 2023, continued

Hennepin County staff

Jodi Wentland	Deputy County Administrator — Health and Human Services	Ex officio
Dan Rogan	Assistant County Administrator — Resident Services	Ex officio
Lisa Bayley	Director of Safe Communities	Ex officio
Kwesi Booker	Director of Children and Family Services	Ex officio
Susan Palchick	Director of Public Health	Ex officio
Evangeline Filosi	Committee coordinator	Hennepin County
Lori Munsterman	Manager, Data Analytics and CQI	Hennepin County
Sherry Smith	Staff support	Hennepin County
Lori Whittier	Managing Attorney, Child Protection Division	Hennepin County Attorney's Office



Hennepin County

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