

Strategic Plan SFY 2025/2026



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History of the Office of Family Representation and Advocacy (OFRA)

Child and family welfare cases¹ impact one of the most basic and fundamental rights - the right to the companionship and care of one's family. Because of the importance of this right, high quality legal representation is critical in child and family welfare cases. It is likewise critical because of the impact of the child and family welfare system on parents and children, including the trauma of removal and the potential of permanently severing the parent-child relationship. High quality legal representation:

- Ensures due process and procedural fairness;
- Improves judicial decision making by providing the court with accurate, timely, and complete information about the children and parents--including the views and voices of the parties' themselves; and
- Leads to better long-term outcomes for children and their families, including higher rates of reunification and swifter resolution of cases. (Of note, this in turn reduces costs to the state for foster care support payments, case worker and court time, and resources and services for children and families).

In a state like New Mexico, where there are high rates of poverty and Adverse Childhood Experiences (commonly known as "ACES"), as well as limited access to meaningful services and supports, high quality legal representation can help prevent parents and children from falling through the cracks, get the services that they need, and reduce the impact of removal.²

The need to improve the quality of legal representation for children and parents³ involved in the child abuse and neglect system in New Mexico has been well-established in several studies and system assessments over the last two decades. These studies underscore the critical need for high quality representation, and the high stakes that families face in the child welfare system.

¹ Child and family welfare cases are certain cases under the NM Children's Code, including abuse and neglect, voluntary placements, families in need of court ordered services, Indian Family Protection Act, and extended foster care cases.

² See Memo from the Children's Court Improvement Commission to the NM Supreme Court (Aug. 27, 2018) (emphasis added), reprinted in full in *Report on Representation in New Mexico Child Abuse and Neglect Cases* by M. Laver and A. Smith: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.nmcourts.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CCIC-Representation-Report-Draft-1.pdf.

³ For ease of communication, this Strategic Plan will refer to all respondents in cases under the Children's Code as parents, although OFRA recognizes that respondents may be caregivers of other kinds, including guardians and custodians.



In 2018, the Children's Court Improvement Commission (CCIC) engaged the American Bar Association (ABA) Center on Children and the Law to study the court-appointed contract attorney system that existed before OFRA.^{4, 5} In this system, attorneys contracted with the Administrative Office of the Courts (the AOC) to represent children, youth, and parents. The AOC received funding for these contracts as part of the Court Appointed Attorney Fee Fund.

Despite decades of interventions and attempts to improve outcomes by improving representation, 6 the ABA identified ongoing issues in quality of representation as well as structural, systemic weaknesses in the NM system. The ABA's findings identified several barriers to high quality representation that resulted in delays in achieving permanency for children, including:

- Inadequate funding and compensation,
- Inadequate monitoring and oversight of attorneys,
- Unmanageable caseloads,
- Poor attorney retention,
- Lack of diversity and cultural humility, and
- Lack of staff and resources in the AOC to address these continued issues.

After the ABA's report, the NM Senate passed Joint Memorial 10 in 2019, creating the Family Representation Task Force (which later became a Commission). The Task Force was charged with studying and making recommendations about structural changes and practice models that would improve representation in New Mexico. That Task Force recommended the creation of an independent legal office with an oversight commission and interdisciplinary legal teams as the evidence-based practice model. The Family Representation Commission (FRC) developed the legislation and during the 2022 Session, the Legislature passed the Family Representation and Advocacy Act (HB46). The Act creates the Office of Family Representation and Advocacy (OFRA) as an independent adjunct agency in the Executive Branch. The Act passed unanimously on the House Floor and by a vote of 35-2 on the Senate Floor. On March 8, 2022, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham signed the bill into law.

⁴ Legal representation in New Mexico has historically been provided by about 125 attorneys under contract with the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC). The AOC, despite its best efforts, has never had the budget or other resources to provide adequate supports for attorneys, monitor quality, and overall improve representation.

⁵ See footnote 2.



After extensive recommendations by the FRC and preparation by the Office of Family Representation and Advocacy Commission,⁷ and OFRA's leadership team, OFRA began serving clients on its opening day, July 1, 2023.

Independence and Interdisciplinary Legal Services: Transforming Representation, Enhancing Child Safety, and Achieving Permanency

The FRC's recommendations and the OFRA's enabling statute mirror the attributes of high quality legal representation developed by the national Family Justice Initiative, namely a centralized child and family welfare office of lawyers who have manageable caseloads, adequate compensation, and access to interdisciplinary legal teams (including social workers, peer mentors, and experts).⁸ Research and evaluation have demonstrated that high quality legal representation, defined as including interdisciplinary supports, leads to improved outcomes for children and families,⁹ including fewer placement moves when a child is placed outside their home, achieving permanency more quickly, and reduced maltreatment when children are returned to their families.

