

TASK FORCE REPORT

June 2026

Lucas County Child Protection Task Force



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Lucas County Child Protection Task Force undertook a comprehensive, multi-phase effort to develop actionable recommendations aimed at strengthening the County's child protection system. Grounded in data, community input, and best practices, the Task Force's work reflects a commitment to building a system that is more equitable, transparent, prevention-oriented, and responsive to the needs of children and families.

Approach and Process

The Task Force followed a structured three-phase process to guide its work. It began by establishing a shared vision, guiding principles, and priority areas informed by data, system review, and lived experience. It then developed draft recommendations through subcommittee work, drawing on national models and focusing on equity and community impact. In the final phase, the Task Force refined and prioritized recommendations based on alignment with priorities, feasibility, and potential impact, resulting in a focused set of actionable strategies.

Throughout all phases, the work was guided by core principles of **equity, transparency, and collaboration**, ensuring the process centered on the lived experiences of families and addressed systemic disparities.

Recommendations

The Task Force identified eight interconnected recommendations designed to function as a cohesive system of reform:

1. Expand community-based visitation and prevention spaces to improve accessibility and reduce stigma.

2. Map Services for Child Maltreatment Prevention and Improve Family Navigation and Resource Access
3. Implement Coordinated Prevention Networks and Post-Reunification Support
4. Deliver Equity Centered Workforce Training and Front Door Practice Reform
5. Embed Lived Experience Leadership Across Governance, Practice, and Accountability
6. Launch Comprehensive Equity-Focused Kinship and Foster Care Recruitment
7. Increase Coordination to Reduce Placement Disruptions and Promote Stability of Foster Youth
8. Reestablish a Lucas County Ombudsman with Public Reporting Authority

The recommendations represent a coordinated strategy for system-wide change rather than isolated improvements. Collectively, these recommendations aim to transform the child protection system by:

- Promoting early intervention and prevention, reducing unnecessary system involvement
- Enhancing decision-making and equity at critical entry points
- Strengthening family engagement and support networks
- Improving coordination across agencies and services
- Increasing accountability and public trust

Successful implementation will require sustained collaboration among county leadership, agencies, community partners, and families with lived experience. By aligning these efforts and building on proven practices, Lucas County is positioned to create a child protection system that prioritizes prevention, supports family stability, and improves outcomes for children, youth, and communities.

VISION AND GUIDING VALUES

The Task Force’s vision is for every family in Lucas County to experience a child protection system that is compassionate, equitable, and responsive. Throughout its work, the Task Force stayed grounded in a clear set of guiding values.

Members made a consistent effort to center equity and the experiences of children and families at key decision points. They prioritized transparency and accountability by working to make the system easier to understand, strengthening oversight, and building public trust. Collaboration was also central to the process, with the Task Force engaging partners across different systems and recognizing that improving outcomes for children and families requires shared responsibility.

The Task Force took a thoughtful and intentional approach to its work. Members prioritized developing well-informed recommendations over moving quickly. They recognized the complexity of the child protection system and the many partners that influence child safety and family well-being. They focused on creating recommendations that address both immediate needs and long-term system change, helping to build a stronger and more responsive system over time.

Task Force Values

Equity: Centering the voices of families, respecting cultural identities, and focusing on prevention over punishment.

Transparency and Accountability: Ensuring that information is shared clearly and consistently, and that community oversight is welcomed.

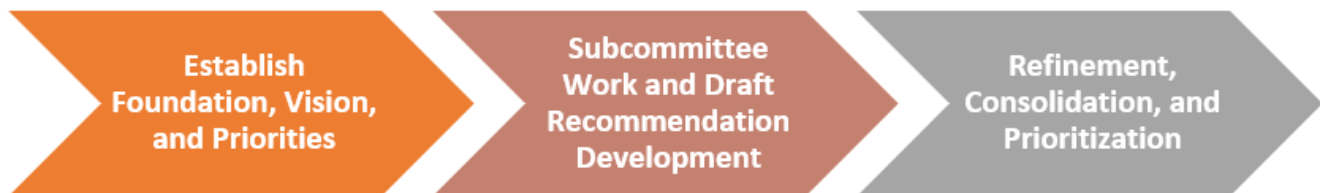
Collaboration: Building strong partnerships across systems to protect children and support families in thriving.

TASK FORCE PROCESS AND APPROACH

The Lucas County Child Protection Task Force developed its recommendations through a structured, multi-phase process (see Exhibit 1) designed to ensure that proposed changes are grounded in data, informed by lived experience, and shaped through collaborative deliberation.

