
Minnesota Citizen Review Panels Annual Report

Reporting Year 2023



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Table of Contents

Minnesota Citizen Review Panels Annual Report Reporting Year 2023.....	1
Table of Contents	0
Overview of Citizen Review Panels.....	1
Chisago County Citizen Review Panel.....	2
County report summary.....	2
Department response	3
Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel.....	3
County report summary.....	3
Department response	7
Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel.....	8
County report summary.....	8
Department response	9
Winona County Citizen Review Panel.....	9
County Report Summary.....	9
Department response	10

Overview of Citizen Review Panels



Mission: To ensure Minnesota's child welfare systems are protecting children and not causing harm.



Vision: Community members are powerful partners in shaping local and statewide child welfare policy and practice.

Citizen Review Panels (panels) are community advisory groups federally mandated under the [Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act \(PL 111-320\)](#) and by [Minnesota Statutes 256.01, subd. 15](#). Panels are comprised of volunteer community members broadly representative of the community in which the panel is established.

Panel members:

- Examine state and local child welfare agency policies and practices to evaluate the extent to which agencies are effectively discharging child protection responsibilities.
- Make policy and practice recommendations for equitable, systemic improvement.

Panels represent a partnership among community members, local child protection agencies and the state child welfare agency. Minnesota has had panels since 1999. Currently, panels exist in Chisago, Hennepin and Ramsey Counties. The Minnesota Department of Human Services would support community member-driven efforts to expand Citizen Review Panels to other areas of the state.

Major structural changes occurred within the Minnesota Department of Human Services (department) since the last application in 2021. Minnesota Gov. Walz approved legislation that created the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF). The Citizen Review Panels will officially transition into the new department in July 2024. Additionally, the department hired a new panel coordinator in June 2023. During the transition, the panels were

staffed by the department's Child Safety and Permanency Division staff. The new panel coordinator implemented Citizen Review Panel operating procedures and open appointment procedures. The panels were advised to follow the [Minnesota Open Appointments Act](#), which prompted the need to develop the procedures including posting open seats on the Minnesota Secretary of State's Office Boards and Commissions website. Recruitment for numerous vacant seats on all three panels occurred during the second half of 2023 and spring of 2024.

This annual report provides a summary of activities and recommendations of each Minnesota panel for calendar year 2023 and the department's corresponding response. Previous [reports](#) are available online.

Chisago County Citizen Review Panel

Mission statement: To facilitate citizen participation and provide opportunities for members of the community to play an integral role in ensuring that federal, state and county child protection systems protect children from abuse and neglect and meet the permanency needs of children.

County report summary

The Chisago County Citizen Review Panel is comprised of five community members. (One member resigned.) The county and department began recruitment processes to fill the two vacant seats. The panel meets bimonthly for two hours in a hybrid model. In June 2023, the panel reviewed and implemented the Citizen Review Panel operating procedures and open appointment procedures. The current members applied for their seats through the Minnesota Secretary of State's Office and were appointed by department Commissioner Harpstead. The appointments were confirmed in March 2023 for three- and four-year terms. Through the implementation process, the panel identified changes needed on the county panel website. These changes will be helpful in streamlining our front-end panel appointment application process. The panel added a new department contact to our team in June 2023. She kept the group focused and facilitated communication of ideas.

The panel's primary focus in 2023 was recruiting and broadening its community scope. The group continued to define the project for the county and invited Taylor Lambrecht from the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA) to its December meeting for a presentation on internet safety/sextortion. Ms. Lambrecht shared many great resources in her presentation that were helpful to the group. The group looks forward to adding new members in 2024 and will continue recruitment efforts until it is at capacity. Capacity was set at seven members per a group vote earlier in 2023.

Lastly, panel members participated in eight maltreatment reconsideration and fatality/near fatality case reviews in 2023. The group was diligent in meeting the mandated timelines for the

review process and all county decisions were upheld. The panel was proud of its members as they had to review some very difficult cases this past year; that process broadened their knowledge of the child protection system.

