



Iowa Child Advocacy Board Annual Report

SFY2024



IOWA CHILD
ADVOCACY BOARD

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Section 1. Executive Summary

The Iowa Child Advocacy Board (ICAB) is appointed by the Governor of Iowa, dedicated to facilitating citizen engagement in child welfare matters. ICAB's commitment to these programs ensures that children receive the support and advocacy they need to thrive. The two primary programs under ICAB's direction are the Foster Care Review Board (FCRB) and the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) programs. These initiatives empower volunteers to play a crucial role in monitoring and advocating for the needs of children in foster care. Together, these programs reflect ICAB's dedication to improving the lives of vulnerable children in Iowa, ensuring they have a voice and a champion throughout their journey in the child welfare system.

The FCRB program involves volunteers who review cases of children in foster care, providing independent assessments to ensure that each child's needs are being met and that they are on a path toward permanency. This program not only brings community voices into the child welfare system but also helps identify systemic issues that may delay a child's journey to a stable, permanent home.

The Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program is a nationwide initiative that trains volunteers to advocate for the best interests of children who have experienced abuse or neglect and are involved in the child welfare system. CASA volunteers are appointed by judges to serve as a consistent, caring presence in a child's life and to provide the court with objective, well-informed recommendations about what is best for the child and family's future. These advocates gather information from caregivers, teachers, medical professionals, and others involved in the child's life to ensure their needs are being met. By offering individualized attention and helping the court make more informed decisions, CASA volunteers play a vital role in securing safe, permanent homes for vulnerable children.

The Board commends the 640 volunteers who served as FCRB Members or CASA volunteers during the past fiscal year. Their dedication and commitment have been instrumental in ensuring that the needs of children in foster care are thoroughly assessed and addressed. Each volunteer brings unique perspectives and expertise, enriching the programs' ability to advocate effectively for these children. Their tireless efforts have not only helped to highlight areas of improvement within the foster care system but also provided invaluable opportunities for individuals to come together on behalf of children and families. The Board is continually inspired by the compassion and resilience shown by these volunteers, who work diligently to make a lasting, positive impact on the lives of Iowa's most vulnerable children.

This fiscal year was yet another year of growth and change for CASA and FCRB as the programs further acclimated to the Department of Health and Human Services. Through the transition, the program volunteers have been supported by a dedicated team of staff and contracted partners, many of whom have devoted their careers to assisting vulnerable children and families in Iowa.

It is my pleasure to present the SFY2024 Annual Report of the Iowa Child Advocacy Board.

Respectfully submitted,



Honorable Judge William S. Owens
Iowa Child Advocacy Board Chair

Section 2. State Board Members

Pursuant to Iowa Code 237.16, the child advocacy board is created within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The state board consists of nine members appointed by the governor, subject to confirmation by the senate and directly responsible to the governor. One member shall be an active court appointed special advocate volunteer, one member shall be an active member of a local citizen foster care review board, and one member shall be a judicial branch employee or judicial officer from nominees submitted by the judicial branch. The appointment is for a term of four years.

Name	City	Term Ending
Judge William S. Owens, Chair	Ottumwa	April 30, 2026
Ashley Baker	Des Moines	April 30, 2026
Courtney Clarke	Waukee	April 30, 2025
Marc A. Elcock	Indianola	April 30, 2025
Don Logan, FCRB Rep	Van Horne	April 30, 2026
Rick McIntosh, CASA Rep	Altoona	April 30, 2025
Wayne Schellhammer	Urbandale	April 30, 2025
Angela Stokes	Sioux City	April 30, 2026
Nicole Nicholson	Waukee	April 30, 2027

Section 3. FCRB Program

The Iowa Foster Care Review Board Program’s mission is to empower the citizens of Iowa to review cases, collect data, and recommend changes to promote the safety and permanency of children who have been removed from the homes of their families. In SFY2024, community citizens served on 22 local foster care review boards to assess the cases of children in 52 of Iowa’s 99 counties.

Most local citizen review boards conducted in-person meetings in SFY24 while also providing interested parties the opportunity to participate virtually. This hybrid approach allowed for greater engagement, ensuring that more voices could be heard and considered in decision-making processes.

Children Eligible for Review

Local citizen review boards are tasked with reviewing the cases of children receiving foster care, which is defined in Iowa Code 237.15, subsection 2, as a child who is described by any of the following circumstances:

- a. The child’s foster care placement is the financial responsibility of the state pursuant to section 234.35.
- b. The child is under the guardianship of the department.
- c. The child has been involuntarily hospitalized for mental illness pursuant to chapter 229.



- d. The child is at-risk of being placed outside the child’s home, the department or court is providing or planning to provide services to the child, and the department or court has requested the involvement of the state or local board.

Local boards conduct reviews for children in paid foster care placements. Reviews are not conducted for those placed with non-licensed relatives or suitable adults (fictive kin). Additionally, children placed in Qualified Residential Treatment Programs (QRTP) are excluded from these reviews to minimize redundant efforts. For SFY2024, the selection plan for prioritizing cases for review was as follows:

- Cases where the children are under the age of 6 in paid foster care placements; then
- Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA) cases; then
- Cases where the children are ages 6-10 years old in paid foster care placements; then
- Cases where there is a transition staffing for ages 16 ½ and older; and then
- Other cases traditionally reviewed.

Children Reviewed

In SFY2024, local boards reviewed a total of 1,035 cases that involved 1,456 children in paid foster care placements in 52 of Iowa’s 99 counties. Some children have more than one review in a year’s time; there was a total of 932 unduplicated children reviewed.

- 462 are female; 470 are male

- 663 are White; 174 Black African American; 76 two or more races; 8 unknown and the remaining 32 are other races
- 420 are aged 0-5 years; 271 are aged 6-12 years; 241 are aged 13+ years
- 477 were placed due to parental substance use; 142 due to denial of critical care; 76 due to physical abuse; 61 due to child’s behavior; 49 due to sexual abuse and the remaining 119 were for various other reasons.

Acknowledging that "one size does not fit all," the FCRB employs three distinct report templates tailored to specific case types: 1) reunification or guardianship goals, 2) adoption, and 3) another planned permanent living arrangement (APPLA). Each template is designed to address the unique findings and barriers relevant to the respective case type, thereby facilitating a comprehensive assessment of the plans and actions required to achieve the permanency goal.

Number of Cases and Children Reviewed in HHS Service Areas

HHS Service Area	Total Cases	Total Children	Unduplicated Children	Reunification / Guardianship Cases	Adoption Cases	APPLA Cases
Western	96	147	93	56	33	7
Northern	131	189	110	93	25	13
Eastern	229	342	218	149	62	18
Cedar Rapids	442	606	399	289	133	20
Des Moines	137	172	112	76	58	3
Total	1,035	1,456	932	663	311	61

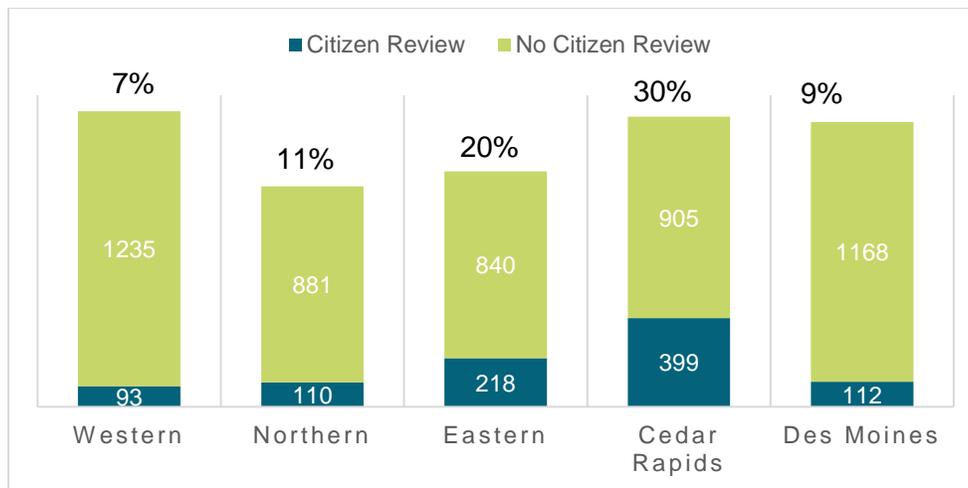
(*) During SFY2024, the Decatur and Union cluster boards were tracked under the prior service area of Des Moines.

(**) The priority population reviewed in SFY2024 was children aged 0-5 years old who had been in foster care for at least one year. Cases of older youth previously assigned to the board continued to receive citizen foster care reviews until they achieved permanency.

The existing language in Chapter 237 of the Iowa Code limits the capacity of the FCRB program to review cases involving children in all foster care environments. The table below shows the number of children in Iowa’s foster care system at some time in SFY24 and the number of children who were reviewed by a local board. The low percentage of children reviewed in each HHS Service area highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach to ensure that every child in foster care receives an

independent, third-party review. Additionally, 47 counties currently lack a foster care review board program.

% of children who received a citizen foster care review



Note: The numbers of children in foster care with HHS supervision, shown in this table, were obtained from the Department of Health and Human Services’ Child Welfare Placements dashboard.