From its launch in 2025 through the completion of this report in 2026, the Task Force followed a deliberate sequence of activities that moved from foundation setting to deep exploration, to consensus-building and prioritization. This approach reflects a shared commitment to designing a child protection system that is not only effective, but also equitable, transparent, and responsive to the needs of children and families in Lucas County.

Phased Work Process



Phase 1: Establish Foundation, Vision, and Priorities

In its initial phase, the Task Force focused on building a strong foundation for its work. This included establishing a shared vision, defining guiding values, and identifying the most critical areas for system improvement.

Key activities during this phase included:

- Reviewing data on child protection outcomes and disparities to understand system performance and equity gaps
- Examining current practices and identifying challenges through structured discussions

- Incorporating lived experience and community insights to inform early thinking
- Reaching consensus on eight strategic priority areas to guide the work moving forward
- This early work emphasized shared understanding, trust building, and alignment, ensuring that all Task Force members had a common foundation before moving into recommendation development.

Phase 2: Subcommittee Work and Draft Recommendation Development

After deciding on priorities, the Task Force transitioned into a more focused phase of work using a subcommittee model. Task Force members chose subcommittees based on their interests and experience. Each subcommittee focused on identifying key challenges and questions related to its topic, reviewing examples and ideas from other places, and developing initial recommendations.

During this phase, the Task Force created draft recommendations across all eight priority areas. Members took part in structured discussions that focused on fairness, transparency, and the impact on the community. They also used ideas and best practices from other counties/states and national models to inform their work. Instead of narrowing ideas too quickly, the group focused on exploring a wide range of options and taking time to fully understand each issue.

The Task Force focused on understanding the root causes of problems rather than just the symptoms. Members worked to better understand how families and youth experience the system before, during, and after involvement. They also looked at where support systems break down, especially during transitions, and explored approaches that promote prevention, strengthen families, and improve long-term outcomes. This approach helped make sure all major systems involved in child protection were considered before narrowing down and prioritizing the final recommendations.

The Task Force used a structured approach, called Gradients of Agreement, to help members agree on ideas, raise concerns, and build support for the recommendations. During this phase, the group moved from broad planning to developing clear, actionable recommendations. They kept the process open and flexible so ideas could be revised as needed.

Phase 3: Finalize Recommendations

With a comprehensive set of draft recommendations developed, the Task Force moved into its final phase: refining, consolidating, and prioritizing draft recommendations to develop a final set of actionable items to move forward.

During this phase, the Task Force worked to refine and narrow its recommendations. Members reviewed the full set of ideas to identify areas of overlap and combine related recommendations where possible. Each recommendation was carefully assessed to determine how well it aligned with the Task Force's priorities, how feasible it would be to implement in Lucas County, and what impact it could have on children, families, and the community.

The Task Force used structured, collaborative approaches to decide which recommendations should move forward. At the same time, members refined the language of each recommendation to ensure it was clear, consistent, and accurately reflected the group's intent. Through this process, the Task Force moved from a broad list of ideas to a focused set of practical, actionable recommendations.

TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Lucas County Child Protection Task Force developed the following recommendations through a multi-phase process that included research, review of current data and practices, and structured input from Task Force members and community partners. These recommendations reflect areas where the County has the opportunity to strengthen prevention, improve system consistency and equity, and better support children and families across the full continuum of care.

Taken together, the recommendations are designed not as isolated actions, but as a connected set of strategies that reinforce one another. They reflect a shift toward a system that:

- **Promotes early support and prevention**, reducing unnecessary system involvement
- **Strengthens decision-making at key entry points**, particularly intake and screening
- **Centers family voice and lived experience** in both practice and system design
- **Improves coordination across agencies and partners**, reducing fragmentation
- **Builds accountability and transparency** to strengthen public trust

While each recommendation addresses a specific aspect of system improvement, they collectively advance a broader goal: creating a child protection system in Lucas County that is **more equitable, more accessible, and more responsive to the needs of the families it serves.**

Recommendation 1: Expand Community-Based Visitation, Engagement, and Prevention Spaces

Expand off-site visitation, family engagement, and early-support opportunities by partnering with trusted community spaces (such as faith communities, libraries, parks, and community centers) to promote accessibility, dignity, and connection. These spaces should be judgment-free, easy to access, designed with family input, and offer supportive services that help families stay connected and feel less alone.

Recommendation 2: Map Services for Child Maltreatment Prevention and Improve Family Navigation and Resource Access

Modernize family service navigation to promote child maltreatment prevention. Conduct countywide service mapping to understand the existing array of services and resources that exist across the county. Develop clear publicly available information and comprehensive resource guides so parents, caregivers, mandated reporters, and community members can easily understand what help is available and how to access it. Improve coordination between systems to better serve families in need, including multiple access points for families in need, warm hand-offs between agencies, and up-to-date information.

Recommendation 3: Implement Coordinated Prevention Networks and Post-Reunification Support

Designate or create a non-CPS lead entity with the authority and funding to build, coordinate, and sustain community-based prevention networks and post-reunification supports. This entity should ensure families have access to trusted, low-barrier supports before and after formal system involvement, including voluntary aftercare services following reunification to support families during high-risk transition periods, reduce re-entry into care, and promote lasting stability. Prevention networks and aftercare supports should provide accessible entry points for families and mandated reporters, strengthen continuity of care across transitions, and prioritize family stability, connection, and long-term well-being.

Recommendation 4: Deliver Equity-Centered Workforce Training and Front-Door Practice Reform

Assess, develop, and deliver experiential, culturally responsive Lucas County Children Services workforce training that is directly connected to improving intake, screening, and early decision making. The revised training should be designed to build cultural humility, trauma responsiveness, and bias-interrupting skills, be co-designed with individuals with lived experience, and be paired with clear practice expectations that strengthen consistency, objectivity, and equity in child protection referrals.

Recommendation 5: Embed Lived Experience Leadership Across Governance, Practice, and Accountability

Embed lived experience across governance, practice, and system learning by strengthening advisory structures and expanding opportunities for meaningful participation and leadership. This includes establishing and sustaining compensated advisory roles for parents, youth, and caregivers; expanding peer mentor and navigator roles within agencies serving children and families; and integrating lived experience into ongoing monitoring, feedback, and system improvement efforts. Incorporate lived experience in the Lucas County Children Services Board of Trustees through formal advisory councils, structured engagement processes, and consistent feedback loops, ensuring lived experience informs decision-making.

Recommendation 6: Launch Comprehensive Equity-Focused Kinship and Foster Care Recruitment

Develop and launch a comprehensive, equity-focused kinship and foster care recruitment strategy that aligns outreach, communications, and community partnerships to expand and diversify caregivers. The strategy should prioritize cultural connections, family voice, and accessible information for prospective caregivers. Recruitment efforts should be inclusive, strength-based, and responsive to community needs, with a focus on supporting placements that align with children's needs and identities, family connections, and community ties.

Recommendation 7: Increase Coordination to Reduce Placement Disruptions and Promote Stability of Foster Youth

Strengthen coordination across child welfare, community partners, and service providers so children and youth in care experience consistent, well aligned supports that reduce avoidable placement changes and promote stability while in care. Short-term respite, caregiver support networks, emergency access to wraparound and behavioral health supports, and cross-agency information sharing agreements are options that may be exported to implement this recommendation.

Recommendation 8: Reestablish a Lucas County Ombudsman with Public Reporting Authority

Reestablish the Children Services Ombudsman role as an independent, collaboratively funded function housed outside of Children Services, with authority to receive, review, and help resolve complaints across the child protection system. The role should include centralized tracking, trend analysis, and regular public reporting to strengthen transparency, accountability, and community trust.



RATIONAL AND PROMISING PRACTICES FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

The Task Force’s recommendations are grounded in a shared vision of a child protection system that is equitable, transparent, prevention-oriented, and centered on the needs and dignity of children and families. Across Ohio and nationally, jurisdictions are increasingly adopting approaches that move beyond a primarily investigative model toward one that emphasizes early support, coordinated services, and shared community responsibility.

To support implementation, the following section provides additional context for each recommendation, including a strengthened rationale and examples of programs, models, and strategies being used across Ohio and nationally. These examples demonstrate that the Task Force’s recommendations are aligned with proven and emerging practices in the child welfare field and offer practical reference points for how these approaches may be adapted and applied in Lucas County.

RECOMMENDATION 1: EXPAND COMMUNITY-BASED VISITATION, ENGAGEMENT, AND PREVENTION SPACES

Rationale

When children are separated from their parents, maintaining strong family connections is one of the most important factors in promoting healing, stability, and successful reunification. Traditional visitation models—often limited to agency settings and rigid schedules—can unintentionally create barriers for families, increase stress, and reinforce stigma.



