

---

# **African American Child and Family Well-Being Advisory Council 2025 Legislative Report**

Jan. 1, 2026

---

This report was prepared by Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families staff on behalf of the African American Child and Family Well-being Advisory Council. For more information, contact:

Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF)  
Child Safety and Permanency Administration  
444 Lafayette Road N  
St. Paul, MN 55155  
(651) 431-4660  
[dcyf.child.safety-permanency@state.mn.us](mailto:dcyf.child.safety-permanency@state.mn.us)

# ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORT 2025

## Table of Contents

**Enacting Legislation ..... 4**

**I.      Introductory letter from the chair ..... 4**

**II.     Establishment of the Council ..... 5**

    A.   Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionality Act (MAAFPCWDA) legislation establishing the Council ..... 5

    B.   How the council differs from the MAAFPCWDA Statewide Work Group and the African American Child and Family Well-being Unit ..... 5

    C.   Vision and purpose of the African American Child and Family Well-Being Advisory Council ..... 6

    D.   Council members and unit staff..... 7

**III.    African American Child and Family Well-Being Council foundation and structure ..... 8**

    A.   Council launch and meeting schedule ..... 8

    B.   Presentations and foundational work ..... 9

    C.   Community perspective: Insights from within ..... 10

    D.   MAAFPCWDA: Why this matters ..... 11

**IV.    African American Child and Family Well-Being Advisory Council subcommittees and work plan ..... 15**

    A.   Executive Committee ..... 15

    B.   Stakeholder Engagement and Public Messaging Subcommittee ..... 16

    C.   Child Welfare Outcomes Subcommittee..... 17

**V.     African American Child and Family Well-Being Advisory Council request for support..... 19**

**VI.    Conclusion: Historic opportunity to lead transformation and trailblaze change ..... 20**

# Enacting Legislation

The enacting legislation that informs this report is from [Laws 2024, chapter 117](#).

Sec. 11. [260.691] AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILD WELL-BEING ADVISORY COUNCIL.

Subdivision 1. **Duties.** The African American Child Well-Being Advisory Council must:

(1) review annual reports related to African American children involved in the child welfare system. These reports may include but are not limited to the maltreatment, out-of-home placement, and permanency of African American children;

(2) assist with and make recommendations to the commissioner for developing strategies to reduce maltreatment determinations, prevent unnecessary out-of-home placement, promote culturally appropriate foster care and shelter or facility placement decisions and settings for African American children in need of out-of-home placement, ensure timely achievement of permanency, and improve child welfare outcomes for African American children and their families;

(3) review summary reports on targeted case reviews prepared by the commissioner to ensure that responsible social services agencies meet the needs of African American children and their families. Based on data collected from those reviews, the council shall assist the commissioner with developing strategies needed to improve any identified child welfare outcomes, including but not limited to maltreatment, out-of-home placement, and permanency for African American children;

(4) assist the Cultural and Ethnic Communities Leadership Council with making recommendations to the commissioner and the legislature for public policy and statutory changes that specifically consider the needs of African American children and their families involved in the child welfare system;

(5) advise the commissioner on stakeholder engagement strategies and actions that the commissioner and responsible social services agencies may take to improve child welfare outcomes for African American children and their families;

(6) assist the commissioner with developing strategies for public messaging and communication related to racial disproportionality and disparities in child welfare outcomes for African American children and their families;

(7) assist the commissioner with identifying and developing internal and external partnerships to support adequate access to services and resources for African American children and their families, including but not limited to housing assistance, employment assistance, food and nutrition support, health care, child care assistance, and educational support and training; and

(8) assist the commissioner with developing strategies to promote the development of a culturally diverse and representative child welfare workforce in Minnesota that includes professionals who are reflective of the community served and who have been directly impacted by lived experiences within the child welfare system. The council must also assist the commissioner with exploring strategies and partnerships to address education and training needs, hiring, recruitment, retention, and professional advancement practices.

Subd. 2. **Annual report.** By January 1, 2026, and annually thereafter, the council shall report to the chairs and ranking minority members of the legislative committees with jurisdiction over child protection on the council's activities under subdivision 1 and other issues on which the council chooses to report. The report may include recommendations for statutory changes to improve the child protection system and child welfare outcomes for African American children and families.

**EFFECTIVE DATE.** This section is effective July 1, 2024.

## I. Introductory letter from the chair

The African American Child and Family Well-Being Advisory Council is more than a body of advisors — it reflects the richness and resilience of Black communities across Minnesota. We are practitioners, scholars, parents, elders and individuals with lived experience. We carry with us the legacies of our ancestors, who, even when denied access to systems of care, built their own: mutual aid networks, childcare cooperatives and traditions rooted in faith, dignity and collective responsibility. That spirit of creativity and survival still lives in us.

Together, we bring expertise, courage and deep love for Black families. We see what history has too often denied: that Black families are whole, brilliant and capable. Where others pathologized, we celebrate. Where others saw weakness, we honor strength. We come from a legacy of people who have always taken care of our own, even when systems denied Black families dignity and support. This Council continues that legacy, determined to make visible the resilience, determination and brilliance of Black families in Minnesota.