Children in care as of June 30, 2024

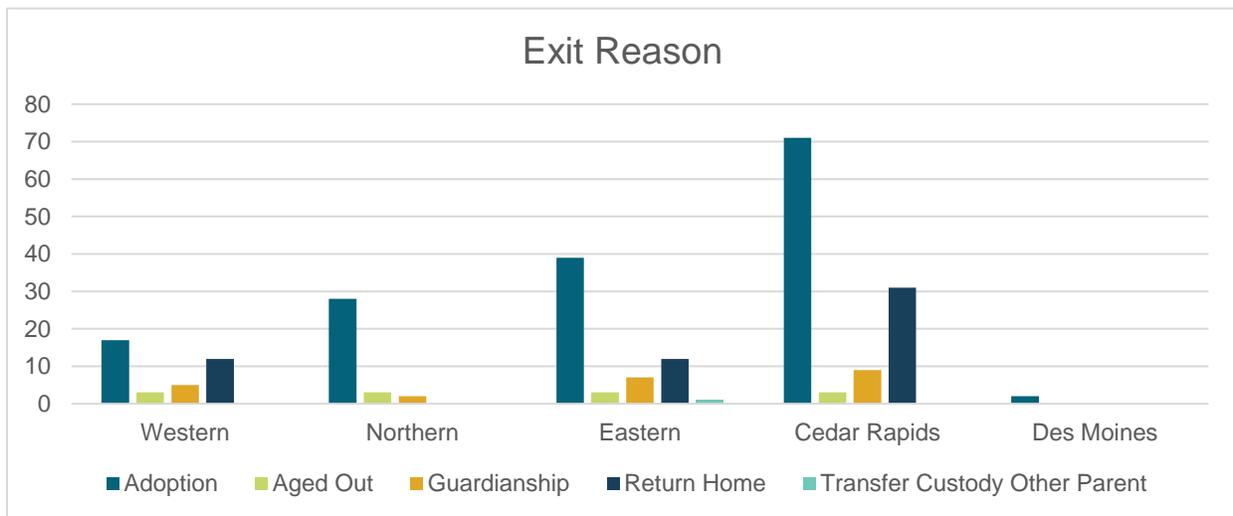
In SFY2024, among the unduplicated children reviewed, 684 remained in paid foster care at the end of the fiscal year. The following overview highlights the demographics of this group along with relevant placement details.

HHS Service Area	No unduplicated children	Average No of Days in Current Placement	Average No of Days in Foster Care	Average No of Placement moves
Western	103	283.2	765.2	3.4
Northern	77	236.8	516.0	3.4
Eastern	156	319.7	653.3	2.9
Cedar Rapids	285	252.7	613.3	3.3
Des Moines	63	434.6	1094.4	5.2

Children reviewed and exited during SFY2024

Of the 932 unduplicated children reviewed in SFY2024, 248 exited the foster care system. The following overview highlights length of stay and placement information of this group along with permanency outcomes.

HHS Service Area	No unduplicated children	Average No of Days in Current Placement	Average No of Days in Foster Care	Average No of Placement moves
Western	37	175.9	751.24	3.2
Northern	33	117.5	592.1	3.0
Eastern	62	110.2	715.8	2.8
Cedar Rapids	114	127.4	703.6	2.9
Des Moines	2	12.0	846.0	2.0



FCRB Case Findings

Foster care review boards assess various findings related to the specific case permanency goals. Findings indicated with an asterisk (*) were derived from the number of children for whom the finding was relevant. In certain cases, the necessary information was unavailable for the review, which affected the overall percentage of whether the finding was achieved.

Key findings are noted in the following tables by HHS Service Area.

Reunification or Guardianship Goals

	Western	Northern	Eastern	Cedar Rapids	Des Moines
Number of unduplicated children	88	138	229	426	104
HHS has developed a concurrent plan.	82%	65%	91%	98%	82%
HHS made efforts to place the child with a relative or fictive kin.	91%	98%	99%	100%	98%
HHS made efforts to place siblings together. *	98%	98%	99%	99%	96%
HHS initiated transition planning for youth aged 14+ yrs. *	60%	38%	63%	76%	59%
Court held a permanency hearing within ASFA timelines.	85%	96%	98%	99%	98%

Adoption Goal

	Western	Northern	Eastern	Cedar Rapids	Des Moines
Number of unduplicated children	50	37	109	183	76
Board found current placement to be appropriate to meet the child’s need for permanency.	90%	95%	93%	96%	91%
HHS has ensured appropriate services are in place to safeguard the child(ren)’s safety and well-being.	96%	100%	100%	100%	98%
HHS casework responsibility has been transferred to the adoption specialist timely. *	100%	68%	90%	96%	97%
Child has a life book or equivalent.	40%	8%	76%	32%	42%
Adoption will be finalized within 24 months of entering foster care.	17%	51%	54%	54%	28%

Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement Goal

	Western	Northern	Eastern	Cedar Rapids	Des Moines
Number of unduplicated children	8	13	18	21	3
The Case Permanency Plan (CPP), Part C includes the youth's transition plan.	88%	77%	89%	76%	67%
Youth has completed the Casey Life Skills Assessment.	88%	61%	72%	95%	100%
A transition planning meeting has been held for the youth.	88%	69%	78%	71%	67%
HHS made efforts to place the child with a relative or fictive kin.	100%	92%	100%	100%	100%
There is at least one caring adult in the youth's support system.	88%	92%	89%	100%	100%

The local boards carefully evaluate the progress made towards achieving the permanency goals, considering factors like the child's well-being, stability and the appropriateness of the current placement. They collaborate with social work case managers, families, foster parents and other stakeholders to ensure that each child's needs are being met and that any barriers to permanency are addressed. Regular reviews help to keep the focus on finding a permanent, loving home for the child, whether that means reunification with their biological family, adoption, guardianship or another planned permanent living arrangement.

Section 4. CASA Program

As part of Iowa's 2023 executive branch restructure, the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program became a part of Iowa Health and Human Services. It now operates within the Compliance and Administration Division under the oversight of the Chief Audit Executive and Administrator of Internal Controls and Accountability. Iowa Code §237.18 designates CASA as a program of the Iowa Child Advocacy Board and the Department of Health and Human Services.

CASA of Iowa recruits, trains, and supports volunteer advocates appointed to cases involving children who have experienced abuse or neglect and are engaged in Child in Need of Assistance (CINA) proceedings. Volunteers complete an application, provide references, undergo an interview, pass a background check, and participate in 30 hours of pre-service training before being sworn in by the juvenile court.

Founded in 1976 by a Seattle judge, the CASA model ensures the voices of vulnerable children are heard and that the court has the information it needs. CASA volunteers advocate for these key principles:

- Families possess strengths that can be built upon to reduce risk.
- Separation from family causes trauma; children should remain with family when it is safe and appropriate.

Appointed by judges, CASA volunteers monitor the child's case, maintain contact with key individuals, and submit Reports to the Court for each hearing. These reports include the child's wishes, assessments of their needs, and recommendations in their best interest.

CASA advocacy is tailored to each unique case. Volunteer advocates gather information from entities serving on the child and family's team, including service providers, the child's placement, schools and various health providers. In this way, the program serves a dual purpose of providing a wealth of information judges, while establishing a caring, collaborative relationship with children and their family.

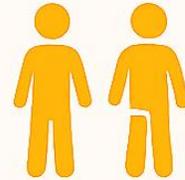


CASA BY THE NUMBERS

SFY 2024

478 Volunteer advocates

83 newly assigned to a case in FY24



144 Applications received

92 newly sworn



1,142 Children served from 622 families



1,186 Reports submitted to the court



25,115 hours donated to cases



224,173 miles driven by volunteers for case-related work



\$877,353 Valuation of time
Valuation of mileage

\$999,440 Total volunteer contribution

Average CASA volunteer serves on a case 15.8 months and stays with the program 50 months

CASA of Iowa – Relationship with the Juvenile Court

CASA of Iowa works closely with juvenile court judges; taking case referrals from the court and helping judges get a more complete picture of the child and family circumstances. The program considers the judge to be the primary consumer of the CASA’s ‘product’ – the CASA Report to the Court.

In June 2024, CASA of Iowa deployed our annual Judges Survey to learn more about the impact of CASA programming through the eyes of Iowa’s juvenile judges. This year, the State Organization developed the survey with a focus on the quality of advocacy services provided by volunteers. Judges were also surveyed about the information they wish to see in the CASA’s report to the court. Please see p. 14 for survey data.

Looking Ahead

In SFY2025, the CASA program is planning several initiatives to address the quality of the advocacy provided to children through enhancement of information provided to the court and support provided to volunteer advocates.

The following activities are planned:

- Training current advocates by enhancing advocacy skills such as asking better questions, gathering information and reporting thorough information to the court
- Conducting a one-on-one discussion monthly with each assigned volunteer to discuss case dynamics, answer questions and provide case-related training as needed
- Newly sworn volunteers will have two required continuing education sessions on gathering information and developing the report to the court when assigned to their first case.
- Volunteers will be offered more live and in-person continuing education and opportunities to network with one another
- Court reports will be audited to track elements of quality

In the June 2024 CASA Judicial Survey one judge stated:

“I enjoy working with the volunteers and wish they were involved in more cases. I like that they provide a different perspective with different information than what is found in other reports. For example, I learn more about school and daycare in these reports than anywhere else. I often learn about family support from churches, teachers and others in the community in these reports as well.”