OFRA's Mission, Vision, Commitment, and Guiding Principles embrace the attributes of high-quality representation and honor the children and families we serve. They also express our full commitment to the well-being not only of our clients, but of the dedicated lawyers, social workers, and family peer support navigators who will do this important work with children and their families.

⁷ NMSA 1978, §§32A-27-6 through -9.

⁸ https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public interest/child law/resources/child law practiceonline/january---- december-2020/the-case-for-a-centralized-office-for-legal-representation-in-ch/; see also https://familyjusticeinitiative.org/model/high-quality-representation/

⁹ https://familyjusticeinitiative.org/data/



OFRA's Mission, Vision, & Guiding Principles

Our Mission is to hear families, respect their cultures and their choices, and provide the interdisciplinary advocacy needed to create the best possible outcomes for children and their families. With humility, respect, and compassion, OFRA promotes diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging for all whose lives we touch.

We envision an equitable society of strong families where culture is honored and dignity is respected.

We are committed to strengths-based advocacy and representation of our clients, understanding that children and families do best when we recognize their unique strengths, they define their own needs, and their self-defined interests drive the representation and services they receive.

To provide the zealous and tenacious representation children and families deserve, we embrace and uphold the following *Guiding Principles*:

- We respect families. Parents have a right to parent their child, and children have a right to be raised by their parent; children, whenever possible, belong with their families.
- We respect children and their right to be safe. We also recognize and promote the importance of a child's emotional, psychological, educational, and overall well-being.
- We know that children and parents are more than just their child and family welfare case. Children and parents are whole people with talents, interests, feelings, histories, and communities.
- We see the obstacles for children and families of color. We are committed to equity in our work with children and families of color.
- We affirm and respect the diversity of families and cultures by encouraging, fostering, and maintaining cultural connections.



- We respect and protect the rights of children and parents regardless of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, national, ethnic, or social origin, socioeconomic status, language, political or other opinion, disability, or other status.
- We continuously and systematically improve the quality of our services. We employ rigorous evaluation and quality monitoring.
- We follow family-centered best practices that promote child safety, well-being, dignity, equity, and permanence.
- We provide a platform for the voices of children and parents in our policy and system reform efforts.
- We create and support highly qualified interdisciplinary legal teams. We build skills, commitment, hope, and well-being through professional development and hold all staff and contractors to the highest standards.
- We engage the community at large to help shape our policy, advocacy, and system improvement efforts.
- We serve as a participative and transformational leader promoting the importance of parent and child representation, the unique and essential role our advocates play, and the need to respect and value their work.



SFY 25 and SYF 26 Goals, Objectives, & Strategies

In the first year of operation, OFRA focused on providing core legal services to clients and establishing the staffing and infrastructure needed to fulfill its mission. OFRA has accomplished a great deal in its first year and has mapped a two-year strategic plan to continue this momentum (for information regarding accomplishments, please review the OFRA forthcoming FY24 annual report). The two-year plan focuses on strengthening core operations, expanding interdisciplinary legal services to a second jurisdiction, and expanding services to include prepetition consultation (funding permitted). The goals, objectives, and strategies that follow are derived from OFRA's enabling statute and are distilled from the priorities and policies established by the FRC, the OFRA Commission, OFRA's leadership team, and stakeholder input. This strategic plan will evolve with additional stakeholder input.

Goal 1: Administer core legal services that ensures due process, enhanced client engagement, and promotes client dignity

Objective		Strategies		SFY Target
	1.1.1 Standardize case assignment processes 1.1.3	1.1.1	Collaborate with the Children's Court Improvement Commission (CCIC) and key stakeholders to petition the Supreme Court for a Rule Change allowing administrative staff access to the Court's case management system to allow for a more efficient and cost-effective attorney- case assignment process.	FY25
1.1		1.1.2	Collaborate with the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) to train and support NM's judicial districts to enter case information uniformly and consistently.	FY25
		1.1.3	Collaborate with the Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD) to train agency staff on the process to submit quality, consistent client information and case documentation utilizing developed forms.	FY25
		Develop and implement continuous quality improvement (CQI) processes to monitor case assignments to ensure quality and timeliness of appointments.	FY26	