Our vision is big because the times demand nothing less. We want a state and a nation where Black families are not pathologized but celebrated, where children are safe because families are whole, where services heal rather than surveil, and where the measure of success is intergenerational joy, not intergenerational harm.

We believe in the power of this work and we believe in the families we serve. Black families cannot and will not fail because we will not let them. The choices we make today will shape generations to come. To Minnesota's leaders: the question before you is not whether change is possible, but whether you have the courage to act. History will judge this moment. Let it judge us as bold, just and unafraid. Let Minnesota be remembered not for its [paradox](#) of progress and inequity, but for its courage to transform. The time is now — and we will not turn back.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Joan Blakey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr. Joan Blakey, PhD, MSW, LGSW

Chair, African American Child and Family Well-Being Advisory Council

## II. Establishment of the Council

### A. Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionality Act (MAAFPCWDA) legislation establishing the Council

In 2024, the Minnesota Legislature passed the [Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionality Act \(MAAFPCWDA\)](#). This landmark legislation was designed to address and mitigate the systemic challenges African American families face within the state's child welfare system.

The Act reflects the urgent need to reduce the disproportionate rates at which African American children are reported for maltreatment, placed in foster care or experience long-term instability. At its core, MAAFPCWDA emphasizes the importance of keeping families together, reducing unnecessary removals and providing the supports needed for children to thrive within their families and communities. It also acknowledges and seeks to redress the deep-rooted interpersonal, racial and intergenerational trauma that contributes to racial disparities in child welfare outcomes.

A cornerstone of the legislation is the creation of the African American Child Well-Being Advisory Council. The council was established in statute to serve as a high-level advisory body to the commissioner of human services. Its duties include:

- Reviewing annual reports related to African American children involved in the child welfare system, including data on maltreatment, out-of-home placements and permanency outcomes
- Recommending strategies to reduce maltreatment determinations, prevent unnecessary removals, promote culturally appropriate foster care and placement settings, and ensure timely permanency
- Monitoring agency compliance by reviewing targeted case reviews and developing strategies to improve outcomes when disparities are identified
- Guiding stakeholder engagement and public messaging to improve trust, transparency and communication with African American families and communities
- Supporting partnerships and service coordination to ensure families have access to critical resources such as housing, employment, food and nutrition, health care, childcare and educational supports
- Promoting workforce diversity and cultural representation within Minnesota's child welfare system by advancing strategies for recruitment, training, retention and leadership development.

The council is also required to submit an annual report to the legislature beginning Jan. 1, 2026, detailing its activities, findings and recommendations for improving child welfare outcomes for African American children and families.

### B. How the council differs from the MAAFPCWDA Statewide Work Group and the African American Child and Family Well-being Unit

While the African American Child Well-Being Advisory Council is a cornerstone of MAAFPCWDA, it is important to distinguish its role from the other structures established under the Act. The Council serves as a permanent, statutory body tasked with providing high-level oversight, policy guidance and accountability. In contrast, the

African American Child and Family Well-being Unit is the operational and compliance arm within the Department of Children, Youth, and Families, and is responsible for technical assistance, data monitoring and direct implementation. The MAAFPCWDA Statewide Work Group is a temporary body established specifically to guide the Act's phase-in process, ensuring successful implementation in Hennepin and Ramsey Counties before statewide rollout. Together, these three entities create a layered system of accountability, technical execution and transitional oversight, but they differ significantly in scope, permanence and purpose.

## 1. African American Child and Family Well-being Unit

- **Nature:** Permanent, operational unit housed within the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families
- **Purpose:** Serves as the implementation and compliance arm of the Act. Provides technical assistance to counties, conducts case reviews, monitors data, administers family preservation grants and develops cultural competency training
- **Key role:** Day-to-day execution, technical support and monitoring of MAAFPCWDA across counties.

## 2. MAAFPCWDA Statewide Work Group

- **Nature:** Temporary, cross-sector group established for the phase-in period (2025–2027)
- **Purpose:** Oversees and evaluates the rollout of MAAFPCWDA in Hennepin and Ramsey Counties before statewide expansion; it provides cost estimates, identifies statutory adjustments and develops best practices for implementation
- **Membership:** County administrators, county attorneys, community organizations and Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Children, Youth, and Families staff.
- **Key Role:** Guides transitional implementation and informs statewide rollout; sunsets once the law is fully operational in 2027.

## C. Vision and purpose of the African American Child and Family Well-Being Advisory Council

### 1. Vision

We declare a future where Minnesota leads the nation by transforming child welfare into a system where Black families are not broken by involvement but rebuilt, equipped with the resources to thrive and empowered to create boundless possibilities.

### 2. Purpose

The African American Child and Family Well-Being Advisory Council (AACFWBAC) exists to help ensure Minnesota's child welfare system protects and sustains the well-being of Black families and communities. The Council advises the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families' commissioner, partners with the African American Child and Family Well-being Unit and the MAAFPCWDA Statewide Work Group to elevate community wisdom, dismantle systemic racism and advance equity-driven strategies that empower families and communities to thrive across generations.