The panel's recommendation for the department is to continue to support and assist it in new member recruitment and other activities the group feels will be beneficial in 2024.

Department response

The department appreciates the challenging work the Chisago County Citizen Review Panel conducted through mortality reviews and case reconsiderations. The department believes community engagement in child protection practices creates more transparency in addition to providing a valuable lens. The department encourages the panel to continue this collaboration between the county and the community. The content of reviews is often difficult. The department will inquire about support for panel members' post-review including offering debriefing sessions. The department will work towards establishing a process to offer as support to ensure our debriefing support is well established and clearly defined to the panel members that may participate. One option for debriefing sessions could be to offer contract behavioral health professionals to develop a framework and facilitate those sessions. This option would have a cost associated to it which could be paid for using panel grant funds.

The department will continue to support membership recruitment and retention. Recruitment efforts have included working with the assistant commissioner's external communications team in development of a robust plan. Social media, website development, community organization outreach and cross-communication with other state entities, including the Ombudspersons Offices, were implemented. The department will continue to offer staff administrative support (recruitment, resources, funds and information) in the appointment process, procedural structure and grant management.

Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel

Mission statement: As citizen volunteers, we collaborate to understand, communicate and recommend improvement to the child protection systems, as well as engage our communities to ensure the safety and well-being of all our children and families.

County report summary

The Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel met monthly for two hours virtually (except for July and December). The panel is comprised of four members. One member retired from the panel as of January 2024. The panel lost four members.

A learning from 2022-2023 was the apparent lack of clarity and understanding of recruited members regarding the role of the panel and its members. The department remains hopeful about the recruitment process; by the end of 2023, there were several people interested in joining the panel, per the department advisor.

The panel spent much of 2023 on the reorganization and reinvigoration of the panel. It was, and continues to be, an uneven process between recruiting, training, retention and resignations.

The panel experienced some stagnation effect with the retirement and reassignments of the department advisement. Additionally, the panel received legal guidance to follow the [Minnesota Open Appointments Act](#). The change allowed the panels to revamp the Citizen Review Panel processes for greater consistency and administrative oversight as well as restructure work, such as the new application procedures for current members and new recruits during 2023 and into 2024.

The panel will move into 2024 with new leadership and a new member process with recruiting possibilities. The panel will set the foci for 2024 and will enjoy the continuation of the productive relationships of the department advisor and Hennepin County staff.

The panel was without a county department advisor for several months; Hennepin County provided a liaison from the Children and Family Services Division. Additional Hennepin County staff support the panel's partnership in the Collaborative Safety review process. Another active direct appointment is a person from the Office of the Ombudsperson for American Indian Families.

Panel activity summary:

- Held 10 monthly meetings (nine via Microsoft Teams and one in-person graciously hosted by Jill Kehaulani Esch, Esq., State of Minnesota ombudsperson for American Indian Families); each meeting contained updates from the department, Hennepin County staff, Ombudsperson for American Indian Families and members.
- Conducted review of the recruitment process and potential member possibilities; the unknowns of the changing application procedures, legal guidance and policies created uncertainties over several months.
- Adopted the open appointment procedures and the Citizen Review Panel operating procedures over several panel meetings.
- Spent significant time on recruitment and changing processes; the panel explored beyond the prescriptive definitions of panel work, but that exploration did not reach any definitive completion.

- Discussed participation in the National Conference and moved the discussion of hosting for a future year. The panel will use grant funds to send the new chair of the panel to the 2024 national conference in San Diego.
- Panel received the Hennepin County Children and Family Services 2023-2026 Strategic Plan (see copy in addendum) to review in formulating future panel planning and focus
- Made meeting minutes available on the department's new [Citizen Review Panel webpage](#).

Panel foci:

1. Collaborative Safety Model participation: Panel committed to, and participated in, the Hennepin County Collaborative Safety Team.