June 2024 Judicial Survey Results RE: CASA Reports

The CASA Report helps me get a detailed understanding of the child's situation to assist in making decisions about the child.



Reports indicate the volunteer has sufficient in-depth knowledge of the case.

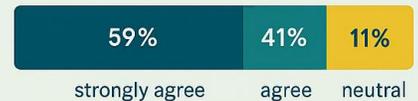


CASA Reports are filed in a timely manner according to my local judicial protocol.

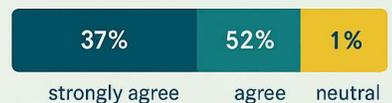


JUDICIAL SURVEY RESULTS

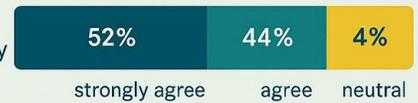
Overall, I am satisfied with the CASA program that I work with.



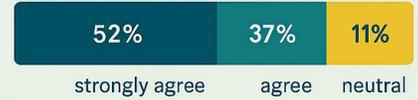
I have a better understanding of what is happening in a case when a CASA Volunteer is appointed.



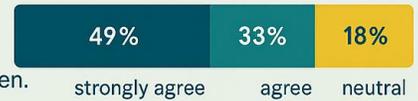
I believe CASA volunteers effectively and professionally advocate for the best interests of the child throughout the judicial process.



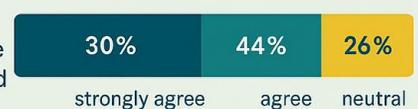
I have more information on which to base decisions regarding a child's best interest when a CASA volunteer is assigned.



I believe the CASA program is influential in impacting positive outcomes for children.

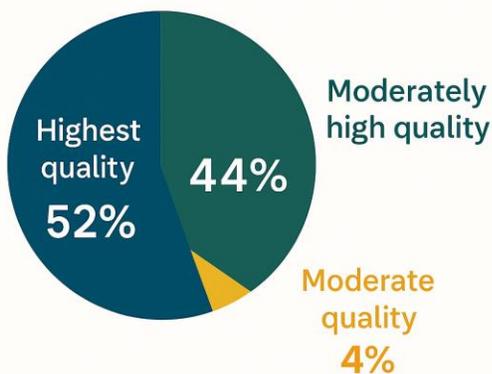


CASA Volunteers in my courtroom demonstrate the principle that children should be with their family of origin when this can be safely achieved.



Legend: ■ strongly agree ■ agree ■ neutral

How would you rate the overall quality of the CASA reports you receive?



Section 5. Volunteer Spotlights

The volunteers at CASA and FCRB come from diverse educational and professional backgrounds, yet they all share a sincere commitment to the welfare of children. Each volunteer brings unique skills and experiences that contribute to the program's mission. Whether they are educators, social workers, business professionals or community leaders, their collective expertise creates a robust lens for reviewing cases of children in foster care or advocating for children who have experienced abuse and neglect. Through continuous training and collaboration, the CASA and FCRB volunteers are empowered to make meaningful recommendations, advocating for every child to receive the care and attention they deserve.



Empowering Iowa's vulnerable children requires empathy and a genuine commitment to the well-being of others. We honor and acknowledge the commitment of CASA and FCRB volunteers. Their unwavering dedication and selfless service have made a significant impact for children in foster care. These volunteers tirelessly give their time and energy to support our mission. We are truly grateful for their contributions and are inspired by their example. Read on to learn why these individuals have chosen to serve on a local citizen review board and/or as a Court Appointed Special Advocate.

Dennis McDonald



Dennis has been with the FCRB program since 2014 and served on the Cedar-Muscatine FCRB. He will continue his service as a reviewer on a consolidated board moving forward into the next fiscal year. Why does Dennis volunteer for FCRB? Because in his words, *“Children are God’s gift to us and every child has the right to grow up in a safe environment where they are physically and emotionally safe and where they are appropriately loved, cared for and protected. Families are the foundation of our society so we should do all we can to protect them. These are real people and each child, and each family situation is unique, and the Foster Care Review Board makes recommendations that protect the child and helps them grow physically, mentally and emotionally while respecting the family situation. Being part of a system that seeks to*

ensure that these values are balanced and protected for each child and family that we review is a privilege that I am blessed to be part of and a responsibility I take seriously.”

Teresa Clevenger

“I retired on 07/31/2023 from the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services as a SWCM (SWII) after serving Iowa's most vulnerable children for over 33 years. The following day I applied to be a FCRB volunteer as well as a CASA. I believe that giving of my time is important to continue to serve Iowa's youth involved in the Child Welfare System. As a retired social worker with lots of experience and now a FCRB volunteer, I'm able to review cases and share ideas to help the team serve the youth. I tend to ask more questions and inquire if a variety of resources have been explored.”

