



August 2022

Citizen Review Board

3-Year Strategic Plan



*Every Day Counts...
in the life of a child in foster care.*

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37 Years of Advocacy

The Citizen Review Board (CRB) is a program within the Oregon Judicial Department (OJD) that reviews the cases of children in foster care. The reviews are conducted by boards made up of volunteers from the community who are appointed by the Chief Justice of the Oregon Supreme Court and facilitated by a team of professional staff. Currently, there are 59 boards in 33 of Oregon's 36 counties and about 250 volunteers serving on them statewide.

At the time the United States Congress passed the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, there was a huge spike in the number of children entering foster care nationwide. Families were not receiving sufficient services and there were no guidelines for how long children could spend in foster care. This landmark legislation set numerous requirements regarding keeping children out of foster care and permanency planning for those in foster care. One of the requirements was that the case of every child in foster care be reviewed at least every 6 months.

Inspired by the success of the first citizen foster care review program in South Carolina, a prominent corporate attorney turned rural Trappist monk named Father Paschal Phillips set out to bring citizen review to Oregon. He and about 20 other child advocates formed The Committee for Oregon Families that drafted legislation to create the CRB. In 1985, the Legislative Assembly passed House Bill 2333 establishing Oregon's citizen foster care review program.

By 1987, CRB had boards in almost every county in the state. Those early boards and the staff who supported them played a significant role in shaping policies and laws that ensured the state had a specific goal for each family it served, there was an early case planning meeting that included the child's entire family network, and that parents were provided written service agreements with concrete expectations of both the parents and the state.

In Oregon, CRB and the courts share responsibility for conducting the 6-month reviews. Citizens bring an independent, diverse, and common sense perspective to foster care cases. They provide transparency and public oversight to a system that is largely closed due to the confidential nature of the cases and a review environment that is typically less formal than a court hearing, often resulting in more meaningful participation from youth, parents, and resource parents.

Today, CRB continues to be an important check and balance on the child welfare system. At each review, boards assess whether the child welfare agency is complying with policies and laws that are critically important to the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in foster care. For example, they verify whether caseworkers are visiting children in the foster home to ensure the home is safe, whether parents and children are receiving the services recommended in their various assessments, and whether older youth have plans in place to help prepare them for independence.

Since its inception, CRB has conducted more than 220,000 reviews of children in foster care and has educated thousands of citizen volunteers on the inner-workings of the child welfare system. It has been involved in the development of almost every state child welfare policy created and legislation passed since 1985, and continues to provide citizens a platform from which to improve how their community serves its most vulnerable children and families.

The Strategic Planning Process

CRB started its strategic planning process in January 2022 by asking all of its boards to identify up to 3 focus areas for CRB through December 2024. They were challenged to develop a focus statement for each of the following categories:

1. A large statewide issue affecting the foster care system,
2. A more specific statewide issue that CRB can meaningfully impact, and
3. A local issue related to CRB that they would like to see improved.

Boards across the state submitted 196 focus statements for consideration. As expected, there were many similarities in what boards wanted to work on and CRB staff were able to consolidate the ideas into a master list of 21 overall categories.

In May 2022, 15 CRB staff, 8 volunteer board members who also serve on the CRB Advisory Committee, and 6 additional volunteer board members from counties not represented on the Committee met in Salem to prioritize the focus areas and develop implementation plans for the highest priority items. The following strategic plan is the result of that work.

A BIG thank you is owed to all the CRB staff and volunteers who participated in this process as well as our external stakeholders who reviewed drafts of the plan and provided their feedback. We can't wait to get started!

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)

The legislation establishing CRB required, as far as practicable, members of each local CRB shall represent the various socioeconomic and ethnic groups of the area served (ORS 419A.092). Additionally, inclusiveness and treating others with dignity and respect have been part of our statement of values for decades and our last strategic plan included 14 specific action items to improve engagement of parties in reviews and recognize and mitigate the effects of bias.

CRB has made progress in these areas through implementation of those action items, trainings, engagement of EDI professionals, building relationships with communities, and making reviews more accessible through virtual participation. The last few years have widely introduced the concept of equity and advanced our understanding of what diversity and inclusion mean. We still have much to do. CRB is committed to fully implementing the [OJD Equity Framework](#) in our CRB reviews and program improvement efforts. The goals, strategies, and action items within this plan will continue to move us towards a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive CRB.

