



**Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act
Report of the Child Abuse and Neglect Advisory Committee
Citizen Review Panel
May 2025**

Background

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) mandates the establishment of citizen review panels (CRP) to examine child protective services policies and procedures. CRPs may also review specific child protective services cases to evaluate key concerns such as the Child Protective Services (CPS) programs' compliance with the State Plan, coordination with Title IV-E foster care and adoption programs, child fatalities and near fatalities, as well as other concerns the panel considers important to the CPS program. This report serves as the annual review from the Child Abuse and Neglect Committee of the Family and Children's Trust Fund (FACT), one of Virginia's three citizen review panels.¹

The Family and Children's Trust Fund (FACT) Board was established by the Virginia General Assembly in 1986 through enactment of § 63.2-2102 of the Code of Virginia. Created as a public-private partnership with the capacity to raise funds for family-serving programs,

¹ Pursuant to sections 106(c)(4)(A)(i) and (ii) of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), each panel must evaluate the extent to which the State is fulfilling its child protection responsibilities in accordance with its CAPTA State plan by: (1) examining the policies, procedures and practices of State and local child protection agencies, and (2) reviewing specific cases, where appropriate. In addition, consistent with section 106(c)(4)(A)(iii) of CAPTA, a panel may examine other criteria that it considers important to ensure the protection of children, including the extent to which the State and local CPS system is coordinated with the title IV-E foster care and adoption assistance programs of the Social Security Act. This provision also authorizes the panels to review the child fatalities and near fatalities in the State.
https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cwpm/public_html/programs/cb/laws_policies/laws/cwpm/policy_dsp_pf.jsp?citID=70

the FACT Board has the stated mission to amplify community programs and initiatives focused on the prevention and treatment of family violence and the protection of children through funding and awareness. The vision of the Board is a world in which no one in Virginia experiences family violence and all children are safe. FACT defines family violence to include child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and elder abuse and neglect. Through its trust fund, supported by donations from a variety of sources, the FACT Board provides grants to financially support programs that serve Virginia families throughout the Commonwealth.

The FACT Board is governed by a 15-member Board of Trustees who are appointed by the Governor (six members), the Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates (five members), and the Virginia Senate Committee on Rules (four members). The Board meets quarterly and members serve a maximum of two four-year terms. The Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS or the Department) serves as an ex officio member of the Board. In 2012, the Governor's Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect (GAB) was moved under the purview of the FACT Board, with the citizen review panel functions of the GAB being assumed by the Child Abuse and Neglect (CAN) Committee established by the FACT Board at that time. The CAN Committee meets quarterly.

The CAN Committee appreciates the response sent by Shannon Hartung, VDSS Child Protective Services Program Manager, on October 10, 2024. VDSS addressed each of the three areas of concern the CAN Committee submitted and the FACT Board adopted in March of 2024. This year, CAN Committee members will continue their focus on these three issues. Additional context for each area is provided below.

Over the past year, CAN Committee members augmented their discussions on these three issues with information from the 2024 Annual Report of the Children's Ombudsman²; with the Virginia Department of Social Services 2024 report on Child Maltreatment Death

² <https://www.oco.virginia.gov/reports/>

Investigations³; and with updates from several VDSS staff members on various components of their work. Each has contributed to CAN Committee members' understanding of the challenges and issues discussed below.

The Ongoing Need for Empirical Data

The CAN Committee meets four times each year and devotes part of each meeting to updates from Department Staff on issues identified in these reports. Over the course of the next year, we ask the Department to provide updates on Family First implementation at two of those meetings, on child death and fatality review findings and recommendations at one meeting, and on the health and capacity of Virginia's child welfare workforce at one meeting. This is the same as our 2024 request.

Going forward, we want to work with VDSS in three other ways, all ultimately for the purpose of improving child welfare policies and practices in Virginia. We think of these as cross-cutting threads that influence all concerns outlined in this report. First, we ask that existing data collected continue to be presented to the Committee, such as local department and call center staffing, hotline response, and reports from child death reviews. Second, we ask that more comprehensive data be presented that includes outcomes, impacts, and implications of policy and practice for child safety and well-being. We are particularly interested in outcome data with regards to Family First implementation and helping to identify appropriate outcome measures and goals. Finally, we request assistance with finding ways to learn about what's happening in local communities and departments in each of these areas. What can we learn from those who work directly with children and families?

1. In-Home Services and Family First implementation.

³ https://www.dss.virginia.gov/geninfo/reports/children/cps/all_other.cgi

Implemented in July of 2021, Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) is a relatively new federal law that prioritizes keeping children who are adjudicated as at risk for abuse and/or neglect safely at home with family, with kin and community, or with foster care as a placement of last resort. Federal funding is available to support these services. Over the past few years, VDSS has continued to implement federally mandated FFPSA through the development of policy, guidance, and training, as well as in discussions with local departments. Members of the CAN Committee have discussed this implementation with members of the Department on a regular basis. In addition, the 2024 Annual Report from the Office of the Children's Ombudsman offers several insights into and recommendations to improve the implementation of FFPSA in Virginia.

Virginia is now four years into this implementation process. We have learned that the infrastructure for supporting children and their caregivers under this new policy is not fully in place to meet the existing needs in all communities, and that many localities struggle to cultivate these resources for families. Virginia's communities are still working to identify and build a network of FFPSA allowable evidence-based services that are effective, robust, and timely in their response to families who are referred for these services.