- a. Cases are chosen to be studied for learnings, using the national model (see descriptive page in addendum), to improve the support and service for children support divisions.
- b. National team and Hennepin County Collaborative Safety Model Team leadership provided two training opportunities for panel members who had not previously participated; plus, a link to a [YouTube video presentation](#) on Collaborative Safety Model.
- c. Panel participated in six review teams.
- d. Panel intends to continue into 2024 with its commitment to partner with the county in the Collaborative Safety Model process.
- e. The Hennepin County panel collaboration with the County Collaborative Safety System is unique to most child protection departments.

2. High need to recruit to increase the panel membership.

- a. Recruitment has been an ongoing challenge and will continue to be into 2024 as the panel adjusts to the loss of five members.
- b. For several months, changing state management of the application process complicated effective recruitment and interview selection.
- c. Local panel recruitment efforts demonstrated the need for more clarity and improvement in the membership job description and the panel's purpose.

Other trainings/participations:

- Federal Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and Minnesota Indian Family Preservation Act (MIFPA) laws, procedures, practice, compliance issues including Hennepin County, and updates were provided by Jill K Esch, Esq., ombudsperson for American Indian Families.

- Trainings and Collaborative Safety case review learnings were provided monthly by members and Kimette Almon of Hennepin County.
- Information, documents and access points trainings were provided by the department and Hennepin County staff.
- Members were regularly invited to participate in the Hennepin County Children and Families Department's new community engagement model in African American and American Indian communities.

Summary:

- The Hennepin County panel reflected on a year of changes and efforts that impacted its ability to meet the expectations of a Citizen Review Panel. The panel continued to work on recruitment of active membership.
- The panel attempted to form work groups with limited success. For the majority of the year, the panel had a cross-section of community citizens from health care, foster youth advocacy, community services, youth services and more.
- Participation in the Collaborative Safety Model County system for learnings from case reviews is ongoing.
- The panel has been, and will continue to, work on reorganizing, per department guidance.

Hennepin County panel recommendations:

- Continue the panel members' participation and partnership with Hennepin County Child and Family Services Department in the Collaborative Safety Model monthly reviews, mappings and learnings processes.
- Continue panel member participation in ongoing training opportunities.
- Continue to support improvements in out-of-home placement, foster care systems and family-serving practices.
- Continue to incorporate changes in reorganization processes per the department and state legislative directives.
- Department should continue to support sharing, cross-communication and opportunities regarding learnings and expertise between Minnesota CRPs.
- Department should continue to support and improve its staff assignment and liaison system for Citizen Review Panels.
- Panel urges the department explore offering or providing education and training in the Collaborative Safety Model to all panels and counties.
- As in 2022, panel urges other panels and their partnerships to explore the use of the successful Collaborative Safety Model; it moves reviews and system service improvements away from the blame/shame review model.

- Panel recommends that the successful Collaborative Safety Model, as used by Hennepin County, be a topic or break-out session at the May 2024 national conference.

Attachments:

1. Collaborative Safety Overview.
2. Trends in Intake, Assessments, Case Management and OHP chart provided by Hennepin County staff.
3. Hennepin County Children and Family Services 2023-2026 Strategic Plan.

Department response

The department is inspired by the perseverance of the Hennepin County Citizen Review Panel. Per panel recommendations, the department responds as follows:

1. The department supports the continuation of the partnership between the panel and Collaborative Safety Model. Themes and lessons from the case reviews should continue to be shared back with the panel. The following counties use the Collaborative Safety Model but without participation of a Citizen Review Panel or on non-near-fatality or fatality cases:
 - Le Sueur
 - Ottertail
 - Western Prairie
 - Faribault
 - Martin
 - Nicollet
 - Blue Earth
 - Dakota (spring)
 - Stearns (fall)
2. The department will continue to share training opportunities with panel members at meetings and via email updates, especially trainings focused on equity, systemic disparities and antiracism efforts.
3. Through the new Hennepin County public dashboard and the department's Social Service Information System (SSIS), data will be shared regarding out-of-home placement, foster care and services. The department looks forward to the project foci in 2024.
4. The department will support the implemented operating procedures and open appointment procedures to ensure panel members are following department legal guidance.
5. The department is planning to coordinate bimonthly meetings with the panel chairs and host an annual CRP retreat for all members to connect in 2024.