1.2	Provide training and coaching on OFRA's model of client representation	1.2.1	Continuously provide training on the OFRA Interdisciplinary Practice Model and the use of the Practice Manual (for new OFRA staff, contract attorneys, and key stakeholders – including the Courts and CYFD staff).	FY25 FY26
		1.2.2	Ensure that OFRA trainings are eligible for CEUs/CLEs for staff (social workers and attorneys) and contract attorneys by partnering with the Corrine Wolfe Center for Child and Family Justice, NMSU Center of Innovation, and other key stakeholders, or by becoming an authorized provider of continuing education.	FY25
		1.2.3	Continue to provide free webinars on relevant best practice topics (e.g. communication strategies with child clients, parent engagement, Cornerstone Advocacy, advancing equity through legal representation, etc.).	FY25 FY26
		1.2.4	Develop additional strategies to support staff and contracted attorneys in becoming Child Welfare Law Specialists and to attend other related and relevant legal training (e.g., Red Book training, NITA training, etc.).	FY25
		1.3.1	Develop print material that explains OFRA services, client rights and responsibilities, and how OFRA engages child welfare stakeholders to provide high quality legal services.	FY25
1.3	Ensure client and stakeholder understanding of OFRA's role and services	1.3.2	Partner with CYFD to develop training plan for foster parents, new and veteran employees, and other key child welfare stakeholders to ensure understanding of OFRA services and engagement practices, including how to provide print material to clients to support their understanding of their rights and access to OFRA services.	FY25 FY26
		1.3.3	Implement training plan with CYFD staff and foster/resource parents.	FY25 FY26
Expand and ensure ongoing language access and access to OFRA services for individuals with disabilities	ongoing language access	1.4.1	Implement a language access plan (e.g., notices and signage once office is secured; execute RFP for contract interpreters and translators; develop procedure for accessing services; ensure website and form accessibility).	FY25
	1.4.2	Execute additional reasonable accommodations identified once office is secured (e.g., office and parking access; mobility accommodations;	FY25 FY26	



			communication assistance, etc.).	
		1.4.3	Continue to prioritize hiring highly qualified staff who are language diverse and have experience supporting individuals with disabilities.	FY25 FY26
		1.4.4	Develop position and hire Access Coordinator to ensure equitable access to language and disability access supports.	FY26
1.5	Ensure ongoing	1.5.1	Provide continuous training and professional development opportunities on trauma-informed and trauma-responsive care and practice in child welfare and legal settings.	FY25 FY26
1.5	incorporation of trauma informed practices	1.5.2	Identify and partner with a trauma-informed consultant to ensure that OFRA's physical offices promote a sense of safety, comfort, and dignity for staff and for meetings with clients.	FY25 FY26



Goal 2: Implement policies, processes and practices that provide for maximum efficiency, accountability, and delivery of high-quality services

	Objective		Strategies	SFY Target
		2.1.1	Develop process to monitor the quality of staff and contract attorney service provision (performance) and adherence to the OFRA practice model of legal representation (fidelity).	FY25
2.1	Develop continuous quality improvement and evaluation processes to monitor service provision and efficacy of practice model implementation	2.1.2	Partner with University of New Mexico's (UNM) Evaluation Lab to develop evaluation framework to monitor progress towards achieving desired outcomes, client satisfaction with core legal services, interdisciplinary legal services, and other services provided by OFRA.	FY25
		2.1.3	Implement Evaluation and CQI processes, to include standardized reporting and stakeholder access to reports.	FY26
2.2	Ensure consistent Interdisciplinary Legal Services (IDLS) and Cornerstone Advocacy practice by staff and contract attorneys	2.2.1	Develop OFRA policies and procedures to outline practice expectations and processes for IDLS and Cornerstone Advocacy practice components to ensure consistency statewide.	FY25
		2.2.2	Develop, disseminate, and train on Cornerstone Advocacy "architecture" documents and model motions.	FY25
2.3	Refine system for rapid and equitable resolution of internal and external grievances	2.3.1	Based on FY24 learning, refine complaint and grievance system concerning performance by OFRA staff and contractors (e.g., refine contracts to ensure clarity to contract attorneys regarding process and potential outcomes; systematize collateral contact process during investigation; define levels of recourse for performance improvement, corrective action, etc.).	FY25 FY26
	and other issues	2.3.2	Implement procedures to address discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment, and retaliation complaints. Establish access to mediation and other	FY25
		2.3.3	alternative dispute resolution practices.	r125
2.4	Identify and implement a case management solution that streamlines data collection and maximizes productive	2.4.1	Identify business needs required in a future case management/data collection system; research existing software systems that may be capable of meeting those needs (as they relate to legal representation activities, case assignments, interdisciplinary legal services case management	FY25



	business processes		tracking, and data collection/analysis for	
	related to client services		reporting on outcome goals and requirements).	
			Implement OFRA Family Case Management	FY26
		2.4.2	System, including incorporation of shared data	
			from CYFD and AOC.	
			Train staff and contract attorneys on effective	
			data entry and use of the case management	
		2.4.3	system to facilitate best practices for accurate	FY26
			and consistent statewide data collection.	
			Implement OFRA Commission policy on diversity,	
		2.5.1	equity, and inclusion (DEI), including collecting	FY25
		2.3.1	and reporting data on implementation efforts.	1123
			Recruit and hire staff consistent with achieving	
		2.5.2	DEI objectives.	
			Require and provide training in diversity, equity,	
			and inclusion (DEI) for all OFRA staff and contract	
				FY25
		2.5.3	attorneys, to include how to engage in anti-racist	
			legal representation and combating the impact of	FY26
			implicit bias and systemic inequities in the child	
			welfare system.	
	Advance diversity,		Provide for equitable access to the court system	
	equity, and inclusion in	2.5.4	for clients (staff and contract attorneys),	FY25
			including language access and other accessibility	FY26
2.5			measures.	
	advocacy provided by		Analyze child welfare data to identify areas of	
	OFRA (ongoing objective)		disproportionate representation of identities	
	(1.81.81.3)		(e.g., race, ethnicity, disability, LGBTQ+, etc.)	
			among clients served and develop plans to	
		2.5.5	mitigate through the provision of legal	FY26
			representation and interdisciplinary legal service	
			advocacy. To the extent possible, analyze child	
			welfare data to identify and respond to disparate	
			impacts on children and families of different	
			identities.	
			Collaborate with New Mexico's Nations, Pueblos,	
		256	and Tribes to develop and strengthen	FY25
		2.5.6	partnerships and to ensure respectful and	ΓΊΖϽ
			appropriate engagement in ICWA and IFPA cases.	
			Establish and develop administrative processes	
	F		and/or procedures for internal controls and	
	Ensure effective		audits, contract analysis to ensure return on	
	organizational	2.6.1	investment, identification of cost reduction	E) (0 =
2.6	infrastructure to support		strategies, financial management and	FY25
	current operations and		transparency, and revenue growth projections	
	expansion goals.		and activities to support FTE needed for full	
			operation of administrative functions and	
			operation of administrative functions and	



implementation of services statewide.	
Implement plan to ensure IT infrastructure and support is in place and capable of supporting expansion in other areas of the state.	FY25 FY26
Automate financial reports and streamline year- end and new fiscal year budgeting and contracting processes.	FY26



Goal 3: Implement policies, processes and practices that promote the recruitment and retention of highly skilled and effective attorneys and interdisciplinary legal services staff (Family Peer Navigators and Social Workers)

	Objective		Strategies	SFY Target
	Expand pool of attorneys (as employees or contractors) and social workers committed to child and family welfare legal representation 3.1.3 3.1.4 3.1.2 3.1.2 3.1.2 3.1.3	3.1.1	Implement plan for pipelining law and social work students from New Mexico Higher Education Institutions to OFRA through paid internships and provision of academic credits.	FY25 FY26
		3.1.2	Continue to engage in educational and recruitment activities (career fairs, job postings, guest speaking, mock interviews, etc.) at UNM School of Law and law schools with child and family welfare specializations across the country, as well as Schools of Social Work in New Mexico and nationwide.	FY25 FY26
3.1		3.1.3	Develop plan for consistent recruitment activities that include broadcast, print, and social media (e.g., PSAs, the Bar Bulletin, NASW and other national social work employment announcements, etc.)	FY25
		3.1.4	Partner with key stakeholders to include OFRA in state statutes to provide loan forgiveness to attorneys and social workers engaged in direct child welfare legal services.	FY25
		Implement retention strategies to include pathways for advancement (as funding allows), access to continuous professional development opportunities, and wellness supports.	FY25 FY26	
		3.2.1	Develop plan to reduce contract attorney caseloads to best practice standards, incorporating a complex case differential.	FY25
fair/equitable		3.2.2	Conduct analysis to develop a complex case differential that provides appropriate compensation for increased legal representation casework requirements.	FY25
		3.2.3	Incorporate compensation differentials (e.g., for VPA consultations, pre-petition consultations, Fostering Connections representation, etc.) into contracts for attorneys.	FY26



