



**BUILDING A NETWORK
OF
TRAUMA
INFORMED
COURTS
IN TEXAS**



the center
TEXAS CENTER FOR CHILD
AND FAMILY STUDIES

**Children's
Commission®**
SUPREME COURT OF TEXAS PERMANENT JUDICIAL
COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES

WORKING TOWARD A TRAUMA-INFORMED CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

In 2017, the Children’s Commission led the Statewide Collaborative for Trauma-Informed Care’s (SCTIC) efforts to transform the Texas child welfare system into a system that routinely views children and families as individuals who have experienced trauma. In 2019, they published, “Building a Trauma-Informed Child Welfare System: A Blueprint,” which laid the foundation and provided a roadmap for the Texas child welfare system to become trauma-informed and trauma-responsive.

In January of 2022, the Children’s Commission partnered with The Center for Child and Family Studies (The Center), to create a Trauma-Informed Courts Project to use strategies from the Blueprint to expand trauma-informed courts in Texas. Although each courtroom had unique challenges and goals, this initiative created a cohort of judges, attorneys, and other child welfare professionals and advocates throughout the state that came together to help build a team that better responds to children and families they serve. The court teams shared their perspectives on the impact of their efforts in their courtrooms.

Below are some of the observed accomplishments from this collaborative:

FELT SAFETY FOR FAMILIES & CHILDREN

The court teams prioritized felt safety by supporting families in executing their plans, slowing down the court proceeding to ensure families understand what is happening, and providing space for children and families to feel safe and heard. Being able to wraparound families in the courtroom with a trauma-informed lens reinforced a sense of safety in an often intimidating setting. This created an environment where parents’ voices were elevated and as a result, they were more engaged in hearings.

EFFECTIVE COURTROOM CULTURE

Laying the groundwork with education, judges, attorneys, and other professionals shifted the culture in their courtrooms to better meet families where they are. Through trauma-informed training and collaborative discussions, these courts were better equipped to engage with the diverse needs of the children and families they work with. What is often an adversarial space, the culture in the courtrooms shifted to an environment that worked as a team to support the best possible outcomes for families.

ADVANCED TRAUMA-INFORMED CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Cross-court information sharing was helpful to learn from other trauma-informed projects, to build stronger community ties, and work toward shared goals across the state. This work contributed to developing long-term, repeatable knowledge and skills about the implementation of trauma-informed and trauma-responsive practices by courts, as well as the obstacles and successes that have arisen in terms of bettering the outcomes for children and families.

The Blueprint encouraged creativity and advancement in the state’s public and commercial sectors’ approaches to trauma-informed care. Acknowledging the importance of trauma-responsive practices in fostering children’s and families’ well-being and healing, the collaborative initiatives discussed in this report sought to implement court-specific projects to support trauma-responsive practices and develop a body of knowledge about becoming trauma-informed as a judicial system. This report highlights the trauma-informed and trauma-responsive work that four courts around the state have done in accordance with the Blueprint’s guidelines. This work paves the way for future efforts that support better safety, permanency, and well-being in the Texas court system.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE TRAUMA-INFORMED IN TEXAS?

The SCTIC adopted the following definitions for “Trauma” and “Trauma-Informed” based on existing definitions from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN). The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services adopted these definitions under Texas Administrative Code Section 702.201. These definitions served as a guiding light for the Trauma Informed Courts Projects.

TRAUMA

Results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning or the individual’s mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

TRAUMA-INFORMED

- + Realizing the widespread impact of trauma
- + Recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma
- + Maximizing physical and psychological safety
- + Building healthy, trusting relationships that create mutuality
- + Striving to avoid re-traumatization

BUILDING THE NETWORK

In April 2021, the Children’s Commission hosted a Judicial Trauma Institute for judicial teams to gain information and discover practical tools and resources about how to become a trauma-informed and trauma-responsive court in Child Protective Services cases. Following the Institute, judges were invited to apply to participate in the Trauma-Informed Courts Project, a partnership between the Children’s Commission and The Center. The project teams also received strategic direction from Justice Darlene Byrne, Chief Justice of the Third Court of Appeals, and Judge Carlos Villalon, Associate Judge for the Child Protection Court of the Rio Grande Valley West.

The goals of the Trauma-Informed Courts Project were two-fold:

- Implement trauma-informed and trauma-responsive practices that promote child and family felt safety within the Texas court system and ultimately support improved permanency and well-being.
- Build a body of knowledge of how courts have implemented trauma-informed and trauma-responsive practices and what success looks like.

THE COURTS



- **JUDGE ANGELA GRAVES-HARRINGTON, PRESIDING JUDGE**

246th Family District Court (Houston)

Project: Brown Bag Training Series

Goal: Increase the number of attorneys available to represent children and children, improve client representation, and expand the trauma-informed knowledge of professionals working in the court.



