

Interagency Collaborative Survey Results

The Interagency Collaborative meets every other month to improve communication and collaboration across social services and judicial districts. Participating agencies include the Court Improvement Program, the Administrative Office of the Courts, the Division of Social Services, the Guardian ad Litem Program, the Indigent Defense Fund, the University of North Carolina, the Department of Justice and representatives from local departments of social service.

In March 2016, the Interagency Collaborative conducted a survey to stakeholders across North Carolina. This survey was designed to gather information about the juvenile court system in North Carolina to help inform the development of the Division of Social Services Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) Program Improve Plan (PIP) and its subsequent work.

The survey was not active for a long duration (48 hours), but more than 450 individuals responded representing 94% of the counties in North Carolina and gave the Interagency Collaborative some rich information to build upon and gain insight into root causes to issues identified.

The following include quantitative and qualitative analysis of the survey.

1. Which best describes your role			
Judge		12	3%
Clerk of Court Office		18	4%
DSS Attorney		29	6%
GAL Attorney Advocate		26	6%
Parent Attorney		46	10%
GAL Staff		68	15%
DSS Staff		246	54%
Other		7	2%
Total		452	100%

2. Overall, I feel like our current court system/processes for abuse and neglect cases is			
Excellent		16	4%
Very Good		114	25%
Good		148	33%
Fair		126	28%
Poor		44	10%
Total		448	100%

3. Do you have current local rules for juvenile court (i.e., prioritizing cases; expectations for attorneys; process of exchange of information, etc.)?

No		100	22%
Yes		346	78%
Total		446	100%

4. Who prepares the juvenile court calendar?

Clerk of Court Office		323	74%
DSS Attorney		35	8%
DSS Staff		24	5%
Other		57	13%
Total		439	100%

5. Who schedules adjudications/dispositions in your county?

Scheduled during previous hearing		217	49%
DSS Attorney		166	37%
Other		52	12%
Clerk of Court Office		98	22%

6. Who schedules review and permanency planning hearings in your county?

Scheduled during previous hearing		294	67%
DSS Attorney		151	34%
Other		39	9%
Clerk of Court Office		37	8%


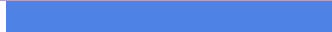
7. Who schedules TPR's in your county?

Scheduled during previous hearing		138	32%
DSS Attorney		254	59%
Other		50	12%
Clerk of Court Office		66	15%



The “other” category includes frequent mentions of Juvenile Court Counselor, Social Workers, Judge, Family Court Case Manager, and several mentions of ‘collaborative effort’.

8. In my county, TPRs are typically not filed unless the child has a permanent placement resource identified.













True		159	37%
False		271	63%
Total		430	100%

9. Is there a process in place to ensure foster parents are notified of court hearings?			
No		114	27%
Yes		309	73%
Total		423	100%

If yes, counties varied as to who notified the foster parents (including the foster care social worker, the GAL, the clerk of court, licensing social worker, and/or the DSS attorney).

10. Is there a process in place to ensure youth over age 12 are notified of court hearings?			
No		125	30%
Yes		292	70%
Total		417	100%

If yes, counties varied as to who notified the youth (including the foster care social worker, the GAL, the clerk of court, LINKS social worker, and/or the DSS attorney) and verbal notifications were also indicated.

11. Please select the top three challenges of your Adjudication/Initial Disposition Hearings being heard?			
Judge not available		14	3%
Inadequate notice		36	8%
Parent attorney not available		205	48%
Review and Permanency Planning Hearings held too often		35	8%
Orders from previous hearing not completed		53	12%
Too many cases on the docket		326	76%
Other		108	25%
Witness not available		112	26%
Courtroom not available		8	2%
GAL attorney not available		6	1%
Matters that could be handled in pre-hearing conference/mediation are taking up court time		173	40%
Court room environment is too adversarial		43	10%
DSS attorney not available		0	0%

12. Please select the top three challenges of your Review and Permanency Planning Hearing being heard?			
Judge not available		18	4%
Inadequate notice		20	5%
Parent attorney not available		204	49%
Review and Permanency Planning Hearings held too often		60	14%
Orders from previous hearing not completed		67	16%
Too many cases on the docket		316	76%
Other		89	21%
Witness not available		53	13%
Courtroom not available		8	2%
GAL attorney not available		11	3%
Matters that could be handled in pre-hearing conference/mediation are taking up court time		143	34%
Court room environment is too adversarial		45	11%
DSS attorney not available		1	0%