### 3. Key goals of the Council

1. **Preserve and strengthen families:** Promote efforts for Black families to remain whole by prioritizing family and community preservation, providing universal access to culturally affirming services and resources, and empowering families to thrive.
2. **Champion systemic change:** Actively work to eliminate structural racism across all facets of child welfare by integrating equity, cultural knowledge and healing-centered approaches into every policy, program and decision-making process. Ensure that policy decisions reflect a commitment to cultural responsiveness, family preservation and community wisdom.
3. **Foster community power:** Partner authentically with families, parents (with an emphasis on fathers), kinship caregivers, youth and community organizations to build trust, shift decision-making power and amplify accountability to the communities most impacted.
4. **Shift narratives:** Identify, support and recommend culturally rooted public messaging that celebrates Black families, challenges deficit-based narratives and builds public will to invest in thriving futures Black families deserve.
5. **Elevate accountability and impact:** Support and co-create additional methods for monitoring outcomes, evaluating progress and recommending systemic transformations that will hold agencies and institutions accountable while positioning Minnesota as a national trailblazer in redefining child welfare for Black families.
6. **Promote responsiveness:** Ensure Minnesota's child welfare system remains actively responsive to the evolving needs, voices and aspirations of Black families with the understanding and emphasis that this is more than policy; it's a declaration of dignity, belonging and possibility.

## D. Council members and unit staff

### 1. Council members

#### Council leadership and executive committee

- **Dr. Joan Blakey**, director, University of Minnesota (chair, executive committee)
- **Lynn Lewis**, CEO, Family Village Refuge (chair, stakeholder subcommittee)
- **Jessica Rogers**, CEO, Connections to Independence (C2I) (chair, child welfare outcomes subcommittee)
- **Jonie Cannon**, director, Urban League of Twin Cities
- **Cindy Devonish**, community engagement manager, City of Brooklyn Park (lived experience)

#### Community and self-representing members

- **Nashauna Johnson-Lenoir**, CEO, Journe Project (lived experience)
- **Yolande Lee**, Council for Minnesotans of African Heritage
- **Ann Hill**, Office of Ombudsperson for Families
- **Kimii Porter**, probation officer, Hennepin County
- **Huda Yusuf**, community advocate



- **Tenelle Thomas**, community advocate and lived experience
- **Carol Washington**, director of education and community engagement programs
- **Titi Russell**, social worker, Washington County

## 2. African American Child and Family Well-being Unit and the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families representation

### Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families staff who support the work of the Council and MAAFCWDA

- **Susan McPherson, MSW**, consultant, African American Child and Family Well-Being Advisory Council, Child Safety and Permanency Administration
- **Devon Gilchrist, MSW, LGSW, CAPSW, MALM**, supervisor, African American Child and Family Well-being Unit, Child Safety and Permanency Administration
- **Michelle D. Seymore**, director of foster care and permanency, Child Safety and Permanency Administration
- **Windy Ross**, director of training and prevention, Child Safety and Permanency Administration
- **Naomi Thyden, Ph.D.**, research consultant, Child Safety and Permanency Administration
- **Ashley Aguy, MSW, LGSW**, MAAFCWDA implementation coordinator and Statewide Work Group lead, Child Safety and Permanency Administration.

## III. African American Child and Family Well-Being Council foundation and structure

### A. Council launch and meeting schedule

Council members were formally notified of their selection in February 2023, marking the beginning of this historic effort to center African American families in child welfare decision-making. The official launch of the African American Child Well-Being Advisory Council took place on March 28, 2023, at the University of Minnesota's Urban Research and Outreach-Engagement Center (UROC). This inaugural gathering brought together members with child welfare leadership to establish a shared commitment and lay the foundation for the Council's work.

Since April 2023, the Council has met one to three times per month, balancing both virtual and in-person sessions to ensure accessibility and engagement. By summer 2023, a more formalized schedule was established. Meetings were generally held on Tuesdays from 6 to 8 p.m., with in-person meetings occurring on the last Tuesday of each month at 1256 Penn Ave. N. in Minneapolis. Virtual meetings focused on training, problem exploration and strategy development, while in-person meetings emphasized community-building, disparity reduction and solution-focused recommendations.

This cadence of frequent meetings allowed the Council to build momentum quickly, identify pressing issues and establish subcommittees by August 2023. Since then, the Council has continued to meet regularly, sustaining its

role as a key advisory body. Initially, it focused on preventing systemic disparities affecting Black children and families. As of July 2024, it shifted towards the implementation and monitoring of MAAFPCWDA.

## B. Presentations and foundational work

From the beginning, the Council prioritized presentations and learning sessions designed to build a shared foundation of knowledge, context and trust. These early sessions ensured that all members — parents, youth, community leaders and organizational representatives — entered the work with a common understanding of the child welfare system, racial inequities and the responsibilities entrusted to the Council. They also created space for relationship-building and subcommittee formation, setting the groundwork for deeper strategic work.