- **JUDGE ANDREA JAMES, ASSOCIATE JUDGE**

Second Region Child Protection Court Number 2 (Bryan)

Project: Phased Service Plans

Goal: Engage parents in services and reduce time in foster care.



- **JUDGE LINDA DUNSON, PRESIDING JUDGE**

309th Family District Court (Houston)

Project: Courtroom Accessibility with Video, Pamphlet and More

Goal: Reduce trauma experienced by families when coming to court.



- **JUDGE CHERYL VAUGHAN, ASSOCIATE JUDGE**

Child Protection Court Eighth Region North (Gainesville)

Project: Phased Service Plans and Parent Notebooks

Goal: Engage parents early and effectively, utilizing a phased service plan in their case to increase reunification rates, improve time to permanency, and reduce recidivism.

COURT PROJECTS: WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

As champions for this work, each judge selected a team to work with them on a trauma-informed court project. The teams were based on the unique community needs, but at a minimum included the judge, a parent's attorney, a child's attorney, representatives from CASA and Department of Family and Protective Services, a court clerk or administrator, and representatives from a child and family serving organization. Staff from the Children's Commission and The Center worked together with the court teams to provide technical assistance and track progress. By August 2023, each of the four teams successfully progressed their projects and set intentions to continue their trauma-informed efforts.

BROWN BAG TRAINING SERIES

JUDGE ANGELA GRAVES- HARRINGTON

246TH FAMILY DISTRICT COURT (HOUSTON)

Through a series of monthly “brown bag” sessions, this project aimed to improve case outcomes for families by strengthening client representation in the courtroom and working to improve court processes. The trainings were designed for attorneys who represent parents and children every day. The goals for the series were to educate attorneys on the tenets of being trauma-informed, share ways to implement trauma-informed policies and techniques, and ultimately produce higher quality attorneys who will provide higher quality representation. Although the initial target audience was attorneys, other professionals in the community

participated which led to stronger collaboration and partnerships. Additionally, having multiple perspectives helped the team identify stronger actions and implementation strategies.

To increase participation, regularly scheduled trainings were held in person and virtually, and included topics such as second-hand trauma and self-care, trauma impacts on the brain, and other practical tools to use in implementation. Through better client representation and compliance by parents, the targeted outcomes for this project included shortened lengths of cases and increased placement stability for children.

SUCCESSES

- **Practical tools from the trainings are being put into action in the courtroom.** The team observed practices being implemented in the courtroom by attorneys, CASA supervisors passed the information down to their volunteers, and participants were able to have a collection of tools in their toolbox to work with their clients. The trainings were well attended and received a lot of positive feedback.
- **Lawyers and other professionals who work with children and families are supported by directly addressing secondary trauma.** This project team identified the need to address the wellness of professionals who are experiencing secondary trauma that often goes unaddressed. As a part of this team’s training series, there were sessions to focus on this important issue.
- **The needs of the community are better met by exploring innovative and flexible ways of working with families.** This type of thinking led to a partnership with The Coalition of Child Serving Sectors to fund a one-year pilot to explore if a family engagement position would increase support for families and access to services.



LOOKING AHEAD

“Everyone has to be held accountable for the piece that they play in the courtroom. Trauma-informed means knowing you are working on the issues, and participants have to be transparent about the process.”

Judge Graves-Harrington plans on continuing the brown-bag trainings for the community. The team is considering how the trainings may be made more accessible and what other steps might be taken to help them develop over time. The project team encourages other courts to collaborate with the community and be open minded about being trauma-informed.

PHASED SERVICE PLANS

JUDGE ANDREA JAMES

SECOND REGION CHILD PROTECTION COURT (BRYAN)

To support families in successfully completing services, this project team implemented phased service plans in Angelina, Brazos, and Grimes counties, modeled after Judge Carol Clark's (321st District Court) service plans, that parceled out court ordered services in a way that was less overwhelming and more straight forward for the parent to understand what was expected within certain, somewhat flexible, timeframes. The intention was to give parents shorter lists of services to manage at a time to better set them up for success. The team hoped it would also give them momentum and confidence because they were moving forward with their plans.

Service plans were split into three phases with targeted completion dates and the team was able to tailor each phase to the specific needs of the families. This allowed for parents, service providers, attorneys, and other professionals involved in these cases to communicate on progress, concerns, and additional needs for services. This was to ensure more communication early on so that any impediments, including lack of parent participation, could be addressed with some urgency. The goal of this project was to minimize the time it takes for reunification and decrease recidivism into the system.

“There was a recognition early on that the best thing is to focus on families.