As Teresa noted, she joined the Johnson County FCRB in 2023, has subbed on several boards and donates her time and talents as a Court Appointed Special Advocate.

John Spengler



John has served on local boards in Northwest Iowa and has been a Court Appointed Special Advocate since 2009. John has provided leadership to the board as a chairperson over the years. He shares his time and talents because *“My mother went into the foster system during the depression. She went in at about 6 ½ and then aged out. After I retired from the Navy my wife and I were foster parents for several years until she got sick. This is a way to continue to help our youth in need.*

I feel that it is important to take care of our youth, they are our future. They could grow up to be an Olympic gold medalist, the President or the nurse taking care of me in the hospital. Every child should have the chance to be who they want to be. It hurts when that is taken away and I want to help get it back for them.

Everything I know I learned from someone else. To share my talent with others is only right. Whether it is helping a child to succeed, a parent to do better or another person so they can help.

I feel that I am rewarded every time that a child in foster care succeeds. I am happy to be part of the team that makes that happen.”

Patricia DeHarty

Tricia DeHarty, a CASA volunteer from Sioux City states *“I have been a CASA for seven years. I started out as a foster parent. Throughout my years as a foster parent, I noticed that once a child is in the system, the child’s need wasn’t the first priority. Once the child was safe, parents took priority. As a foster parent I was told I care too much and to let them do their jobs.*



As a CASA, I get to care about the children and make recommendations about what is best for the child. With older children, I do a lot of listening to how they feel and what they want. I listen to what they think the family needs to succeed. Kids have a different view of how the family is and I get to speak for them. With the parents, I get to be the cheerleader that tells them good job when they accomplish something. A lot of younger parents have never had that kind of support. The best thing about being a CASA is knowing at the end of the day I made a difference and did my best to keep a child safe.”

Section 6. Recommendations

The Iowa Child Advocacy Board offers the following recommendations to strengthen the CASA and FCRB programs or the child welfare system overall. Collaboration between state agencies, community organizations and policymakers will be crucial in achieving these goals and fostering a more robust support network for system-involved children and families.

- 1. The CASA program should ensure connection with all juvenile judges across the state through speaking engagements, one on one meetings and regular check ins to talk about the quality of information and professionalism displayed in the court room.** The CASA program's renewed focus naming the judge as the primary "customer" of the CASA volunteer means relationships with judges become more important than ever.
- 2. The CASA and FCRB programs should enhance data sharing with the HHS foster care program to allow for comparative data for analysis and drawing conclusions on program and system effectiveness.** FCRB lacks access to child-specific data for other children in foster care who do not qualify for a citizen review. The CASA Program lacks this same data, which could be used to formulate outcomes demonstrating the impact a CASA Volunteer has on the average case. This limitation poses a challenge in understanding the broader context and effectiveness of Iowa's child welfare system.
- 3. Iowa HHS social work case managers should use a standard case permanency plan template that is consistent across the state.** The case permanency plan is developed by the assigned social worker to reflect the child's unique situation; the document is then utilized by the local foster care review board to determine whether satisfactory progress is being made toward the goals of the plan. Case permanency plans are not always provided for foster care reviews and there has not been consistency in the format used across HHS Service Areas, making case reviews more difficult.
- 4. Iowa HHS should research volunteers, staffing and funding needed to potentially fill the "best-interest advocacy" gap by assigning CASA volunteers and/or foster care reviews to cases of children 10 and up.** Legal stakeholders in the juvenile justice arena have recently explored code changes which would appoint a client-directed attorney to represent youth ages 10 and up in all juvenile proceedings, removing the Guardian Ad Litem appointed to serve in the youth's best interest.

5. **Iowa HHS should pursue Iowa Code changes to allow department employees not directly involved with child welfare the opportunity to become CASA and FCRB volunteers.** Current Iowa Code does not allow HHS employees to serve as CASA or FCRB volunteers due to a conflict of interest. Yet there are potentially hundreds of individuals employed by Iowa HHS whose work does not touch child welfare and protective services.
6. **The state should expand or reimagine the FCRB program to conduct independent reviews of child welfare cases from all 99 counties.** By doing so, the system can utilize data and information from case reviews to assess trends and gaps in services and outcomes for children and families involved in the Iowa child welfare system in a manner that is not available today.
7. **The CASA Program should create a strategic development plan to expand service to all of Iowa's 99 counties.** Currently there is a CASA Bureau team member assigned to all counties, but not every county has a volunteer available. Judges, children and families in all areas of Iowa should have equal opportunity to access CASA advocacy.
8. **The CASA program should seek resources for an app-based tool for volunteers to complete case notes, reporting and required training.** This level of enhancement to the program's data system could help volunteers become more efficient and timelier in their data entry and potentially improve the information/case notes contained in the system.