### Highlights of the presentations and topics that laid this foundation include:

- **March 2023:** Launch of the Council, orientation and introductions.
- **April–June 2023:** Early trainings, including “Change and Implementation” (root cause analysis using the 5 Whys) and “Child Welfare Disparity” (webinar).
- **July–August 2023:** Problem exploration sessions focused on safety, prevention, pre-placement and permanency.
- **Aug. 29, 2023:** Subcommittees formally identified; Council began moving from learning to structured action planning.
- **Fall 2023 – June 2024:** Ongoing sessions addressing:
  - Historical trauma and intergenerational harm in African American families
  - Cultural competency and the role of African American cultural knowledge in child welfare practice
  - Data and disparities in out-of-home placement and permanency outcomes
  - Engagement of kinship caregivers and fathers
  - Compliance and accountability mechanisms.
- **July 2024 –** Preliminary review and execution of responsibilities mandated by the legislative enactment of MAAFPCWDA.
- **August 2024 – October 2025:** Council activities and informational presentations providing insight on procedures, practices, resources and supports:
  - Parent Support Outreach Program (PSOP)
  - Family First Preservation Act
  - African American Child and Family Well-Being Unit: Updates, expansion and restructuring.
  - The Department of Children, Youth, and Families’ Continuous Quality Improvement and data collection process
  - Minnesota’s Office of Foster Youth Ombudsman
  - Hennepin County Outreach and Engagement Program
  - Village Arms (advocacy and community services)
  - New York State Fatherhood Program Model
  - Minnesota State Open Meeting Laws
  - Minnesota Departments of Children, Youth, and Families and Human Services performance management system
  - Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families legislative proposal and action process

- Hennepin and Ramsey Counties’ experiences with phase-in, funding and technical assistance, review of active efforts under MAAFPCWDA and its application in county practice, legislative updates and review of statutory adjustments
- African American Child and Family Well-being Unit: policy and practice updates regarding child safety initiatives:
  - Legislative changes regarding children and fentanyl
  - Community-based response to educational neglect
  - Plans of safe care and prenatal substance exposure.
- Review of Draft RFP for active efforts training
- Preparation of the Council’s first annual report to the legislature (due Jan. 1, 2026)
- Council retreat (groundwork analysis).

Together, these presentations and foundational activities set the stage for the Council’s work. They provided members with a broad array of knowledge, tools and relationships needed to continue their charge: promoting accountability, advancing equity and guiding the implementation of MAAFPCWDA in partnership with families and communities.

## **C. Community perspective: Insights from within**

To ensure recommendations reflect authentic lived experiences, the African American Child and Family Well-Being Advisory Council drew upon the insights of its members and professional experts. These initial efforts centered the voices of families, caregivers, youth and community leaders directly affected by Minnesota’s child welfare system, grounding the Council’s work in the realities of those it aims to serve.

### **1. Systemic challenges**

Over the course of two months, the Council dedicated time to listening deeply to the lived experiences shared by its members, who represented parents with a previous history of involvement in the child welfare system, kinship caregivers, foster youth advocates, community leaders and service providers. These voices illuminated a range of systemic challenges, such as:

- Limited access to culturally specific services
- Unequal treatment across counties
- Barriers to maintaining family connections
- Insufficient engagement of fathers and kin caregivers
- Lack of transparent accountability within agencies
- Bias and inconsistency in reporting and screening practices.

### **2. Themes**

After a comprehensive and thoughtful review of the stories and experiences shared, the Council surfaced several key themes, including:

- The urgent need to reduce disparities and promote family preservation
- A strong call for culturally affirming services and placement options

- Increased investment in culturally grounded prevention and support services
- The importance of clarifying family rights and protections under MAAFPCWDA
- Opportunities to foster genuine collaboration between state agencies and Black communities.

## **D. MAAFPCWDA: Why this matters**

Grounded in preliminary qualitative responses from our internal problem exploration meetings and lived experience listening sessions, Minnesota’s 2022 Child Maltreatment Report, national research on racial disparities in child welfare, the African American Child Well-Being Advisory Council concluded that Black families are often unaware of their rights and rarely perceive their entitlements. Black families deserve a bold declaration: that Minnesota must not only reduce systemic disproportionality and disparities but also build a child welfare system where Black families can remain whole, thrive across generations and create sustainable wellness.

### **1. The right to wholeness**

Black families have the right to remain intact and to be supported in preserving their cultural, emotional and relational bonds.

#### **Why this matters:**

- In 2023, African American/Black children (single race and multiracial) in Minnesota were three times as likely to be in out-of-home care compared to white children. (Sources: Social Service Information System (SSIS), Research and Evaluation Unit, Child Safety and Permanency Administration, Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families, September 2024, and 2023 American Community Survey.)
- Nearly one in 10 Black children will experience placement in their lifetime.
- Families reported that removals often occur before supports are offered, describing the system as “punitive rather than supportive.”
- Children fare better long-term when safely supported in their homes compared to unnecessary removals.

**Council recommendation:** Require counties to exhaust culturally responsive prevention and kinship supports before removal is considered.

### **2. Intergenerational and generational impact**

Black children and families have the right to environments that nurture intergenerational well-being, healing and possibility.

#### **Why this matters:**

- Generational trauma from systemic racism, removals and economic instability continues to harm Black families.
- Unconditional caring, belonging and cultural celebration are protective factors for children.

- Positive cultural identity and intergenerational connection are proven protective factors against maltreatment.

**Council recommendation:** Invest in prevention programs and community spaces that promote cultural pride, celebration and intergenerational connection.

### 3. The right to equity in systems

Black families are entitled to child welfare systems free from bias, disproportionality and systemic racism.

#### Why this matters:

- Black children remain disproportionately reported, investigated and placed in foster care.
- Families describe bias in mandated reporting and unequal treatment across counties.
- Bias in reporting and assessment drives racial disparities and erodes trust.

**Council recommendation:** Train and hold mandated reporters and county staff accountable for bias reduction, with statewide oversight to ensure consistency.

### 4. Voice, dignity and decision

Black families deserve dignity, to be heard, to shape policies and practices that impact them, and to make decisions in their own lives and communities.

#### Why this matters:

- Families have shared that decisions are often made *about* them, not *with* them.
- Published surveys have highlighted calls for more authentic listening, father inclusion and family-led solutions.
- Family engagement improves case outcomes and long-term stability.

**Council recommendation:** The department should establish regular listening sessions, surveys and family advisory councils, ensuring family voice is integrated into policy, case decisions and legislative reforms.

### 5. Culturally grounded placements

Black children should have placements that honor their culture, traditions and identities.

#### Why this matters:

- Culturally specific supports are scarce and difficult to access.
- African American children are less likely to be placed with kin or culturally matched caregivers.
- Culturally affirming services and placements promote safety, permanency and well-being.

**Council recommendation:** Expand culturally specific prevention programs, advance recruitment efforts towards African American foster/kin caregivers and require cultural competence in service provision.

## 6. Transparency and accountability

Black families should have information about their rights and protections so they can hold institutions accountable.

### Why this matters:

- Families often do not know their rights under MAAFPCWDA or how to file grievances.
- Families are subjected to inconsistent practices and confusion about case processes.
- Transparency and accountability build trust and improve compliance.

**Council recommendation:** Develop plain-language rights education, create family-friendly grievance processes and publish annual progress reports on disparities.

## 7. The right to heal

Black children deserve safety, stability and healing supports that address historical and ongoing harms.

### Why this matters:

- Families are limited to untraditional and innovative services such as restorative justice circles, healing spaces and trauma-informed supports.
- Trauma without healing perpetuates cycles of harm and reduces long-term stability.
- Service gaps in respite care and behavioral health persist, especially in rural areas.

**Council recommendation:** Expand access to trauma-informed, culturally specific healing programs and ensure families can access services before crises escalate.

## 8. Flourishing with dignity: Advancing equity for Black families

Black families are entitled to more than mere survival; they deserve the opportunity to thrive. This means equitable access to safe housing, quality education, comprehensive healthcare, affordable childcare, meaningful economic opportunities and vibrant community support systems that affirm their dignity and potential.

### Why this matters:

- Housing, childcare, food and income stability reduce maltreatment and strengthen families.
- Families identified a lack of affordable housing and childcare as major barriers to stability.
- Economic supports prevent family separation and improve child outcomes.

**Council recommendation:** Integrate economic supports into family preservation efforts, expand childcare access, and ensure families can meet their basic needs.

## 9. Empowering Black families: Bridging access

Black families deserve streamlined access to culturally affirming information and resources that support their goals, strengthen their advocacy and reflect their lived experiences.

### Why this matters:

- Black families frequently encounter fragmented systems and barriers to timely, accurate and culturally affirming information.
- Equipping families with streamlined access to resources empowers them to advocate for their needs and fosters community connections that promote long-term stability and healing.
- Equitable access ensures that vital supports, such as housing, education and health care are distributed fairly across families and communities.
- Strengthening relationships among families, service providers and stakeholders improves information-sharing and reinforces cross-sector collaboration.
- Deepened partnerships between grassroots organizations, policymakers and institutional providers build trust and enhance the effectiveness of services delivered to Black families.

**Council recommendation:** Establish a unified, culturally responsive digital platform that serves as a statewide information hub, connecting Black families with community organizations, service providers and key stakeholders. This platform will strengthen collaboration across all child- and family-serving systems while offering timely updates on housing, food access, health care, employment, mentoring, volunteer opportunities and other essential supports. By elevating community assets and fostering cross-sector coordination, the platform will promote equitable access and empower families to navigate resources with confidence and ease.

## 10. Educational equity for Black children

Black children in foster care deserve equitable educational opportunities supported by culturally responsive training for parents, guardians and caregivers that strengthens their capacity to navigate school systems and advocate for children's academic success.

### Why this matters:

- Children in foster care, especially those from racially marginalized communities, are at increased risk for negative educational outcomes due to instability, lack of culturally responsive support, and limited access to accurate information and advocacy. ([Minnesota Social Service Association](#).)
- School systems can be complex and intimidating, with processes like enrollment, IEP meetings, behavioral interventions and resource access requiring informed and confident adult engagement.
- Caregivers who do not share the child's racial or cultural background may struggle to build the cultural competency needed to support the child's identity and educational success.
- Recognizing the deep-rooted ties Black families have with cultural networks, such as churches and community organizations, strengthens educational outcomes by offering trusted support, effective advocacy and culturally responsive crisis intervention.

**Council recommendation:** Deliver culturally rooted training for all caregivers, particularly foster and kinship providers, that equips them to navigate educational systems, advocate for academic services and engage culturally traditional sources of support.

Together, these rights and values represent what Black families in Minnesota deserve. They set the standard by which policies, practices and systems must be measured.

The Council's three-year work plan is designed to move these rights from aspiration to action. Each subcommittee — Executive, Stakeholder Engagement and Public Messaging, and Child Welfare Outcomes — has identified phased objectives that build toward making these rights a lived reality for Black children, families and communities.

## **IV. African American Child and Family Well-Being Advisory Council subcommittees and work plan**

The Council's work plan reflects both the lessons of history and the forthright commitments we are making for the future. Together, these efforts embody our vision: a Minnesota where Black families are whole, thriving and empowered, and where the state leads the nation in transforming child welfare through equity, culturally grounded practice, meaningful services and authentic partnership with families.

The African American Child and Family Well-Being Advisory Council is comprised of three standing subcommittees that structure its work and ensure members can focus on specific areas of responsibility while advancing the Council's broader charge. Each member is required to serve on at least one subcommittee. These subcommittees not only provide structure but also serve as the foundation for the Council's three-year work plan.

This work serves as a declaration of the Council's intentions over the next three years. Each subcommittee has developed phased objectives that move us toward our vision: first by laying the foundations of trust and accountability, then by expanding communication and awareness, and finally by driving systemic transformation.

### **A. Executive Committee**

**Chair:** Dr. Joan Blakey (University of Minnesota-Twin Cities).

The Executive Committee provides leadership and oversight to guide the Council's process and direction. It ensures all activities align with the Council's mission, statutory responsibilities and reporting requirements. This committee steers the overall vision, monitors progress and holds the Council accountable to its bold charge: ensuring that the work remains visionary, effective and true to its purpose of strengthening and preserving Black families.

#### **Members:**

- Jonie Cannon, director, Urban League Twin Cities
- Lynn Lewis, CEO, Family Village Refuge
- Cindy Devonish, engagement manager, City of Brooklyn Park.



Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families support

- Susan McPherson, Child Safety and Permanency Administration, African American Child and Family Well-Being Advisory Council consultant
- Devon Gilchrist, Child Safety and Permanency Administration, African American Child and Family Well-Being Unit supervisor.

### **Year 1: Establishing governance and direction**

*Objective 1: Build council infrastructure and accountability.*

- Establish meeting norms, decision-making processes and communication channels between subcommittees.
- Develop reporting structures for communication with the commissioner, the African American Child and Family Well-being Unit, and the MAAFPCWDA Statewide Work Group.
- Draft and adopt the Council's first multi-year strategic priorities.

### **Year 2: Strengthening oversight and alignment**

*Objective 2: Align council efforts and monitor progress.*

- Review annual reports and outcomes data from the African American Child and Family Well-being Unit.
- Ensure subcommittee recommendations align with Council-wide goals.
- Monitor implementation of Council recommendations and provide mid-course corrections.

### **Year 3: Driving statewide and national influence**

*Objective 3: Position the Council as a model for transformation and possible replication.*

- Oversee publication of the Council's comprehensive legislative report.
- Highlight Minnesota's progress in national forums and create frameworks for replication in other states.
- Set new strategic priorities for the next three-year cycle, grounded in lessons learned and community input.

## **B. Stakeholder Engagement and Public Messaging Subcommittee**

**Chair:** Lynn Lewis (CEO, Family Village Refuge).

This subcommittee ensures that the voices of African American families and communities are not only heard but centered in child welfare policy, practice and communication. Its charge is to strengthen relationships with key stakeholders, build transparency and accountability, and develop culturally responsive public messaging strategies. Through this work, the subcommittee promotes family preservation and advances systemic equity under MAAFPCWDA.

#### **Members:**

- Nashauna Johnson-Lenoir, executive director, Journee Project Inc.
- Cindy Devonish, engagement manager, City of Brooklyn Park

- Joan Blakey, Ph.D., director, University of Minnesota–Twin Cities
- Kimii Porter, Hennepin County Probation Department
- Yolande Lee, Council for Minnesotans of African Heritage.

Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families support

- Susan McPherson, Child Safety and Permanency Administration, African American Child and Family Well-Being Advisory Council consultant.

### **Year 1: Building relationships and foundations**

*Objective 1: Deepen stakeholder engagement.*

*Objective 2: Rebuild community trust.*

- Launch listening sessions with fathers, kin caregivers and grandparents to establish community feedback loops.
- Partner with trusted community leaders to co-develop culturally grounded approaches.
- Host forums acknowledging historical harms and listening to community concerns.