		3.2.4	Conduct analysis to determine appropriate caseload/casework standards for Interdisciplinary Legal Services staff (Social Workers and Family Peer Support Navigators).	FY25
		3.2.5	Prepare timely budget requests and advocate for appropriations that support high-quality interdisciplinary legal representation and advocacy statewide	FY25 FY26
3.3	Provide litigation	3.3.1	Identify appropriate staffing levels (caseloads) for attorneys, social workers, and family peer navigators. Create plan for sufficient support staff to engage in high quality legal representation (including investigators, experts, paralegals, and other clerical supports).	FY25 FY26
supports	3.3.2	Identify and secure funding to create a Client Support Fund within OFRA (to include transportation and other services that often result in barriers to participation in the legal process and/or case planning activities).	FY25	
		3.4.1	Provide opportunities and supports for employee well-being and self-care	FY25 FY26
	Maximize employee and	3.4.2	Continuously support staff and contractors to create a healthy workplace and a culture of trust, transparency, and fairness	FY25 FY26
3.4 contract and satis	contractor productivity and satisfaction (ongoing objective)	3.4.3	Develop and implement processes to solicit feedback and input on the effectiveness of well-being/self-care initiatives, office culture, and business practices (for staff and contractors)	FY25 FY26
		3.4.4	Conduct exit interviews for all OFRA staff and contract attorneys to learn reasons for departure and to develop systemic plans to address concerns, if applicable.	FY25 FY26



Goal 4: Expand Interdisciplinary Legal Services for families built on the practices of Cornerstone Advocacy.

	Objective Strategies		SFY Target	
	Provide clarity to ensure consistent client engagement practices statewide	4.1.1	Develop written procedures for client enrollment, ongoing engagement, litigation supports, interdisciplinary activities related to Cornerstone Advocacy, case transfer, and case closure.	FY25
4.1		4.1.2	Implement processes for referral, triage, prioritization, and case assignment until funding allows for full implementation of interdisciplinary services for all persons (parent/custodian, children, youth, and young adults) involved in child welfare legal system.	FY25
		4.1.3	Train staff and contract attorneys on developed procedures.	FY25 FY26
4.2	Provide access to Interdisciplinary Legal Services to all parents/ custodians in Bernalillo County / the Second Judicial District	4.2.1	Hire and train key personnel (Family Peer Navigators, Social Workers, Staff/Contract Attorneys, managers/supervisors to ensure quality support and oversight) necessary to provide Interdisciplinary Legal Services to all parents/custodians involved in child welfare legal cases in Bernalillo County (as funding permits).	FY25 FY26
	Expand access to Interdisciplinary Legal 4.3 Services to Dona Ana County / the Third Judicial District	4.3.1	Develop expansion plan to include a deeper introduction to benefits and outcomes of Interdisciplinary Legal Services (increase buy-in from key stakeholders) and the practice model.	FY25
4.3		4.3.2	Hire and train key personnel (i.e., Family Peer Navigator(s), Social Woker(s), Managing Attorney) to effectively implement high quality legal representation and advocacy (as funding allows).	FY25 FY26
		4.3.3	Begin implementation in Dona Ana County.	FY25
		4.3.4	Evaluate implementation/fidelity and report key findings to the NM Legislature and other stakeholders.	FY26
	Expand Interdisciplinary Legal Services to include pre-petition	4.4.1	Identify and secure funding for service expansion, to include a phased rollout plan that identifies target counties/judicial districts for initial implementation.	FY25
4.4	consultations for parents/custodians	4.4.2	Develop implementation plan for services, including evaluation metrics.	FY25
involved in a CYFD investigation	4.4.3	Implement Pre-Petition Consultation Services in identified areas, evaluate implementation, and report key findings to funders and stakeholders.	FY26	



SFY 25 AND 26 PERFORMANCE MEASURES

Measure	Target
Number of respondents (parents, guardians, or custodians) in the Second Judicial District (Bernalillo County) who receive services from a Family Peer Support Navigator	120
Average reduction in time to reunification for children whose parent, guardian or custodian received interdisciplinary legal services from a family peer support navigator or licensed master social worker compared to those whose parent, guardian or custodian did not receive these services	7% reduction in median days to permanency
Percentage of hearings where client and attorney spoke at least once prior to day of hearing	75%



OFRA Contact Information

For more information: https://www.familyrepresentationnm.org

Contact us at: info@familyrepresentationnm.org

or

Beth Gillia Executive Director 505-231-9864 beth.gillia@ofra.nm.gov

Farra Fong
Deputy Director
505-537-3903
Farra.fong@ofra.nm.gov

Leslie Jones
Legal Services Division Director
505-549-3905
leslie.jones@ofra.nm.gov

Lisa Fitting
Administrative Services Division Director
505-538-0134
lisa.fitting@ofra.nm.gov

Stacie Ortiz
Interdisciplinary Services Division Director
505-549-5843
stacie.ortiz@ofra.nm.gov