13. Please select the top three challenges of your Termination of Parental Rights Hearings being heard?			
Judge not available		27	7%
Inadequate notice		53	13%
Parent attorney not available		147	37%
Review and Permanency Planning Hearings held too often		26	7%
Orders from previous hearing not completed		55	14%
Too many cases on the docket		264	67%
Other		129	33%
Witness not available		92	23%
Courtroom not available		16	4%
GAL attorney not available		8	2%
Matters that could be handled in pre-hearing conference/mediation are taking up court time		86	22%
Court room environment is too adversarial		32	8%
DSS attorney not available		5	1%

The “other” category includes frequent mentions of lack of interpreter, problems with serving official notices, parent attorney’s not having adequate time with their clients, parent’s attorney often also in civil court, GAL and/or GAL Attorney not available.

Qualitative analysis was completed on key questions including:

- What is one thing that could be done that would make the greatest positive impact?
- Please select the top three challenges of your Adjudication/Initial Disposition Hearing being heard.
- Please select the top three challenges of your Review and Permanency Planning Hearing being heard.
- Please select the top three challenges of your Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) Hearing being heard. Other comments.

What is one thing that could be done that would make the greatest positive impact?

We received 101 responses to this question. Responses fell into the following categories, with some responses encompassing multiple categories.

Category	Sub-Category	# Responses
Adversarial		
	Adversarial: More teamwork/less adversarial	3
Attorneys		
	Attorneys: Attorneys be present and accountable	13
	Attorneys: Judicial requirement (enforced) that DSS hearings take precedence over other types	7
	Attorneys: Contract parent attorneys	3
	Attorneys: Better attorney preparation	2
	Attorneys: Designate juvenile court judges, attorneys	1
	Attorneys: Hire more DSS attorneys	1
	Attorneys: Need full-time GAL attorney	1
Bench		
	Bench: No continuance	9
	Bench: Better use of court time	6
	Bench: One case, one judge	5
	Court orders completed timely	2
	Bench: Judges do less SW from bench	1
	Bench: Judges should weigh SW, GAL input more heavily	1
Communication		
	Communication: General	2

Category	Sub-Category	# Responses
	Communication: Better communication between DSS, GAL	2
Court capacity		
	Court capacity: More court days	20
	Court capacity: Clear backlog by hiring temp attys, judges	1
	Court capacity: Hire more staff so system not overloaded	1
	Court capacity: More courtrooms/confidential setting	1
	Court capacity: More court rooms	1
Court scheduling		
	Court scheduling: Pre-set times for hearings	6
	Court scheduling: Set schedule so that you have time to hear all cases that day to prevent delays when things go long	4
	Court scheduling: Schedule so juvenile court doesn't conflict w criminal court	3
	Court scheduling: More precise scheduling	2
	Court scheduling: Schedule Review, PPH hearings farther apart	1
	Court scheduling: Schedule TPRs more timely	1
Parent(s)		
	Parents: Hold parents accountable for no-shows	2
Training		
	Training: Training for judges about child welfare	2
Other		
	Mediation	6
	Pre-hearing conferences	5
	Less pressure for timely permanency	2

Attorneys. Many respondents spoke to the need for improvements in attorneys, typically parent attorneys. A number of respondents (n=13) discussed the need for parent attorneys to be present and accountable, while others (n=7) asked that courts enforce the judicial requirement that family court hearings take precedence over other ones. Others spoke to the need for better parent attorney preparation (n=2). Finally, respondents asked for more attorneys—specifically, the hiring of a full time GAL attorney (n=1), hiring of more DSS attorneys (n=1), and the contracting of parent attorneys, a move which respondents said would improve quality and capacity (n=3).

Bench. Suggestions for improvements from the bench included a reduction in the number of continuances (n=9), more efficient use of court time (n=7), and adopting a “one case, one judge” policy to ensure that the same judge sees a case from start to finish (n=5). Another respondent asked that judges weigh more heavily input from DSS and GAL. Two respondents said that court orders should be completed in a more timely manner.

Court capacity. Many respondents spoke to the need for greater court system capacity. The most popular request (n=20) was for more court days, followed by more courtrooms (n=2) and the hiring of more staff, either on a temporary or permanent basis, to clear the current backlog (n=2).

Court scheduling. Respondents also spoke to the need for improvements in court scheduling, including pre-set times for specific hearings (n=6), more precise scheduling in general (n=2), and setting a realistic docket to ensure adequate times for all hearings on the schedule for a given day (n=4). Others requested that schedulers ensure family court does not interfere with criminal court (n=3)—although many if not all counties have a judicial requirement that family court takes precedence over criminal court. Finally, two respondents spoke to the timing of specific types of hearings: one requested that judges schedule review and planned permanency hearings farther apart, while another requested that judges schedule TPR hearings in a more timely manner.

Communication. Four respondents suggested better communication among all parties involved in the hearing process (i.e., courts, DSS, GAL, parent attorneys) would make the greatest impact.

Parents. A few respondents (n=2) spoke to problematic behavior by parents and specifically requested that judges hold parents accountable when parents do not show up at court.

Training. Other respondents (n=2) advocated for periodic training for judges about the child welfare system.

Mediation and less adversarial atmosphere. Five respondents suggested more frequent use of mediation, either prior to or in place of hearings. Several others (n=3) spoke to the need for more teamwork and a less adversarial atmosphere in the court room.

Pre-hearing conferences. Five respondents suggested that more frequent use of pre-hearing conferences would have the greatest impact to improve the family court system.

Timely permanency. Finally, 2 respondents suggested that having less pressure for timely permanency would have the greatest impact.

Please select the top three challenges of your Adjudication/Initial Disposition Hearing being heard.

A total of 108 respondents selected “Other” and wrote in a response. These write-in responses are discussed here. Responses fell into the following categories, with some responses encompassing multiple categories.

Category	Subcategory	# Responses
Bench		
	Bench: Continuances--too many	19
	Bench: Poor time management from bench	2
	Bench: Matters that could be handled pre-court are consuming court time	1
	Bench: Need to go back to closed court	1
	Bench: One judge, one case	1
Attorneys		
	Attorney not meeting w client before court	11
	Attorneys don't come, are late, or leave early	8
	Attorney: Bad parent attorney and atty advocates	1
	Attorneys: General	1
Parent(s)		
	Parent not present	8
	Parent not available (e.g., jail)	3
	Parent hasn't met with counsel	4
	Parent: Paternity issues	2
Service of court summons		9
Court capacity		
	Court capacity: Not enough court days	8
Court scheduling		
	Court scheduling: Too many cases on docket	4
	Court scheduling: No precision/order to court scheduling	1
	Court scheduling: General	1
Contested hearings		4
Adversarial		
	Adversarial: Mediation takes too long	1
	Adversarial: General	1
Poor calendaring		2
Lack of preparation time		3
Discovery		8
Reports and evidence		5
GAL		3
None		
	No specific problem indicated	13

Bench. Comments from 24 respondents referenced problems related to the bench. These included too many continuances (n=19), poor time management from the bench (n=2), and the

lack of a “one case, one judge” policy to ensure that the same judge sees a case from start to finish (n=1). Other comments included a request to go back to closed courtrooms (n=1), and a statement that matters that could be handled prior to court are taking up court time (n=1).

Attorneys. Comments from 21 respondents referenced problems with parent attorneys. Specific problems included attorneys failing to meet with clients before court (n=11); attorneys fail to come to court, come late, or leave early (n=8), and general problems with parent attorneys and attorney advocates (n=2).

Parents. Comments from 17 respondents referenced problems related to parents. These included parents not being present (n=8) or being unavailable, such as in jail (n=3), as well as parents not having met with counsel prior to the hearing (n=4). Paternity issues were cited as a problem by 2 additional respondents.

Service of court summons. Nine respondents referenced problems related to failure to serve court summons to parents.

Court capacity. Comments from 8 respondents referenced the lack of an adequate number of court days.

Court scheduling. Comments from 4 respondents referenced too many cases on the docket. Another respondent cited lack of precise scheduling of hearings to be a challenge. Yet another respondent spoke of general scheduling problems.

Poor calendaring. Two respondents complained about poor calendaring, specifically the length of time between specific hearings. One said cases are calendared too soon to allow time to build a case, and another said cases are not calendared soon enough.

Lack of preparation time. Three respondents said they didn’t have enough time to prepare cases before they came up—particularly complex cases requiring assessments (e.g., mental health assessments) and/or discovery.

Contested hearings and adversarial atmosphere. Four respondents said contested hearings were a problem. On a related note, 2 respondents cited problems with the adversarial nature of the court process and adversarial atmosphere in the courtroom, with 1 adding that mediation often takes too long.

Discovery and reports/evidence. Eight respondents cited problems related to discovery, typically pertaining to multiple and/or last-minute requests for discovery. Five others spoke to problems of requests for reports and evidence, which often happen at the last minutes and are time- and labor-intensive to fulfill.