### **Year 2: Expanding communication and awareness**

*Objective 3: Expand public understanding of MAAFPCWDA.*

*Objective 4: Close communication gaps (early stage).*

- Develop accessible, culturally affirming educational materials (fact sheets, videos, FAQs, infographics).
- Host community forums and workshops tailored for families, educators and child welfare professionals.
- Partner with churches, advocacy groups and cultural centers to expand reach.
- Provide training for child welfare staff, educators, healthcare providers and law enforcement.
- Pilot digital tools (website, newsletters, text alerts) and community ambassadors to strengthen outreach.

### **Year 3: Strengthening accountability and coordination**

*Objective 5: Improve interagency communication.*

*Objective 6: Close communication gaps (full implementation).*

- Recommend strategies to improve cross-system coordination so families experience seamless support.
- Expand digital and multimedia strategies (apps, podcasts, interactive tools).
- Establish county-level outreach structures and advisory groups to ensure continuous feedback from families.
- Release regular public progress reports to build transparency and trust.

## **C. Child Welfare Outcomes Subcommittee**

**Chair:** Jessica Rogers (CEO, Connections to Independence, Inc.).

This subcommittee focuses on “practice, policy and procedural” outcomes, promoting accountability to drive meaningful change. It reviews performance measures, tracks progress in reducing disparities and develops

recommendations for systemic improvements. By identifying barriers, analyzing trends and uplifting community wisdom, the subcommittee works to dismantle inequities and ensure that Minnesota's child welfare system protects, strengthens and sustains Black children and families. Its vision is a system where safety, stability and equity are not exceptions but expectations.

#### **Members:**

- Jonie Cannon, director, Urban League Twin Cities
- Carol Washington, director, Family Enhancement Center
- Titi Russell, MSW, Washington County
- Yolande Lee, Council for Minnesotans of African Heritage
- Tenelle Thomas, Umoja, lived experience.

Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families support

- Susan McPherson, Child Safety and Permanency Administration, African American Child and Family Well-Being Advisory Council consultant
- Naomi Thyden, Ph.D., Child Safety and Permanency Administration research consultant

#### **Year 1: Building understanding and baselines**

*Objective 1: Examine maltreatment determinations.*

*Objective 2: Identify barriers to family preservation (early stage).*

- Review statewide and county-level data on maltreatment determinations.
- Host community listening sessions to gather lived experience on reporting and assessments.
- Analyze reporting practices and provide recommendations to reduce bias.
- Begin documenting barriers to family preservation from community input.

#### **Year 2: Strengthening prevention and placement equity**

*Objective 3: Identify barriers to family preservation (deepening work).*

*Objective 4: Strengthen placement equity.*

- Elevate recommendations for culturally responsive prevention services to reduce unnecessary removals.
- Review foster care placement data and recommend improvements in licensing.
- Partner with African American-led organizations to ensure placement processes respect cultural identity.
- Advocate for expanded support to recruit and retain African American foster families.

#### **Year 3: Advancing permanency and systemic change**

*Objective 5: Elevate permanency pathways.*

*Objective 6: Strengthen placement equity (continued).*

- Review permanency outcomes for African American children, highlight systemic barriers and recommend policy adjustments.
- Collect family and kin caregiver input on challenges to achieving permanency.

- Recommend stronger kinship navigator programs and cultural navigator supports.
- Continue monitoring foster care placement practices to ensure cultural competence and responsiveness.
- Publish findings and systemic recommendations in the Council's legislative report.

## V. African American Child and Family Well-Being Advisory Council request for support

To effectively fulfill its mandate and advance the goals of the Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionality Act (MAAFPCWDA), the Council respectfully submits the following requests for consideration. These recommendations are designed to strengthen the Council's infrastructure, enhance its capacity for community engagement and ensure accountability in tracking the law's impact. Each request reflects the Council's commitment to equity, transparency and meaningful collaboration with state partners.

### Request to the Minnesota Legislature

- **Annual reporting alignment:** To align with the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth and Families' fiscal calendar (July 1–June 30), the Council requests that its reporting period reflect this timeframe. This will allow adequate time to compile and submit its annual report by the legislative deadline of Jan. 1, as required under Minnesota law.
- **Community engagement resources:** To fulfill its commitment to community-informed policy, the Council requests funding and support for statewide listening sessions, culturally responsive outreach and public education efforts. These engagements will inform legislative priorities and ensure authentic representation of impacted communities.

### Request to the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families' commissioner

- **Formal partnership and communication protocols:** To ensure efficiency and clarity in our alignment with the department, the Council requests establishing regular, structured meetings between the Council and agency leadership.
- **Training and capacity building:** To strengthen the Council's capacity and deepen members' understanding of Minnesota's child welfare landscape, the Council respectfully requests access to relevant Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families trainings. These should include sessions focused on MAAFPCWDA, child welfare systems, racial equity, trauma-informed practice, active efforts and legislative processes. The Council also seeks inclusion in agency-led professional development opportunities and support in identifying external trainings that align with this council's mission and values.
- **Transparency and public accountability:** To foster trust and uphold integrity with African American communities, the Council urges the department to commit to publishing consistent and transparent updates on its progress toward the goals outlined in MAAFPCWDA legislation. These updates should include clear benchmarks, implementation timelines and any corrective actions taken. Additionally, the Council requests active participation in oversight and evaluation processes to ensure shared accountability and meaningful transparency throughout the implementation journey.
- **Support for community engagement and outreach:** To strengthen community engagement efforts, the Council requests intentional interagency collaboration and inclusion in agency programs conducting

listening sessions, public events and culturally responsive outreach. By working in partnership, agencies can ensure that Council members are actively involved in shaping and participating in initiatives that reflect the lived experiences and needs of African American families across Minnesota.