Appendix 1. Foster Care Review Board Annual Program Evaluation, SFY2024

Iowa Code 237.18, subsection 4



Introduction

Pursuant to Iowa Code §237.18, subsection 4, the Foster Care Review Board maintains an annual evaluation program designed to evaluate the effectiveness of citizen reviews in “improving case permanency planning and meeting case permanency planning goals, identify the amount of time children spend in foster care placements, and identify problem issues in the foster care system.”

There are three components to the evaluation program:

1. Annual survey of interested parties
2. Comment card results from local foster care review meetings
3. Barriers to achievement of the permanency goal

Local citizen foster care review board programs accumulated data for over 1,400 children from 52 counties in SFY2024. Of those children, there were 932 unduplicated children who remained eligible for at least one citizen foster care review during the fiscal year.

- The average length of time these children were under the purview of the ICFCRB program was 430 days.
- Reasons children exit from the foster care review board program include:
 - Reunification with their family of origin
 - Placement with relatives or fictive kin
 - Permanency established through a guardianship
 - Adoption
 - Custody is transferred from HHS to the noncustodial parent, relative or a foster family
 - Placement in a Qualified Residential Treatment Program (QRTP)
 - Reach majority age

Comment Card Results

After each case review, all participant groups are encouraged to share their thoughts on the review process. The Boards and staff are dedicated to conducting their work with respect and care, focusing on the safety and long-term planning for children. Stakeholder feedback is crucial for improving the quality and effectiveness of the program.

Those attending a local review are invited to fill out a comment card, while individuals participating virtually receive a direct survey link. In the fiscal year 2024, over 1,000 comment cards were collected. Along with providing open comments, participants are asked to assess four specific areas.

Table 1. Comment Card Results

Case Role	Today's review adequately addressed issues regarding the child's safety and permanency.	The Board's recommendations will effectively impact case planning for the child(ren).	The Board listened to my comments and concerns and treated me respectfully.	Timely notification of reviews was received (at least 10 days prior).	Total Responses
Atty/GAL	100%	100%	100%	97%*	35
CASA	100%	100%	100%	86%*	70
Foster Parent	97%	96%	100%	95%*	241
HHS SWCM	99%	98%	99%	94%*	340
Other	95%	99%	99%	92%*	76
Parent	89%	86%	95%	85%*	112
Parent's Atty	97%	97%	100%	97%	39
Relative Caregiver	100%	100%	100%	88%*	17
Service Providers	98%	100%	100%	94%*	88
Youth	100%	100%	92%	75%*	12

(*) Not all respondents answered this question.

FEEDBACK

Respondents could answer three open ended questions as part of the comment card. Common themes emerged and are shown in Table 2.

1. What did you like most about today's review?
2. How could the FCRB process be improved?
3. Additional comments.

Table 2. Themes from Comment Card Open-Ended Responses

What did you like most about today's review?	How could the FCRB process be improved?	Additional Comments
Reviews were thorough and respectfully done.	Need more time for reviews, especially more difficult or complex cases.	Comments were about specific cases.
Everyone had a chance to share updates.	Reviews could be done virtually.	Thank you.
The board listened and everyone was heard.	Mandate all parties to participate or provide updates; need HHS and GAL at the reviews.	None or N/A.
Child-focused; they genuinely care about the children.	Boards need to be more diverse in membership.	
Focused on progress of child and/or parent(s).	Provide more recommendations to help families.	
Great opportunity for collaboration by all parties who attend.	Ensure boards are up to date with training on social work practices.	
Boards ask good questions, thoughtful questions and the more difficult questions.		
Board members are knowledgeable about the cases.		

The data and feedback gleaned from comment cards underscore widespread support for the citizen foster care review process among contributors offering post-review feedback. This positive reception reflects the commendable efforts of board members and facilitators in conducting thorough and respectful reviews that prioritize progress. Participants in these reviews value the collaborative nature and the opportunity to exchange case updates.

In light of this feedback, enhancements are necessary within the FCRB program. Priorities include diversifying board membership, providing ongoing education to board members on pertinent social work practices, and actively involving more stakeholders in the review process. Moreover, careful consideration should be given to optimizing case scheduling and allocating adequate time for the examination of complex cases.

Survey of Interested Parties

Individuals and stakeholders were asked to take part in a program survey to evaluate how effective citizen foster care reviews are in enhancing case permanency planning and achieving related goals. There was a decrease in the level of participation from the previous fiscal year.

RESPONDENTS

While 103 individuals started the survey, only 71 completed it.

- No youth participated.
- There was low participation from parents and foster parents.
- 40% of the responses were from HHS social work case managers and/or supervisors.

RESULTS

Survey respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with several key components of the foster care review process. Table 3 depicts the respondents' answers.

