SOUTH CAROLINA'S CHILDREN'S JUSTICE ACT

WHAT IS THE CHILDREN'S JUSTICE ACT?

The federal Children's Justice Act provides grants to states to develop, establish, and operate programs designed to improve the investigation, prosecution, and judicial handling of cases of child abuse and neglect, particularly child sexual abuse and exploitation, in a manner that limits additional trauma to the child victim. This also includes the handling of child fatality cases in which child abuse or neglect is suspected and some cases of children with disabilities and serious health problems who also are victims of abuse and neglect.

CJA TASK FORCE

To be eligible for CJA funds, states are required to establish and maintain a task force on children's justice. In accordance with federal statutory requirements, membership must be multidisciplinary and comprise at least one slot for each of a multitude of disciplines. South Carolina has maintained an active Children's Justice Act Task Force since 1994. The purpose and activities of the CJA Task Force (as defined by its bylaws and federal statute) are as follows:

- To **conduct an assessment** of the state's systems responding to abused and neglected children at three-year intervals;
- To **adopt recommendations** in each of the CJA categories;
- To **work towards implementation** of the recommendations;
- To **recommend** to the state's grantee (DSS) **projects to be supported by the CJA** grant funds; and
- To **express positions on legislation or state policy issues**, consistent with its mission and recommendations.

CJA FUNDING STRUCTURE

South Carolina currently receives approximately $260,000 annually in CJA funding. The SC Department of Social Services has been designated the state's CJA grantee and contracts with USC's Children's Law Center as recommended by the Task Force. The Children's Law Center receives the CJA funding to support the Task Force and assist in implementation of its recommendations. CJA grants are to be used to implement Task Force recommendations in the following three categories:

A. **Investigative, administrative, and judicial handling of cases**
B. **Experimental, model, and demonstration programs**
C. **Reform of state laws, ordinances, regulations, protocols, and procedures**

CJA ACCOMPLISHMENT HIGHLIGHTS FOR 2021-2024:

- Reviewed Best Legal Practices; provided suggested revisions to the Bench-Bar Committee
- Collaborated with USC Gould School of Law for modification and use of the SC Competency Tool – Assessing Children's Understanding of the Duty of a Witness to Report
- Provided multidisciplinary training on communication strategies with children with limited communication skills and distributed consultation list of resource professionals
- Provided multidisciplinary training to improve skills when handling court cases with children who must testify, to reduce child's stress
- Developed and delivered the SC Child Abuse Response Protocol training for professionals
- Conducted intensive child death investigation training for coroners and investigators
- Researched the Sexual Assault Forensic Excellence(SAFE) program and provided a letter of support for the training designation
- Supported the South Carolina Network of Children's Advocacy Centers
- Supported the Children's Law Center to provide applicable resources and trainings
- Provided training to improve the handling of cases with dually-involved youth (DSS/DJJ)

CJA TOPICS OF CONSIDERATION FOR 2024-2027:

- Support the development of an exploratory committee to investigate attorney representation of children in abuse and neglect cases
- Support the Attorney General's Office related to training on technology related offenses, including but not limited to sexting and sextortion
- Provide training to child welfare professionals related to substance use disorders and state law related to the possession and use of illegal and controlled substances, and the Drug-Endangered Child Protocol regarding safety concerns for families
- Improve the response to children with special needs, especially autism, related to abuse or neglect via training for forensic interviewers, law enforcement, judges, and GALs
- Build upon trainings regarding multidisciplinary child death investigations, including identifying and addressing barriers to effectively implementing the Child Death Investigations Task Force's rapid response
- Support the training of professionals on the co-occurrence, or nexus, of child maltreatment and domestic violence
- Support improvement of the multidisciplinary team response to human trafficking cases
- Support the assessment and reduction of overreporting by medical and child professionals

To learn more about the Children's Justice Act programs, please contact Rebecca Carney at carneyrmailbox@sc.edu or 803-576-7233.
The CJA Bylaws, members list, and current recommendations may be found at http://childlaw.sc.edu/