We wanted to choose a project that we can make some ground with, and not have families feel overwhelmed”

SUCCESSES

- + Families are getting more constructive service plans.** This project has opened the door to new resources and creative solutions for families and management strategies that are realistic and effective. By creating bite-sized tasks and realistic expectations, families are more engaged and productive.
- + Families are being heard.** Judge James and her team were able to engage with parents in the courtroom in a new way. The team worked to reinforce that all parties involved in this process were on equal footing; that all parties (including DFPS) were subject to the court's expectations as set out in the service plans; and that the stated goal during this process was to support families by taking a teamwork approach to cases.
- + A shift to a collaborative environment in the courtroom creates a culture that better supports families.** By recognizing that collaboration and culture can ultimately improve outcomes for families, the team prioritized this shift. Acknowledging the power of celebrating small wins along the way kept this momentum going.



LOOKING AHEAD

Judge James and her team are currently working on expanding the implementation of phased family plans in the additional counties that she presides. The team is also working on evaluating the efficacy of phased plans and expanding the application to more families. Changes to the Child Protection Case Management System operated by the Office of Court Administration are allowing the court to begin tracking outcomes for families using the phased service plan to assess impact of this change.

COURTROOM ACCESSIBILITY

JUDGE LINDA DUNSON
309TH FAMILY DISTRICT COURT (HOUSTON)

Recognizing that navigating the court system can be overwhelming for families, Judge Dunson and her court team focused their efforts on creating materials to help families understand the process. The team created a video designed to show what a family should expect when coming to the court then created written pamphlets sharing additional information. The team sought to create a “trauma-informed ecosystem” in the

courtroom, acknowledging that in addition to videos and pamphlets, families will thrive when there is community support throughout their case and a trauma-informed environment in the courtroom. The ecosystem consists of community collaboratives to connect parents to resources and a connection center that served as a place for children and families to meet while at court in a trauma-informed environment.

SUCCESSES

- + High quality resources help families.** The team partnered with a professional video director that had lived experience in the child welfare system to create an impactful video that explored navigating the courtroom in a way that would resonate with families.
- + Courtroom culture wraps around families.** By creating a trauma-informed ecosystem in the courtroom, the team was able to shift the tone in hearings by supporting and encouraging caseworkers and legal teams in their engagement with families.
- + Education led to creative solutions.** The trauma-informed lens that the team developed shifted what they considered wins and helped create different solutions that can be helpful for families. Education increased attorney’s ability to recognize certain behaviors as a response to trauma and increased their willingness to listen.



LOOKING AHEAD

“Everyone deserves a second chance; it’s refreshing to be in a court where everyone understands what the clients are dealing with.”

Judge Dunson and her team are preparing to showcase the video in a viewing for the community while they continue to expand and finalize the trauma-informed ecosystem. The team is working to secure funding for the connection center to further support families in their court.

PHASED SERVICE PLANS AND PARENT NOTEBOOKS

JUDGE CHERYL VAUGHAN

CHILD PROTECTION COURT EIGHTH REGION NORTH (GAINESVILLE)

Judge Vaughan and her team integrated phased family service plans into the DFPS Family Service Plan to support families in Wise County in completing services in a structured manner. This project piloted using service plans in a focused manner to help parents stay less overwhelmed and move families towards unsupervised visitation and reunification more quickly and permanently. In addition to the phased service plans, the team created parent notebooks for parents to be able to have all their case information in one place. Additionally, recognizing that parents are often nervous when they enter the courtroom, the team worked to strengthen engagement and support for families as they work their phased service plans.

“Empowering parents making it a more cohesive program so it’s not an us vs. them mentality.”

SUCCESSES

- + **Collaboration created a village for families.** This project has led to very strong teamwork and collaboration among those in the courtroom and involved in these families’ cases. This dynamic has created a community for parents and their children.
- + **Perseverance shifted the courtroom culture.** The team understood throughout the project that transforming from an adversarial space to a collaborative environment helps establish the bottom line of supporting families. The team was able to apply trauma-informed practices to check-in with each other and support other team members.
- + **Celebrating success keeps parents encouraged.** In addition to providing structure and guidance, phased plans offer check points to celebrate and encourage parents at the end of different stages that normal family plans don’t do.

LOOKING AHEAD

- + Judge Vaughan and her court team plan on expanding this project and implementing phased service plans in the other counties she presides over. The team is also continuing to discuss the efficacy of plans while adjusting the process to apply to more families and assess the impact of the plans through updates to the Child Protection Case Management System that allow the court to track progress of families through the phases.

“This is a top-down project, if the judge was not treating people with dignity and respect, this would not be happening. She models how we should be treating all these people.”

SHARED LEARNING AND PEER SUPPORT

Throughout the project, cohort convenings were held that were intended to provide an opportunity for shared learning and peer support across the cohort. At each convening, court teams were given an opportunity to share information about their projects, gain new information on ways to become trauma-informed, and connect with each other to discuss challenges and opportunities and celebrate successes.

1st Convening *April 2022*

The first trauma-informed court convening marked the start of the project and established a shared understanding of what it means to be trauma-informed. The goals for this convening were:

Refresh participants' understanding of what it means to be trauma-informed using the definition adopted by the SCTIC and published in the Blueprint.

Practice identifying trauma and opportunities to be trauma-informed in different stages of a case.

Discuss strengths and develop preliminary opportunities for improvement within the court.

During the convening, participants heard from Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI®) trainers on what being trauma-informed is and how to recognize trauma and heard from the advisory judges on how they implemented trauma-informed practices in their courtrooms.

2nd Convening *September 2022*

The second cohort convening provided the courts an opportunity to share their project updates and discuss ways to overcome the challenges of being trauma-informed in the courtroom. The objectives of this meeting were:

Develop awareness of ways to overcome challenges to being trauma-informed in an adversarial setting.

Learn tools to center the voice of the child and family in decision making.

Develop cross court information sharing and learning among cohort members.

Participants heard from Judge Aurora Martinez Jones, 126th district court, and Jacquelyn Wilson, Staff Attorney in the Office of Parental Representation*, both from Travis County. These voices shared learnings for the project teams to consider in their own work and gave first-hand knowledge and experiences from the Travis County Model Court in developing a trauma-informed courtroom. Participants also received training on the Texas Permanency Outcomes Project (TXPOP) practice model, including tools to center the voice of the child and family in decision making.

3rd Convening *April 2023*

The third cohort convening focused on how to sustain the momentum on the path to becoming trauma-informed. The learning objectives for the court teams in this convening were:

Develop an understanding of ways to sustain trauma-informed practices in the courtroom in a long-term approach.

Develop cross court information sharing and learning among cohort members.

Participants heard from Chief Justice Darlene Byrne on growing and sustaining trauma-informed court practice. Following the presentation was a panel discussion, including panelists from several courts, county offices, CASA, and CPS, to discuss the role of the court teams in sustaining this work. This gathering was a continuation of cross court collaboration and knowledge sharing and helped support long-term success for these projects.

4th Convening *August 2023*

The final cohort convening recognized and celebrated the work of the court teams and their journey of becoming trauma-informed. This meeting highlighted the successes, key wins and lessons learned, and next steps for each project, by meeting these objectives:

Share information about the implementation and impact of their projects and reflect on their personal experiences throughout this trauma-informed process.

Learn about the Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences (HOPE) initiative and how positive childhood experiences drive healthy development and mitigate the effects of adverse childhood experiences.

Peer-to-peer knowledge exchange related to opportunities and challenges associated with implementing trauma-informed courts from role-specific perspectives.

Each court team shared their plans to sustain this work and to keep expanding trauma-informed practices.


*The titles of the professionals names are those at the time of the publication.



CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTATION FOR FUTURE EFFORTS

While the accomplishments of these project teams were significant, their efforts were not without challenges. The teams faced obstacles early on, such as scheduling conflicts, uncertainty due to election cycles, funding for resources and materials, setting expectations, and maintaining progress. The project teams shared some additional challenges encountered during this collaboration, summarized below, for future consideration by courts or other professionals that are working to advance a trauma-informed child welfare system.

- 1 A paradigm shift is needed, and change is hard. Families would benefit from a more compassionate, trauma-informed child welfare system but getting there is no easy feat.
- 2 The system is not moving together or at the same pace. Trauma-informed practices are not being used in every court and with the pace and workloads in which we work, people can get overwhelmed and discouraged.
- 3 Change takes time, perseverance, and collaboration. Finding times that worked for most to offer training was difficult and each county comes with its own unique challenges. It's a commitment to keep momentum.
- 4 Some changes, such as phased plans, require more engagement from the caseworkers and other professionals. Acknowledging upfront that this work will ultimately support better outcomes is not always possible or easy to prioritize.
- 5 Keeping families engaged is a continuous effort. If parents lose trust at an early stage, they may not engage in the process.
- 6 Parents come in nervous and often guarded and it is often not easy to build, and keep, their trust.
- 7 The lack of availability and access to services, often due to transportation or limited resources in rural areas, can create delays in a family's case. This can cause discouragement, and it is important for the court teams to take this into consideration.


 The work of all four courts paves the way for future efforts to support better safety, permanency, and well-being in the Texas court system. Whether it be replicating one of the projects that the courts implemented or using the lessons learned as a starting point for the creation of a whole new idea, we hope this report inspires court teams across Texas to create a trauma-informed environment that focus on the needs of the children and families they serve. If you would like further information about the projects described in this report or ways to become trauma-informed, please contact info@tacfs.org.