Table 3. Interested Party Survey Results

Survey item	% in Agreement
Citizen review boards positively address issues regarding the case permanency plan for children and families.	94%
Citizen review boards effectively address progress toward completing the action steps of the case permanency plan.	96%
Citizen review boards positively address whether concurrent planning is occurring for children in foster care.	93%
Citizen review boards routinely address whether relative searches are occurring for children in foster care.	89%
Citizen review boards continually address progress towards the achievement of legal permanency for children.	94%
Citizen review boards are actively focused on assessing the critical needs of children (i.e., educational advocacy, mental health, physical health, placement needs, relational permanence, transition planning, etc.)	93%
Citizen review boards routinely provide an opportunity to identify systemic barriers in the child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems.	83%
Recommendations made by citizen review boards effectively influence case planning for families with children in out-of-home placements.	76%

FEEDBACK

The survey included the opportunity for respondents to answer the following open-ended questions:

1. In your experience with the FCRB, what do you feel are benefits of citizen review for children in foster care placements?
2. In your experience with the FCRB, what suggestions do you have for improving the effectiveness of citizen reviews for case permanency planning and achievement of the case permanency plan goals?
3. Provide any additional comments regarding citizen foster care reviews that was not previously addressed in this survey.

Table 4. Common Themes from Annual Survey Open-Ended Responses

Benefits of FCRB	Suggestions for Improvement	Additional Comments
It is a neutral, un-biased third party review that parents, in particular, can benefit from.	Diversify the board membership.	Don't believe FCRB reports hold much weight in court.
Provides a checks and balance approach that is not always available.	Consider the timing of reviews and do not schedule so close to court dates.	FCRB is often a rubber stamp of HHS.
It gives everyone an ability to have their voice heard; opportunity for collaboration and communication.	Allow more time to review complex cases.	There is not much to be gained from these meetings.
It can help identify additional resources or services for children that the team may not have thought of.	Ensure all board members are knowledgeable of laws, HHS policies and make recommendations that fit within those parameters.	

CONCLUSION

While most participants concurred with the key points included in the survey, local boards must increase their efforts in addressing systemic barriers within child welfare and juvenile justice systems. It is crucial that all citizen review boards continue to conduct reviews that are objective and free of bias. Moreover, offering recommendations that align with laws, policies and practice to improve case permanency planning for children and families is imperative.

Barriers to Achieving Permanency

In the review process, obstacles impeding the realization of permanency plan goals and objectives are identified by engaging in dialogue between the local board members and members of the child's team. Recognizing the individuality of each case, distinct challenges can emerge. Local citizen foster care review boards document the primary barriers identified across different case categories.

Cases with the goal of reunification or guardianship

Of 1,991 documented barriers from reviews held, the top four barriers documented in FY24 are:

1. 494 of the barriers were parental mental health issues
 2. 387 of the barriers were parental substance abuse issues
 3. 296 of the barriers were family economic issues to include lack of stable housing
 4. 235 of the barriers were lack of progress by parent(s) to alleviate the concerns that led to the removal within 12 months of out-of-home placement
- ★ 46 had no identified barriers because the achievement of the permanency goal was in process.

Cases with the goal of adoption

Of 446 documented barriers from reviews held, the top four barriers documented in FY24 are:

1. 52 of the barriers were children who were not in the pre-adoptive home for 180 days at the time of the review
 2. 32 of the barriers were related to the youth's special needs being a challenge in securing a pre-adoptive placement
 3. 29 of the barriers were youth who required residential treatment at the time of the review.
 4. 26 of the barriers were for children in placements that were not interested in adoption at the time of the review.
- ★ 89 had no identified barriers because the finalization of adoption was pending.

Cases with the goal of another planned permanent living arrangement

Of 123 documented barriers from reviews held, the top four barriers documented in FY24 are:

1. 17 identified that the youth need employment or job experience.
 2. 11 identified that youth did not have enough credits to graduate high school.
 3. 8 identified that the youth's cognitive ability is a barrier to active involvement in transition planning
 4. 7 identified that the youth needed to be connected with the Aftercare worker.
- ★ 16 had no barriers noted.

There was a noticeable improvement from the previous fiscal year in 1) the number of older youth who needed certified personal documents (photo ID, social security card and/or a birth certificate) and 2) the number of youth who were not connected to the Aftercare worker.

Recommendations

Based on the data and information gathered for this annual evaluation report, the following recommendations are offered.

1. FCRB staff to establish internal and external partnerships to address systemic issues in Iowa's child welfare system.
2. FCRB program to review internal processes for scheduling of reviews and engaging interested parties to elevate the level of participation in foster care reviews.
3. FCRB program to review continuing education for board members and ensure that all board members receive and complete ongoing training regarding child welfare laws, policies and practices.