Expanding visitation and engagement into trusted community settings shifts the experience from one that feels monitored or punitive to one that is

supportive, accessible, and relationship centered. At the same time, these same spaces can serve as entry points for early support, helping families access services before crises escalate. This approach reflects a broader system shift toward normalizing help-seeking and reducing unnecessary system involvement.

Example approaches to consider

- Community-based visitation programs that allow family time in neutral, home-like, or community settings (Strive™ Supervised Visitation and Visit Coaching / Family Time Coaching are identified as “promising” approaches in national evidence reviews)
- Family Resource Center models that combine engagement, parenting support, and connection to community resources (Orange County, California – Families and Communities Together (FaCT), New York City – Family Enrichment Centers (FECs), New York State – Family Resource Center Model)

RECOMMENDATION 2: MAP SERVICES FOR CHILD MALTREATMENT PREVENTION AND IMPROVE FAMILY NAVIGATION AND RESOURCE ACCESS

Rationale

Families often experience the child- and family-serving system as fragmented, difficult to navigate, and inconsistent, particularly when information is outdated or varies across agencies. This fragmentation can delay access to help, increase frustration, and contribute to unnecessary escalation into formal child protection involvement.

By integrating public information, resource guides, service mapping, and coordinated navigation, this recommendation addresses both access and system design. It ensures families and mandated reporters can easily



understand what supports exist and how to access them—while also helping the County identify gaps and improve alignment across systems.

This approach reflects a shift toward a “no wrong door” model, where families can enter the system through multiple pathways and still receive coordinated, timely support.

Example approaches to consider

- 211 and warmline models that connect families to services without requiring CPS involvement (New York State: 211 + HEARS Family Line)
- Countywide service mapping and coordinated referral systems that improve access and reduce duplication (County-Level Coordinated Systems - Ventura County, CA)

RECOMMENDATION 3: IMPLEMENT COORDINATED PREVENTION NETWORKS AND POST-REUNIFICATION SUPPORT

Rationale

Families’ needs don’t end when a case is closed or when reunification occurs. In fact, the period immediately following reunification is often a high-risk transition point, where families may face ongoing challenges without structured support.



This recommendation creates a continuum of support that spans before, during, and after system involvement. By designating a lead entity and strengthening prevention networks, the County can provide early intervention while also ensuring continuity of care for families returning home.

This approach reflects the broader prevention continuum and emphasizes that effective systems must support families long before and long after formal intervention.

Example approaches to consider

- Post-reunification aftercare models that provide coaching, wraparound services, and concrete supports (Orange County, CA – permanency and aftercare supports, Sacramento County, CA – reunification and prevention integration)
- Community-based prevention networks and collaboratives that offer voluntary, early support (New Jersey System of Care provides prevention and aftercare integration)



RECOMMENDATION 4: DELIVER EQUITY CENTERED WORKFORCE TRAINING AND FRONT DOOR PRACTICE REFORM

Rationale

Decisions made at intake and screening—often referred to as the “front door” of the system—have disproportionate influence on whether families become formally involved in child protection. Variability in decision-making, combined with implicit bias and inconsistent interpretation of risk, can contribute to inequitable outcomes.

Training that is disconnected from daily practice has limited impact. The Task Force’s emphasis on assessing and strengthening existing training ensures that the County builds on current efforts while addressing gaps. By linking training directly to intake and screening decisions, and pairing it with clear expectations for practice, this recommendation supports more consistent, equitable, and data-informed decision-making.

This approach aligns with growing national emphasis on embedding equity, trauma responsiveness, and lived experience into both training and practice improvement efforts.

Example approaches to consider

- Ohio START model, which integrates structured screening, training, and peer support into frontline practice
- National training efforts that combine cultural humility, trauma-informed care, and lived-experience-informed facilitation (Parent Partner / Peer Partner Training Models elevated by Casey Family Programs, Cultural Humility Training - Academy for Professional Excellence/CWDS in California)

RECOMMENDATION 5: EMBED LIVED EXPERIENCE LEADERSHIP ACROSS GOVERNANCE, PRACTICE, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Rationale

Individuals with lived experience—parents, youth, and caregivers—bring critical insight into how the child protection system functions in practice. Without their perspectives, systems risk designing policies and processes that do not fully reflect the realities families face.

Embedding lived experience across advisory structures, practice roles, and system learning ensures that input is consistent, meaningful, and actionable, rather than episodic or symbolic. This recommendation also reflects careful consideration of governance structures by emphasizing advisory roles, feedback loops, and practice integration—while aligning with legal and structural considerations.