GAL. Three respondents cited specific problems with GAL.

None. Comments from 13 respondents referenced no specific problem or challenge.

Please select the top three challenges of your Review and Permanency Planning Hearing being heard.

A total of 89 respondents selected “Other” and wrote in a response. These write-in responses are discussed here. Responses fell into the following categories, with some responses encompassing multiple categories.

Category	Sub-Category	# Responses
Bench		
	Bench: Continuances -- too many	19
	Bench: Not "one judge, one case"	3
	Bench: Matters that could be handled pre-court are consuming court time	2
	Bench: General	4
Parent(s)		14
Attorneys		
	Attorneys don't come, are late, or leave early	4
	Attorneys don't meet with clients before court	4
	Attorneys unprepared, inexperienced, inept	1
	Attorneys: Not enough attorneys	1
	Attorneys: General	1
Court capacity		
	Court capacity: Not enough court days	13
Court scheduling		
	Court scheduling: No precision/order to court scheduling	2
GAL		2
Mediation		1
Contested hearings		1
Reports and evidence		
	Reports and Evidence: General	5
	Reports and Evidence: Discovery	1
Cases linger in court		1
None		
	No specific problem indicated	18

Bench. Comments from 28 respondents referenced problems related to the bench. These included too many continuances (n=18), the lack of a “one case, one judge” policy (n=3), and

the fact that matters that could be handled prior to court are consuming court time (n=2). A handful of others (n=4) listed general or miscellaneous problems related to the bench.

Parents. Comments from 14 respondents referenced problems related to parents, typically related to no-shows by parents and the fact that judges often fail to hold them accountable for these no-shows.

Attorneys. Comments from 11 respondents referenced problems with parent attorneys. Specific problems included attorneys fail to come to court, come late, or leave early (n=4); attorneys failing to meet with clients before court (n=4); not having enough attorneys (n=1); and general problems with parent attorneys and attorney advocates (n=2).

Court capacity. Comments from 13 respondents referenced the lack of an adequate number of court days.

Court scheduling. Comments from 2 respondents cited lack of precise scheduling of hearings to be a challenge.

GAL. Two respondents cited specific problems with GAL.

Mediation. One respondent discussed problems with mediation.

Contested hearings. One respondent cited problems with contested hearings.

Reports/evidence and discovery. Five respondents cited problems related to problems of requests for reports and evidence, which often happen at the last minutes and are time- and labor-intensive to fulfill.

Another respondent spoke to problems with discovery, specifically multiple and/or last-minute requests for discovery.

Other. One respondent said that cases tend to linger in court, but cited no other specifics.

None. Comments from 18 respondents referenced no specific problem or challenge.

Please select the top three challenges of your Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) Hearing being heard.

A total of 129 respondents selected “Other” and wrote in a response. These write-in responses are discussed here. Responses fell into the following categories, with some responses encompassing multiple categories.

Category	Sub-Category	# Responses
Service of court summons		25
Court capacity		
	Court capacity: Not enough court days or court time	18
	Court capacity: Cases take too long to schedule	6
Bench		
	Bench: Continuances -- too many	18
	Bench: Case filing not timely	3
Parent(s)		
	Parents not present	9
	Parents not located/identified	2
	Parental appeals	1
Attorneys		
	Attorneys don't meet with clients before court	5
	Attorneys unprepared, inexperienced, inept	4
	Attorneys don't come, are late, or leave early	1
	Attorneys: Not enough attorneys	1
DSS		
	DSS attorney has poor skills or prep	5
	DSS poor prep or slow	3
Petition not filed timely		6
Court scheduling		
	Court scheduling: Overloaded docket/cases take too long to hear	3
	Court scheduling: No precision/order to court scheduling	1
	Court scheduling: General	1
Policy		
	Policy: DSS policy means kids linger in system	3
None		
	No specific problem indicated	20

Service of court summons. Nearly one in five respondents (n=25) respondents referenced problems related to failure to serve court summons to parents.

Court capacity. Comments from 24 respondents referenced the lack of court capacity. Specifically, 18 respondents cited an inadequate number of court days or lack of enough court time. A handful of others (n=6) said that cases take too long to schedule, presumably due at least in part to lack of court capacity.

Bench. Comments from 21 respondents referenced problems related to the bench. Most of these (n=18) stated that there were too many continuances. Others (n=3) said that case filing was not always timely.