This year, we ask the Department continue to provide CAN Committee members with information and data that describes (1) the number of child abuse and neglect cases resulting in in-home services, in placement with kin or kith, and in placement in foster care; (2) the status of and progress in developing appropriate evidence based services in Virginia communities; (3) information on the average timeline from case opening to case closing; and, (4) any measures available for assessing long term stability and safety for the child. How does this data compare to similar measures prior to the implementation of FFPSA?

To complement this big picture providing data trends, a subcommittee of the CAN Committee will review a sample of OASIS records of individual cases to learn about how FFPSA is implemented in the lives of children and their families. It is important for the group to understand how individual case work proceeds across the state. We expect that

Virginia communities vary in their service capacity and resources and want to read and hear about specific cases from several localities.

2. Recruitment, compensation, and retention of child welfare professionals and the child abuse and neglect hotline staff.

CAN Committee members support VDSS' efforts to strengthen and support the child protection labor force in Virginia. We believe that a fully responsive child protection system needs case workers who are trained for the work, receive salaries and benefits appropriate to the education and skills required to undertake this difficult and stressful work, and a strong sense that their efforts on behalf of the children and families they work with is understood and valued by their community. The Department's Office of Trauma and Resilience Policy has updated the CAN Committee on its efforts to develop tools and resources to support child protection workers in Virginia.

But there is still much to be done to build this capacity in Virginia. As Department staff has reported to us, many local departments of social services in Virginia continue to be short-staffed, even when there are open positions and funding available for the positions. There are problems with high turnover, burnout, low pay, and low morale among child protection employees and, as a result, communities cannot fully respond to child safety needs in their localities. While data on the CPS Hotline provided to CAN Committee members this past year shows that the Department continues to make significant progress in reducing wait times and dropped calls, too many calls to help children who may be in danger are still not being answered due to staffing shortages.

CAN Committee members ask that we continue this conversation in the coming year. Data and information provided will help the Committee and the FACT Board to advocate and educate for additional funding and resources as appropriate. Are there standards for child protection caseloads that spell out how many cases a worker can carry for optimal outcomes? What is the ideal and what is the reality? How many positions would it require and in which communities to meet recommended caseload standards?

3. Regional child death review teams.

There are five regional child fatality review teams in Virginia. The teams may review cases where the decedent child or family was known to a local department and when the death was investigated for suspicion of abuse and neglect. The teams collect case level data and generate recommendations based on trends that they see in these cases; this information is collated in an annual statewide report by the Department.

Staff from the Department have described changes to the organization, process, and efforts of these teams in the last year. While these changes are designed to create more systematic and consistent fatality reviews across the state, they will result in fewer cases being reviewed regionally than in previous years. We look forward to hearing about how these changes improve this work, seeing the data, and reviewing recommendations. For our own purposes, CAN Committee members want to use this information, along with that provided by the Virginia Office of the Children's Ombudsman, to consider new insights into the treatment and prevention of child abuse and fatalities.

In the coming year, a subcommittee of the CAN Committee will review OASIS records in some of these child death cases to understand risk factors and potential areas for interventions. Every year, there are continued reports of infant deaths, many of them sleep-related, where parents, caregivers, or both, have substance use disorders and cannot safely care for their children. Like so many other states in the nation, substance exposure and use continues at epidemic levels.

Conclusion: A Confluence of Concerns for Children and Families at Risk

As CAN Committee met and discussed issues associated with child protection and safety in Virginia over the past year, three overarching factors and circumstances continue to be of profound concern to us. Taken together, these concerns present a crisis facing Virginia's Child Welfare System. They include the following:

- The Federal Policy of FFPSA is focused on preventing out-of-home placements for children who are abused and/or neglected, instead keeping children in their home with their parents or placing them with other caregivers who are kin/kith. The goal of this legislation is to increase the use of in-home services to stabilize the children and families with support from local CPS workers and other FFPSA Approved Evidence Based Program services, such as Multisystemic Therapy or Parent-Child Interaction Therapy. While the intent of this legislation is positive there continues to be concern about the lack of available data related to the overall safety and welfare of the children involved in these cases. Specifically, it is unclear how success is being measured for these children outside of achieving the overall goal of keeping them with their parents or with kin/kith.
- While the absence of substantial outcome data related to the health and welfare of children involved with child welfare systems is relevant across all states, the issue is further compromised in Virginia because of the antiquated Child Welfare Information System (CWIS), OASIS, currently in use. Years after the funding was secured to update the system, the Department still does not have a contract for a new system. The ability to accurately measure outcomes related to practices in the field are central to developing effective training, policies and laws that are essential to keeping a child safe, healthy, and with their families.
- Lastly, significant workforce challenges continue to hamper response efforts in many local departments of social services. Long after COVID-19 impacted this work, local departments continue to struggle to hire and retain child protection workers to meet the needs of children and families. The work is emotionally difficult and these workers are underpaid. Staff report that many front line workers suffer from secondary trauma responses including burnout and feeling overwhelmed. This is happening in Virginia and in many other states. A comprehensive solution is complicated and involves improving social-ecological systems across the prevention spectrum, but this is a factor that greatly contributes to this crisis facing effective responses to abused and neglected children in Virginia.

Like our colleagues at the State and Local Departments of Social Services, CAN Committee members worry about the safety and well-being of children in the face of these challenges, and wonder how long it will take for a comprehensive, fully protective child welfare system to be implemented in Virginia.

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Thank you for engaging with the CAN Committee in this effort. We recognize and appreciate the efforts made by the Virginia Department of Social Services to build and support a strong child protection system in Virginia, and are aware of the difficult work carried out by local departments of social services around the state. We look forward to working with you on these issues and concerns in the coming year.