This approach supports a broader shift toward shared learning, improved trust, and more effective system design.

Example approaches to consider

- Parent advisory councils that inform policy and system improvement (New York City – Rise Parent Leadership Model, San Diego County, CA – Child & Family Strengthening Advisory Board, Georgia – Local County Advisory Boards)
- Peer parent and navigator roles that support families during and after system involvement (Washington State – Parents for Parents (P4P), New York City – Parent Advocacy Initiative, Arizona/Washington - Parent Partner Program)

RECOMMENDATION 6: LAUNCH COMPREHENSIVE EQUITY FOCUSED KINSHIP AND FOSTER CARE RECRUITMENT

Rationale

Children experience better outcomes when they can remain connected to family, culture, and community. Kinship placements and culturally aligned

foster placements are associated with greater stability, reduced trauma, and stronger long-term well-being.

However, recruitment efforts are often fragmented or not sufficiently aligned with the needs of children entering care. This recommendation emphasizes a coordinated, equity-focused approach that aligns outreach, communication, and partnerships to better reflect and support the community being served.

By prioritizing family voice and culturally responsive recruitment, the County can strengthen placement quality—not just placement availability.

Example approaches to consider

- Kin-first recruitment strategies that prioritize identifying and supporting relatives (Pennsylvania – Family Finding (well-known national model, Colorado, Arizona, Wisconsin have Kin Engagement Toolkits)
- Data-driven and community-based recruitment approaches that focus on culturally responsive caregiver engagement (Iowa – Data-Driven Recruitment with Performance Contracts, Nationally – CHAMPS has a national campaign and uses targeted recruitment plans aligned with child demographics)

RECOMMENDATION 7: INCREASE COORDINATION TO REDUCE PLACEMENT DISRUPTIONS AND PROMOTE STABILITY OF FOSTER YOUTH

Rationale

Placement disruptions are often a symptom of misalignment across systems, rather than solely the needs or behaviors of a child or caregiver. When child welfare, schools, behavioral health providers, and community supports operate independently, children and families experience inconsistent expectations and gaps in care.

Strengthening coordination ensures that children and youth in care experience consistent, well-aligned supports, which reduces unnecessary moves and promotes stability. This recommendation reflects the

understanding that stability is not achieved by any single system—but through intentional alignment across partners.

Example approaches to consider

- Cross-system care coordination models that align services and communication across providers (Washington State (County court-based model, Parents for Parents and Wraparound integration, New Jersey Children’s System of Care)

RECOMMENDATION 8: REESTABLISH A COMMUNITY-BASED OMBUDSMAN WITH PUBLIC REPORTING AUTHORITY

Rationale

Accountability is essential to maintaining public trust and ensuring that systems improve over time. Families and community members need a clear, independent pathway to raise concerns and have those concerns addressed fairly and transparently.

Reestablishing an Ombudsman function provides an independent, impartial mechanism to review complaints, identify patterns, and recommend system improvements. By incorporating centralized tracking and public reporting, this recommendation ensures that the system learns from individual concerns and translates them into system-wide accountability and transparency.

This approach aligns with national trends toward strengthening oversight and ensuring systems are responsive to the communities they serve.

Example approaches to consider

- Independent Ombudsman offices that investigate complaints and publish findings and trends (Colorado – Child Protection Ombudsman, Washington – Office of the Family and Children’s Ombuds)

CLOSING

The recommendations outlined in this report represent a meaningful step toward transforming the child protection system in Lucas County into one that is more responsive, more equitable, and more centered on the well-being of children and families. While each recommendation addresses a distinct area for improvement, their collective impact lies in how they work together. Taken together, these recommendations form a **connected system** designed to:

- **Strengthen prevention and early support,**
- **Improve decision-making and equity,**
- **Enhance family engagement and stability, and**
- **Build accountability and trust**

And importantly, they reflect approaches that are already being used successfully across the country—adapted here to meet the needs and opportunities within Lucas County.



Implementation of these recommendations will require continued partnership, shared responsibility, and sustained commitment across County leadership, public agencies, community organizations, and families with lived experience. Progress will not be defined by any single action, but by the County’s ability to align efforts, adapt over time, and remain focused on outcomes that matter most—family stability, child safety, and community trust.

By building on existing strengths and aligning with demonstrated practices from across the field, Lucas County is well-positioned to move forward with a clear direction: a system where families are supported early, treated with dignity, and connected to the resources they need to not only navigate moments of crisis—but to thrive long after.