Parents. Comments from 12 respondents referenced problems related to parents. These included parents not being present (n=9) or being unable to be located or identify (n=2). A high number of parental appeals was cited by 1 respondent.

Attorneys. Comments from 11 respondents referenced problems with parent attorneys. Specific problems included attorneys failing to meet with clients before court (n=5); attorneys are unprepared, inexperienced, or inept (n=4); attorneys fail to come to court, come late, or leave early (n=1); and not having enough attorneys (n=1).

DSS. Comments from 8 respondents referenced problems with DSS. Specific problems included poor DSS attorneys (n=5) and generally poor or slow preparation by DSS attorneys and/or social workers (n=3).

Petition not filed timely. A handful of respondents (n=6) said that petitions were not filed in a timely manner.

Court scheduling. Comments from 3 respondents referenced too many cases on the docket. Another respondent cited lack of precise scheduling of hearings to be a challenge. Yet another respondent spoke of general scheduling problems.

Policy. One respondent said that faulty DSS policy results in children lingering in the foster care system.

None. Comments from 20 respondents referenced no specific problem or challenge.

Other comments.

The survey allowed stakeholders to share any additional comments. We received 121 responses. Responses fell into the following categories, with some responses encompassing multiple categories.

Category	Sub-Category	# Responses
Attorneys		
	Parent attorneys are late, don't show, are unprepared	19
	Pre-trial conferences (effective ones) needed	6
	Better pay for parent attorneys	2
	Not enough attorneys	1
	Attorneys should prioritize juvenile court	1
	Attorneys uncaring	1

Category	Sub-Category	# Responses
Bench		
	Continuances -- too many	11
	Court orders not submitted in timely manner	3
	Need "one case, one judge"	3
	Problems with judges	3
	Too many appeals when matters can be handled in a different way	1
	Bench: General	1
Court capacity		
	More court days/more realistic calendaring	10
Court scheduling		
	Court takes up too much of social workers' time	5
	Need more precise scheduling of case (e.g., morning or afternoon)	5
	Court schedules that don't conflict, e.g., only juvenile hearings that day	1
GAL		
	GAL attorney/advocate not always available	4
	GAL: General	1
	GAL attorneys too chummy with staff at expense of children	1
	GAL attorneys unprepared	1
	GAL is biased	1
Adversarial		
	Adversarial environment	7
Children		3
Training		
	Training for social workers	3
Policy		
	Policy: DSS policies unhelpful	2
Communication		
	Poor communication	1
Court reports		1
Other		
	Lack of privacy/confidentiality in courtroom	4
	Timeliness should be priority	3
	MCO	1
	Court system is embarrassingly bad; no specifics	1

Category	Sub-Category	# Responses
Recommend		
	Recommend: Continue CIP efforts like training	1
None		
	No specific problem stated	19

Attorneys. Comments from 30 respondents referenced parent attorneys. Specific comments included attorneys are late, don't show, or are unprepared (n=19); attorneys should prioritize juvenile court (n=1); attorneys are uncaring (n=1); and not having enough attorneys (n=1).

Bench. Comments from 22 respondents referenced problems related to the bench. Half of these (n=11) stated that there were too many continuances. Others (n=3) said that case filing was not always timely. Other comments related to the bench referenced the lack of a "one case, one judge" policy (n=3), general problems with judges (n=3), and too many appeals (n=1). One other respondent listed general or miscellaneous problems related to the bench.

Court capacity. Comments from 10 respondents referenced the lack of court capacity, specifically an inadequate number of court days or lack of enough court time.

Court scheduling. Comments from 5 respondents stated that poor court scheduling takes up too much of social workers' times. Another 5 respondents requested more precise scheduling of hearings, while yet another respondent requested court schedules that do not conflict.

GAL. Eight respondents cited problems with GAL, including lack of availability (n=4), lack of preparedness (n=1), and other problems (n=3)

Adversarial environment. Seven respondents cited problems with the adversarial nature of the court process and adversarial atmosphere in the courtroom.

Children. Three respondents included comments related children—generally that children tend to be short-changed in the court process.

Training. Three respondents requested more training for social workers.

Communication. One respondent said poor communication was a problem.

Other. Nine other respondents discussed issues ranging from lack of privacy in the court room (n=4), an assertion that timeliness should be a priority (n=3), problems with the MCO (n=1), and other general complaints about the court process (n=1).

Recommendation. One respondent recommended that the court system continue efforts related to the Court Improvement Program, such as ongoing training.

None. Comments from 19 respondents referenced no specific problem or challenge.