6. The department does not foresee any staff changes in 2024. It will continue to employ a full-time position to attend all panel meetings and provide administrative support.
7. The department has reached out to the Child Family Services Quality Improvement Unit (CQI) to inquire how many other counties are using the Collaborative Safety Model.
8. The department has inquired with CQI on the number of counties using the Collaborative Safety Model. In addition, the department has conducted outreach to other counties to share information about Citizen Review Panels to generate interest in expansion. These efforts will continue in 2024.
9. The 2024 National Citizen Review Panel Conference stopped accepting session proposals in December 2023. The department encourages the panel and Hennepin County to submit a proposal for the 2025 national conference. The panel provides grant funding to the county. Travel to present at the conference would be an allowable expense. The department would be happy to provide additional support needed to share their important collaborative effort and model.

Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel

Mission statement: Provide opportunities for citizens to play an integral role in ensuring the child protection system is protecting children from abuse and neglect and ensuring a nurturing home environment.

County report summary

The Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel met until April 2023. The panel is comprised of two community members. Two additional former community members remained involved through a transition period. Currently, there are three recruit applications for the panel. The panel's established meeting schedule is once a month for two hours.

Yearly plan/projects:

The panel will need to increase membership and continue recruitment efforts of potential new members. Members attended several community events to talk about the Citizen Review Panel including the community members' Transforming Systems Together meeting. Recruitment efforts were conducted by Ramsey County staff throughout the summer of 2023 at community events and community meetings on a consistent basis. The staff worked with the communications department in Ramsey County to develop a flyer and information sheet to distribute. The information was shared with department leaders across Ramsey County including: The county attorney's office, Children's Justice Initiative, County Commissioner Community events, Pride Celebrations, Save our Children annual Pow Wow, Community Pow Wow events held at Aims Elementary School last summer and the Juneteenth Celebrations throughout the city.

Another focus included foster child survey development, data collection and collaboration with St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS). Panel members talked with a lobbyist from Ramsey County, the Ramsey County commissioner, a Minnesota senator, a couple of State of Minnesota representatives and three Tribal chairs. This activity was an attempt to start momentum and conversation of a statewide foster child survey.

Members and prospective members attended trainings and workshops. The panel collaborated with Mitchell Hamline's Institute for Transforming Child Protection. On April 22, 2023, a resource fair for kinship caregivers was held for families and foster parents to get information on foster care and resources. Attorneys answered questions and presentations were made. Chair Tonya Long attended all day and recruited two kinship care providers who expressed interest in serving on the panel.

Biweekly meetings were held regarding hosting the annual National Citizen Review Panel Conference in Minnesota. A conference center was secured to host the event. Due to the Capacity Building Center's decision, the Ramsey County panel pause, interpersonal conflict and budgetary restrictions, the department was unable to sponsor the request of \$10,000. The department advisor left the position, and the Capacity Building Center made the decision to not host the 2024 National Citizen Review Panel in Minnesota. A new department coordinator started in June 2023. Significant funding, resources and time have been invested to resolve the conflict in hopes of resuming the panel in Ramsey County in 2024.

Department response

The department values the commitment and time invested by the panel members and Ramsey County to resolve interpersonal conflicts. The department is determined to continue with panel membership recruitment efforts when the panel reconvenes in 2024. The department hired and paid for an outside, neutral consultant to facilitate a restorative meeting on March 8, 2024. The parties participating include the department, Ramsey County staff and panel members. The panel and department goals are to reset the norm, roles and expectations of the panel. The department has continued its support through upper-level management to continue conversations with Ramsey County's new leadership.

Winona County Citizen Review Panel

County Report Summary

The Winona County Citizen Review Panel disbanded at the end of 2022 due to the community panel members' inability to commit to the continuation of the panel. The contract between the department and Winona County was terminated in the summer of 2023.

Department response

The department would like to thank the panel members and Winona County staff for their time served on the panel.