CRB

Oregon's Foster Care Review Board



Our Vision

Citizens will shape public policy and actively promote conditions to ensure that every child lives in a safe, secure, healthy, and permanent home, preserving families whenever possible.

Our Mission

We provide a citizen voice on the safety, stability, and supervision of children in foster care through impartial case review and advocacy.



We Value

- A fair, impartial and inclusive review process.
- Citizen input and advocacy.
- Treating others with dignity and respect.
- State accountability for the safety of children.
- Appropriate and timely services for children and families.
- A safe and nurturing family for every child.



Goal 1: Increase recognition of the impacts that citizen input and advocacy have on the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in foster care.

Strategy 1a: *Increase awareness of who we are and what we do.*

Oregon law requires CRB to recruit volunteers from groups with special knowledge or interest in child welfare and, as stated previously, ensure its boards are representative of the various socioeconomic and ethnic groups of the area served (ORS 419A.092). The law also requires volunteer board members to complete a 16-hour orientation training before they can serve, and receive 8 hours of additional training annually.

CRB has seen positive results from efforts to focus board member recruitment on groups that are underrepresented on boards. We have worked hard to transform our culture to empower board members to make findings they feel are deserved, even when it's hard; and equipped our staff and volunteers with training and tools to hold county ODHS offices accountable for implementing statewide child welfare administrative rules and procedures that are key to ensuring the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in foster care.

We updated our volunteer orientation training with 5 additional hours of web-based homework on race, gender, domestic violence, addiction, trauma, and resilience as well as two new mock dependency cases for volunteers to practice conducting culturally responsive reviews. We partnered with ODHS and others to bring monthly online trainings to CRB staff and volunteers on child welfare administrative rules and procedures, applicable laws and appellate decisions, services in the community, and experiences of children and families involved in the system.

CRB has made many important improvements and it's time to get the word out!

Action Items

- Year 1
- Use the OJD Equity Framework to help us understand how discrimination and oppression operate within our program generally and in our volunteer recruitment and retention efforts specifically.
 - Prepare county and state demographic information for both the general population and children in substitute care.
 - Develop specific goals for recruiting volunteers from groups that are underrepresented on boards. Consider socioeconomic, ethnic, sexual orientation, gender identity, and language diversity as well as tribes, individuals who identify as having a disability, and persons with lived experience as a child in foster care, parent of a child in foster care, and resource parent.
 - Develop and implement a coordinated statewide volunteer recruitment plan that utilizes marketing professionals where appropriate and can be sustained over time. Consider dedicating at least part of a CRB staff person to this effort as well as using existing volunteers to help communicate our message.
 - Provide information to community stakeholders about who we are and how our reviews can support implementation of their own priorities.
- Year 3
- Ensure our vision, mission, and values align with current expectations and practices.

Strategy 1b: Improve retention of existing volunteers.

On December 3, 2021, 48% of CRB volunteers were either currently employed or retired from occupations in education, health care, social work, or law. Twenty-three percent of boards had a member who identified as an ethnicity other than Caucasian, 26% had a member who was age 35 or younger, and 32% had a member with an annual income of less than \$35,000. While CRB does not collect statistics on any history our volunteers have with the foster system, anecdotal reports suggest many have personally touched the system in some capacity either as a child in foster care, parent of a child in foster care, resource parent, or adoptive parent. Anecdotal reports also suggest representation of the LGBTQ+ community on a number of boards.

In 2021, CRB volunteers collectively donated 24,598 hours of service to the state preparing for and conducting 2,880 reviews involving 3,943 children and young adults in foster care, and spent an additional 3,353 hours in trainings on topics important to the cases they review. While recruitment is important, retention of our skilled volunteers (and staff) is actually what makes our program healthy and impactful. Currently, our volunteers serve an average of 6 years. This is an impressive number, particularly considering the worldwide events of the last 2 years; but, we can do even better supporting and retaining our exceptional volunteers and staff.

Action Items

- Year 2
- Enhance community and unity of purpose amongst volunteers and staff by establishing training cohorts as well as facilitating observations of CRB reviews in other counties (i.e., peer reviews) and multi-county meetings and collaborations.
 - Create more opportunities to recognize and show appreciation for our volunteers.
 - Continue efforts to make volunteering for CRB more accessible by offering part-time schedules, remote participation, working with employers to support volunteering, and updating our policy for reimbursement of volunteer expenses.
 - Work with local ODHS offices and courts to increase implementation of CRB recommendations and address areas of concern. It is very discouraging for CRB volunteers when they review a case and discover that one or more recommendations from the last CRB review were not implemented. This can impact retention.

Strategy 1c: Improve our data collection and sharing.

CRB has been collecting data on our findings for a decade. While interesting, the data wasn't very actionable until recently. We could tell someone how many times boards found the child welfare agency had not ensured the safety, health, and well-being of a child, was not making reasonable efforts to reunify the family, and/or was not in compliance with the case plan or court orders; but, we couldn't tell them why without pulling reports and doing a hand count. That changed in April 2019 when we started collecting data on the reasons findings were made, presence of attorneys at reviews, implementation of recommendations from the prior CRB review, and applicability of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). Since that time, CRB has been compiling this data into quarterly reports that are regularly sent to all CRB field staff and volunteers on the CRB Advisory Committee.

CRB has a lot of great data now. Our next challenges are: what are we going to do with it, and is there other information we need?

Action Items

- Year 2
- Evaluate the impact of CRB. Explore the impact of CRB on compliance with key child welfare administrative rules and procedures.
 - Start collecting additional data on CRB volunteers to better highlight the diversity that our volunteers bring to case reviews.
 - Update the CRB [Volunteer] Exit Interview form to include both quantitative and qualitative questions. Start reporting compiled results on a regular schedule.
 - Improve and standardize data sharing between CRB and stakeholder agencies and organizations.



Goal 2: Improve the safety and stability of foster care placements.

Strategy 2a: Strengthen CRB inquiry around placement safety, suitability, support, and transitions.

In 2021, citizen review boards statewide found in 9% of the children reviewed (337 of 3,943), ODHS had not ensured that appropriate services were in place to safeguard the child’s safety, health, and well-being. Ten percent of the time (35 of 337), the negative findings were due at least in part to concerns about appropriateness of a placement and 7% (23 of 337) to concerns about the number of placement changes.

Children who must be removed from their homes for their protection are owed placements appropriate enough for them to thrive. We also know how multiple placement changes impact children—permanency is delayed and well-being is affected in multiple ways, including poorer educational outcomes due to changing schools and increased behavioral and mental health issues.¹

Action Items

- Year 2
- Use the OJD Equity Framework to examine CRB processes for ensuring safety and stability of foster care placements.
 - Start tracking child, parent, and resource parent attendance at CRB reviews.
 - Research what and how information about CRB is being communicated to children, parents, and resource parents by system stakeholders.

- Improve child, parent, and resource parent attendance and participation at CRB reviews.
- Update questioning guides for CRB Finding 2 (efforts to place with a relative) and Finding 3A (appropriate services to safeguard the child’s safety, health, and well-being). Ensure questions address child input in placement decisions, supports provided to resource parents including ODHS communication with them, early identification of child’s needs and implementation of recommendations, supervision plans, resource parent involvement in developing the family time plan, extended family contact and efforts to engage them in the case, and efforts to promote thoughtful placement transitions. Consult the federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) Onsite Review Instrument and other existing sources for possible questions.
- Provide training to CRB staff and volunteers to coincide with roll-out of the updated questioning guides.

Strategy 2b: Reinstate CRB reviews of children in trial reunification placements.

CRB stopped reviewing children in trial reunification placements with their parents in October 2012. This came at a time when CRB was trying to reduce its reviews after some difficult budget reductions and layoffs. Since then, the responsibility for keeping these cases in compliance with the federal periodic review requirement has fallen entirely on the courts. CRB staff and volunteers have been noticing some overly long gaps between reviews when children have returned to an out-of-home placement after a disrupted trial reunification. This has prompted renewed calls within CRB to reinstate our reviews of these cases.

Action Items

- Year 1
- Complete an analysis of periodic review compliance in the 2021 calendar year.
 - Obtain a legal opinion to determine whether current Oregon law authorizes CRB to review children in trial reunification placements. If yes:
 - Determine whether updates are needed in the analysis of some CRB findings when reviewing children in trial reunification placements.
 - Update section 2.5 in the [ODHS/CRB Memorandum of Understanding](#) and coordinate with courts and external stakeholders to identify a date for reinstating the CRB reviews.
- Year 3
- Complete another analysis of periodic review compliance in 3 years.

¹ Jones, A. S. & Wells, S. J. (2008). PATH/Wisconsin-Bremer Project: Preventing placement disruptions in foster care. Final [report](#).



Goal 3: Improve access to mental and behavioral health services for Oregon’s most vulnerable children and families.

Concerns about mental health/therapeutic support (mostly timeliness of the service) is the most common reason why boards find ODHS has not ensured appropriate services are in place to safeguard the child’s safety, health, and well-being. In 2021, those concerns were part of 32% of the negative findings (108 of 337). Oregon is experiencing significant shortages in mental and behavioral health services that are being addressed on a number of fronts. Through our findings, CRB has an opportunity to highlight gaps and needs in these services for families involved in the foster system.

Strategy 3a: Strengthen CRB inquiry around availability, accessibility, and timeliness of mental and behavioral health services for children and parents.

Action Items

- Year 2
 - Use the OJD Equity Framework to examine CRB processes for determining whether children and parents are provided appropriate mental and behavioral health services when they are needed.
 - Provide local training to CRB volunteers on mental and behavioral health services available in the community they serve.
- Year 3
 - Develop procedures to obtain information about mental and behavioral health needs and services when the case material submitted for a review excludes that

information or provides insufficient detail.

- Research child welfare administrative rules and procedures for children and parents having an emergency mental or behavioral health crisis. Develop guidelines for consistent analysis of these efforts during reviews.
- Develop a training for CRB staff and volunteers on asking questions and making recommendations about mental and behavioral health services. Include information on communicating effectively with youth and parents during reviews, how to verify needs are assessed and appropriate services are provided promptly (particularly for children), and when and how to appropriately recommend alternative therapeutic services.
- Collect and transmit data on mental and behavioral health service delays, needs, and barriers to Oregon's Coordinated Care Organizations and others who can systemically impact those services.



Goal 4: Improve outcomes for teens and young adults in foster care.

According to the [Oregon Child Welfare Data Set](#), there were 1,167 Oregon teens and young adults age 15 and older in foster care on March 31, 2022. One hundred and thirty seven of them (12%) lived in a supervised independent living setting and 461 of them (39%) had 6 or more placements. Additionally, 272 youth age 18 and older exited foster care (i.e., aged out) in the 2021 calendar year. These, however, are just numbers. They tell us nothing about the hopes, strengths, challenges, individuality, and connectedness of the young people behind them. The things that truly matter.

CRB reviews are doors to the more meaningful details. They are an additional opportunity for youth and their team to advocate for their needs, and one more check and balance to ensure those needs are met. A strength of CRB is our detailed inquiry into the safety, health, and well-being of the child. Our program is well positioned to positively impact outcomes for teens and young adults by improving our reviews and holding the state more accountable to serving them.

Strategy 4a: Make CRB findings more applicable in cases involving teens and young adults, particularly those living independently.

Action Items

- Year 2 • Use the OJD Equity Framework to examine CRB processes for reviewing cases of teens and young adults in foster care.
- Convene an interdisciplinary focus group to discuss and advise how the CRB findings should be applied in cases involving teens 14 to 17 years old and young adults 18 to 21 years old. Ensure foster youth are represented on the group.
- Create a technical assistance guide or guides for reviews of teens and young adults.

- Assess the value of creating specialized CRB Case Notes Sheets to assist volunteer board members in preparing for and conducting reviews of teens and young adults.

Strategy 4b: Offer trainings on topics affecting teens and young adults in foster care.

Action Items

Provide training to CRB staff and volunteers on the following topics:

- Year 1
 - Lived-experience of foster youth including those who may have experienced placement in a residential treatment facility,
 - Independent Living Program (ILP),
 - Cases involving teens and young adults who qualify for Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD) services,
- Year 2
 - ODHS teen policy requirements,
 - Standards for ensuring safety of young adults, particularly those living independently,
 - Reviewing youth on runaway status,
 - Self-selected environments, and
 - Services and opportunities available to young adults 18 to 21 years old who remain in substitute care.

Strategy 4c: Increase accountability for serving teens and young adults.

Action Items

- Year 2
 - Identify key benchmarks and milestones in cases involving teens and young adults and follow up on them during CRB reviews.
 - Explore ways to improve how CRB notifies teens and young adults of reviews.
 - Build relationships between local boards and ILP providers to increase youth and ILP worker participation in CRB reviews. Consider changing CRB confidentiality practices so ILP providers can receive a copy of the board schedule.
 - Share with local model court teams the work CRB is doing to improve reviews of teens and young adults.

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