The Minnesota African American Child and Family Well-Being Advisory Council acts as a voice for families who have long been unheard in our child welfare system. Our requests reflect the urgent need to shift from reactive participation to proactive, community-rooted solutions. We are calling on the Minnesota Legislature and the Department of Children, Youth, and Families' commissioner to equip the Council with the resources and authority necessary to protect Black families, elevate lived experience and ensure MAAFPCWDA delivers on its promise of equity and accountability.

## **VI. Conclusion: Historic opportunity to lead transformation and trailblaze change**

Passing the Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionality Act (MAAFPCWDA) was only the beginning. It created a legal and moral mandate to do what Minnesota — and no other state — has ever done before: keep Black families whole and reimagine and transform child welfare as a system of equity, healing and liberation. But laws alone do not transform lives. That work now rests with the collective courage of legislators, commissioners, administrators, counties and communities.

This is a historic moment. Minnesota can either continue business as usual — a path that has consistently produced racial disparities, intergenerational trauma and historic mistrust — or it can lead the nation by charting a bold new course. That choice requires a profound mindset shift: moving away from a system built on surveillance and punishment toward one rooted in prevention, partnership and community well-being.

This moment also requires an honest reckoning with what has long been called “The Minnesota Paradox.” Minnesota is regularly ranked as one of the best states to live in, yet it simultaneously produces some of the worst outcomes in the nation for Black and Native American children (Myers, 2022). Measured by unemployment, wages, homeownership, incarceration and education, African Americans in Minnesota fare worse than in almost any other state (Myers, 2022). These disparities are not the product of chance or lack of resources, but of policy choices rooted in a history of racial covenants, redlining and the destruction of Black and Indigenous communities such as the Rondo community in St. Paul (Myers, 2022). The paradox is real: Minnesota's progressive reputation coexists with entrenched systemic racism and inequities.

This is not primarily a resource issue; it is a matter of will and motivation. It requires moving away from “niceness” and investing resources more wisely. Title IV-B and IV-E federal reimbursements, prevention dollars through the Family First Prevention Services Act, and state investments in community-based supports are available but remain underutilized, leaving opportunities for prevention and preservation on the table. Too often, counties shoulder the burden of navigating complex funding streams, social service landscapes and other challenges facing families without adequate state investment, oversight, coordination or accountability. The result is disparities from one community to another. Unequal county resources and the absence of strong public-private partnerships further widen the gap, limiting innovation and coordinated support for families.

Minnesota can and must do better. We can no longer accept inequities as inevitable. The state must reallocate existing funds, expand the use of untapped federal resources and invest directly in prevention, preservation and family well-being. But this cannot happen through unfunded mandates or political ploys that distract us from root causes. If the state truly cares about this work, it must support it by investing money, strengthening infrastructure and demanding and documenting accountability.

To make this vision real, Minnesota must approach this work differently. That means investing in what matters most: keeping children safe by keeping families together — and when that is not possible, ensuring that every effort has been made to keep the family whole. It means working with trusted community-based organizations rooted in cultural wisdom and practices that may not meet the standard of “evidence-based” as it has been narrowly defined. It means elevating the voices of families most impacted and removing bureaucratic barriers that too often slow or stifle change. The cost of inaction is staggering — not only in dollars spent on foster care, incarceration, homelessness and lost workforce potential, but in the erosion of community trust and the intergenerational harm we continue to perpetuate if we fail to act.

This will not be easy. It will require shifting perspectives, questioning entrenched practices and resisting the instinct to focus on why transformation “cannot” happen instead of focusing on what is possible. But as Governor Walz noted when signing this Act into law, “Disparities in our child welfare system have persisted for too long. This is a major step toward becoming the best state in the nation for all children” (*The Imprint*, 2024).

Minnesota stands at a pivotal moment, not just to mend a broken child welfare system, but to redefine it. By boldly reimagining child welfare through the lens of equity, cultural healing and community empowerment, Minnesota can lead the nation and establish a transformative model for justice that other states will be compelled to follow. This is not just policy work; it is legacy work. Years from now, we will all be judged by whether we continue business as usual or seize this historic opportunity to build a future where Black children and families thrive.

The African American Child and Family Well-Being Advisory Council stands ready to serve as a bridge between community wisdom and state action. Together, we can ensure that Minnesota not only complies with the letter of this law but fulfills its spirit: reimagining and transforming child welfare into a system of equity, healing and restoration where Black families and communities emerge whole, thriving and empowered.

Now is the time. Black families cannot wait. Children come from families and communities, and we cannot save children without investing in families and communities. Minnesota must decide: we can choose to invest in prevention and supportive services, or we can continue to invest in the destruction of families and communities. The choice is ours.