INTERIM JOINT COMMITTEE ON FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

Minutes of the 3rd Meeting of the 2026 Interim

August 19, 2026

Call to Order and Roll Call

The third meeting of the Interim Joint Committee on Families and Children was held on August 19, 2026, at 1:00 PM ET/12:00 PM CT in Room 149 of the Capitol Annex. Senator Danny Carroll, Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

Present were:

Members: Senator Danny Carroll, Co-Chair; Representative Samara Heavrin, Co-Chair; Senators Matthew Deneen, Shelley Funke Frommeyer, Rick Girdler, Amanda Mays Bledsoe, Stephen Meredith, Robby Mills, Reginald L. Thomas, Robin L. Webb, and Gex Williams; and Representatives Tina Bojanowski, Emily Callaway, Mike Clines, Steven Doan, Robert Duvall, Daniel Elliott, Kim Holloway, Kimberly Poore Moser, Michael Sarge Pollock, Felicia Rabourn, Steve Riley, Rachel Roarx, Sarah Stalker, and Nick Wilson.

Guests: Kara Wente, Director, Ohio Department of Children and Youth; Leila Salisbury, Executive Director, The Kentucky Center for Grieving Children and Families, Inc.; Judge Marcus Vanover, Chief Family Court Judge, 28th Judicial Circuit; Judge Elise Spainhour, Family Court, 55th Judicial Circuit; and Judy Russell, School Program Coordinator, The Kentucky Center for Grieving Children and Families, Inc.

LRC Staff: Logan Bush, Ben Payne, Cameron Franey, and Becky Lancaster.

Approval of Minutes

A motion was made by Representative Pollock and seconded by Senator Mills to approve the minutes of the July 20, 2026 meeting. Minutes were approved by voice vote without objection.

Presentation on the Ohio Department of Children and Youth

Kara Wente, Director, Ohio Department of Children and Youth, discussed developing a detailed plan to service and reach families, statutory deadlines, creating a new foundation within the previously set budget, creating shared data and accountability between programs, and the short- and long-term goals for increased positive outcomes.

In response to Chair Carroll, Ms. Wente discussed how the cabinet level agencies in Ohio initially met with a facilitator to evaluate the pillar programs and needs for improvement, creating the system as a department and not a cabinet, the low turnover rate during the transition, other states working on similar changes, the reasons for working with an external firm to establish and achieve initial goals, lessons learned, and actions taken to ensure successful changes.

In response to Senator Thomas, Ms. Wente stated Ohio does not have universal prekindergarten classes and a quality rating and improvement system has been implemented for providers to obtain additional funding.

Discussion on the Kentucky Center for Grieving Children and Families

Leila Salisbury, Executive Director, The Kentucky Center for Grieving Children and Families, Inc., discussed the services and programs offered for family and child grief support, state and county level data on childhood parental bereavement, the child survivor benefit program, percentages of children with stigmatized and complicated parental deaths, peer-reviewed research of nondeath separation or loss, macro-economic studies with an estimate to the overall cost of grief, and ideas for various collaborations.

In response to Representative Roarx, Judy Russell, School Program Coordinator, The Kentucky Center for Grieving Children and Families, Inc., stated the center works with children during the school day but not during core class time.

In response to Representative Moser, Ms. Salisbury stated the center would like to do more longitudinal studies as the number of services offered grows, noting some schools offer reports on student attendance, truancy, and behavioral issues for data analysis, and how the center may use students that have completed the program as peer facilitators in future groups. Ms. Russell stated as kids age, they may choose to participate in the group again as needed.

In response to Representative Callaway, Ms. Salisbury stated urban areas often do not have the same interpersonal community connections as rural areas, and confusion in the Social Security Administration (SSA) benefit description, often causes information to not be shared or used as mush as in rural areas. Ms. Russell stated there is two-year time limit to apply for the SSA benefit.

Discussion on Foster Care Adoptions

Judge Marcus Vanover, Chief Family Court Judge, 28th Judicial Circuit, discussed a parent's fundamental right to their children, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA)

of 1997 creating a permanency timeline, the termination of parental rights (TPR) standards for involuntary termination, the best interest factors and reasonable efforts for the child, the 15-month permanency timeframe to determine grounds for TPR, a judicial sequence of topics to evaluate each case, and the newer pathway for voluntary TPR,

In response to Chair Carroll, Judge Spainhour, Family Court Judge, 55th Judicial Circuit, stated she tries to avoid sending children between parents and foster care as much as possible in the best interests of the child by lengthening home visits. Judge Vanover stated judges also consider the requests of the children and when the child is an infant the court considers if there has been a reasonable time for the parent's improvement and parental bond to the child.

In response to Senator Funke Frommeyer, Judge Spainhour stated the attorney for the Cabinet for Health and Family Services files the documents for TPR, foster parents are allowed into family court regarding the case they are a part of but would need the permission of the judge or the guardian ad litem to speak about the case.

In response to Chair Carroll, Judge Vanover stated there is a standard for notification for foster parents regarding TPR cases, and while foster parents do not have custodial rights to the children prior to adoption, they can give input on the case.

In response to Senator Williams, Judge Spainhour stated if foster parents want to adopt their foster child, the foster parents must go through the state's TPR process, and wait for CHFS to file papers for TPR.

Adjournment

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned.