A medley of laughter and happy voices recently filled the Olson Training Center as smiling staff found their seats. We were attending a Wednesday Workshop at UNL's Center on Children, Families, and the Law (CCFL), where once a month we gather for a fun activity and then broaden our perspectives by hearing from an invited speaker.

Presenters include community partners, university faculty, and our CCFL Project Directors. No matter the speaker, these workshops always lead to thoughtful questions and provide an invaluable opportunity to get curious and connect as we learn about a topic together.

Expanding our sense of curiosity encourages us to listen and learn from those with lived experience and increases insight into how we can more effectively help the helpers. Strengthening our sense of connection reminds us of the transformative power of community and reaffirms that we must all work together for children and families to be able to thrive.

We are committed to cultivating authentic curiosity and connection as we grow, and we believe you will see that represented throughout the following pages. Featured projects focus on permanency, child and youth engagement, homelessness prevention, safe and healthy families, trauma-capable schools, workforce and family well-being, youth justice, court improvement, economic aid, and respite care. CCFL collaborates with exceptional partner organizations and agencies in these efforts.

We are so proud of the work our faculty, staff, and students are doing at CCFL and are pleased to share it with you in this report.

Eve Brank, JD, PhD
Director

Kathy Olson, MA, JD
Associate Director

Christine Henningsen, BSW, JD
Associate Director
CENTER ON CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND THE LAW

The Center on Children, Families, and the Law is one of 57 departments, centers, programs, and institutes located within the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. CCFL was established in 1987 to serve as a home for research and public service on child and family policy issues. The knowledge of child and family issues we gain is used to educate policymakers, scholars, service providers, and the public. Our work serves as the primary basis for local, state, and national policies and has been cited in court rulings, including the U.S. Supreme Court. We help the helpers by providing training, resources, and expertise to helping professionals.

THE HELPERS
- Child Welfare Practitioners
- School Personnel
- Community Leaders
- Homeless Service System Providers
- Policymakers
- Respite Coordinators
- Service Providers
- Mental Health Practitioners
- Indigenous Tribal Leaders
- Local, State, and Federal Agencies
- Probation Officers
- Volunteers
- Judges and Attorneys
- Law Enforcement
- Community Health Workers
- Basic and Emergency Needs Providers

THOSE HELPED
- Neglected and Maltreated Children
- Vulnerable Infants and Toddlers
- Parents and Families
- Service Professionals
- Older Adults
- The Community
- Foster and Adoptive Parents
- Populations at Increased Risk
- Individuals Impacted by Health Disparities
- Youth Impacted by the Justice System
- Caregivers and Care Recipients
- Individuals with Disabilities
- Survivors of Trafficking
- Children and Youth in Foster Care
- Individuals Experiencing Homelessness
- Families Impacted by Domestic Violence

HOW WE HELP THE HELPERS
- Needs Assessment
- Training
- Research
- Legal/Policy Analysis
- Program Evaluation
- Community Services Planning
- Data Management
- Resource Information
- Technical Assistance
- Consultation and Capacity Building

OUR COMMITMENT
We believe that every person and every interaction matters. In this annual report, you will see how our various projects help support the six ambitious aims of UNL’s N2025 Strategic Plan.

OUR GROWTH
- 700+ years of combined experience at CCFL
- 100+ employees have worked 10+ years at CCFL
- 20 employees have worked 15+ years at CCFL
- 13 employees have worked 20+ years at CCFL

CCFL Awards
- FY19: $6.3+M
- FY23: $11.8+M
- 3→101 EMPLOYEES
- 1→66 GRANTS
- 98% FY grant success rate
- 100+ collaborative partners

OUR WORK
We are excited to share a few project highlights on the following pages. With more than 30 collaborative projects, sub-projects, programs, and initiatives, this annual report only features a limited sampling of CCFL’s work. We invite you to scan the QR code for a more in-depth look at the scope of CCFL’s services, projects, training, and publications.
The National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative (NTI), led by the Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.), began in 2017 and is an online training designed to support child welfare and mental health professionals to address the mental health needs of children and families in adoption, guardianship, or kinship care.

Traumatic experiences and early losses contribute to developmental and emotional challenges that may be inadequately addressed because professionals do not receive specialized training. NTI aims to improve collaboration between services and to improve permanency, child and family well-being, and stability through enhanced casework and clinical practice.

Starting in 2022, CCFL has led the evaluation of NTI by assessing the outreach and promotion of NTI; training implementation and utilization; participant experiences, knowledge, and case practice; and collaboration between professionals. These evaluation data are integral to demonstrating C.A.S.E.’s progress toward NTI’s goals and its impact.

Having an attitude of curiosity is a must at nearly every stage of evaluation, from seeking to understand the program, to developing measures, identifying information sources, analyzing data, and interpreting results. The CCFL team is passionate about using effective methods and trust-based connections to ensure the success of this nationwide initiative.

The NTI directory lists NTI-trained Mental Health Providers in 34 states.

Participants reported significant increases in ADOPTION MENTAL HEALTH COMPETENCE in both knowledge and ability.

COLLABORATIVE PARTNERS: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Children’s Bureau; Center for Adoption Support and Education; Family Equality; FosterClub; PolicyWorks, Ltd; University of Connecticut School of Social Work, Innovations Institute

TEAM: Dawn Davis, Eve Brank, Brittany Blahnikhoff, Spencer Gowin, Michelle Graef, Megan Paul, not pictured: Sara Ibrahim

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The Quality Improvement Center on Engaging Youth in Finding Permanency (QIC-EY) is charged with advancing child welfare programs and practice to ensure that they are authentically engaging and empowering children and youth in child welfare throughout the U.S., especially in relation to permanency decisions. Spaulding for Children leads the QIC-EY, and CCFL is one of four collaborative partners. CCFL’s primary role is to help child welfare agencies make systemic changes to improve child and youth engagement.

This process is all about being curious. Exploring current practice, assessing organizational functioning, identifying facilitators and barriers, analyzing root causes, and generating solutions all involve an iterative process of questions and answers. This work is done with surveys and facilitated discussions and activities with subject matter experts.

The team has also provided input on the eight pilot sites, supported the design and development of the training and coaching model, delivered technical assistance, and offered sustainability planning.

CCFL is proud to be a part of the QIC-EY and transformative child welfare change that authentically engages with children and youth and amplifies their voices.
The Community Services Division helps the helpers by developing systems and programs that serve those needing basic and emergency assistance, including housing, food, and financial support. Ending Homelessness Planning and Development is one component of Community Services. Hearing directly from those who have experienced homelessness is vital to planning, development, implementation, and evaluation of homeless systems and programs. Cultivating trusting relationships with homeless service providers and those with lived experience is crucial to address the housing crisis and meet real needs with real solutions.

CCFL is part of the Family Violence Council’s Safe and Healthy Families Initiative (SAHFI), which provides a coordinated response to child maltreatment cases related to domestic violence (DV) in Lancaster County. SAHFI seeks to develop a DV-informed workforce to improve professional practice within the intersection of DV and child welfare. This goal requires meeting professionals where they are, setting aside assumptions, and approaching professional development training open-mindedly. SAHFI is dedicated to bringing together community partners, Department of Health and Human Services caseworkers, therapists, law enforcement, county attorneys, private attorneys, judges, and other practitioners to help families experiencing DV receive the support and services they need.
Trauma Capable Schools

Trauma Capable Schools includes an online training library developed by CCFL that offers stand-alone courses for Lincoln Public Schools (LPS) personnel. In addition, the project utilizes surveys, workgroups, and evaluations to understand how various parts of the school system impact students, including how to respond to educator experiences, values, attitudes, barriers, and successes. The project has increased trust and decreased suspensions, expulsions, and out-of-classroom time by applying evidence-based promising practices and a healing-centered approach. Trauma Capable Schools helps students and educators to grow emotionally, behaviorally, and academically by supporting school personnel as they integrate trauma-sensitive solutions into the school system.

By hearing, respecting, and honestly addressing the needs of workers, we remain true to our mission to help the helpers and improve the lives of children and families.

- Shelly Johnson, Training Administrator

When we foster authentic curiosity and connection between educators and their students, everyone benefits. A school system that focuses on relationship building, cultural humility, and trauma-informed education practices empowers students to succeed.

- Cheryl Turner, Training Specialist II

DURING THE 2023 FY:

54
social workers completed a three-year training to be self-sustainable in Trauma Informed and Restorative Practices (TIRP) assessments

150
school counselors were trained in providing observation data for TIRP assessments

Three new mental health courses were developed and launched online:

1. Anxiety or Behavior: What Comes First?
2. Psychotropic Medications
3. Bringing Equity into the Classroom

NEW WORKER TRAINING HAS:

19 courses with mental and physical well-being resources for workers and families

By hearing, respecting, and honestly addressing the needs of workers, we remain true to our mission to help the helpers and improve the lives of children and families.

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Training for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services

CCFL’s training team delivers comprehensive New Worker Training to Child and Family Services (CFS) Specialists and Nebraska Tribal staff. CCFL’s multidisciplinary team invites input from CFS trainees, experienced workers, supervisors, administrators, and families with lived experience, which helps to expand perspectives and grounds training curricula in genuine practice. Research suggests that workers and families are experiencing increased stress. Raising mental and physical well-being awareness, education, and support is crucial to staff retention. When CFS staff feel empowered in self-care, they become better equipped to support child and family well-being.

TEAM:
Anna Christy, Mitchell Issakivitz, Amy Peters, Tam Miller, Michael Runnbaugh, Audrea Gain, Vindy Labbe, Mark Ellis, Chad Schaefer, Amelia Fot, Eliza McCombs, Jamison Bireley, Charlotte Lewis, Cheryl Turner, and Frank Kanter, Angela Gerhardt, Sarah Melcher, Rachel Okeke, Jessica Cole, Shelly Johnson, Joyce Dehler, Laura Cakal, Anna Graham, Jessica Martin, Mirza Basker, Shalini Vasey, Eliza Johnson, Destiny Willson, Kathy Olson, Sarah Bruck, Melissa Kryg, MarisaChaves, Allison Jones, Kristen Adkins, Alisa Beaulieu, John Turner, Shelly Egge, Christina Henningham, not pictured: Xenia Farris, Justin Fiscus, Sara Blackwell, Himal Singh, Wendy Sfahadi, Laurie Voelker, Cheryl Yoder

12
13
18
12
13
The Children's Justice Clinic (CJC) was created by CCFL and Nebraska Law and offers experiential learning for third-year law students to serve as guardians ad litem (GALs) in the juvenile court system. The CJC has transformed the legal landscape of child welfare in Nebraska by providing high-quality representation to maltreated and neglected children. Despite overwhelming success since launching in 2017, the clinic continues to look for innovative ways to enhance the student and client experience. In 2023, the CJC was pleased to expand expert consultation by hiring a part-time social worker. Students report that meeting with an in-house social worker has increased their confidence, advocacy, and overall understanding of their cases.

GALs indicate that talking with our CJC social worker has helped them to more fully connect with the parents’ perspectives, get curious about their own unconscious biases, and become even better advocates for the children they represent.

- Michelle Paxton, Director, Children’s Justice Clinic

The Nebraska Resource Project for Vulnerable Young Children (NRPVYC) improves the well-being of young children by strengthening the professionals who serve them. One area of focus is Court Infusion, which introduces therapeutic principles to juvenile and problem-solving courts. During 2022-2023, NRPVYC supported two problem-solving court projects, provided a needs assessment to a third court, and offered reflective practice facilitating Attuned Interactions (FAN) training and ongoing reflective consultation to judges, attorneys, and Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) caseworkers involved in juvenile court. Through Court Infusion, NRPVYC connects court professionals with evidence-based, trauma-informed practice, leading to improved outcomes for children and families.

A large part of NRPVYC’s work is centered around attunement. Attunement between parent and baby. Attunement in interactions with others. In our work with courts, we offer reflective practice training programs and ongoing reflective consultation to help support court professionals’ interactions with colleagues, co-workers, clients, and others.

- Kelli Hauptman, Project Director

In 2023, the Acklie Charitable Foundation made a landmark gift to the University of Nebraska College of Law, part of which was a permanent endowment of the Children’s Justice Clinic.

Managed 549 completed evaluation surveys through its court projects
The Tax Credit Alliance of Nebraska (TCAN) offers free federal and state income tax preparation to populations currently underserved across the state. TCAN is sponsored by the Internal Revenue Service and is part of CCFL. The team keeps busy year-round, informing individuals about their tax credit eligibility by conducting educational clinics across Nebraska. Preparing a return can involve multiple tax codes and statutes. During training, various case studies are used to pique curiosity and assist preparers in understanding and applying tax law correctly. The TCAN team enjoys working collaboratively to solve complex returns while ensuring individuals, children, and families receive the tax assistance and returns they deserve.

Answers4Families (A4F) is a dynamic multi-platform information hub connecting Nebraskans with special needs to resources and support. One aspect of A4F’s work is a partnership with the Nebraska Lifespan Respite Network (NLRN), a resource for family caregivers. A4F administers NLRN’s website and database, which offers training, caregiver events, a provider directory, and a data dashboard. NLRN’s innovative respite program consistently garners national recognition for its impactful contributions to caregivers. By conducting evaluations and embracing diverse viewpoints, A4F is helping NLRN foster open feedback and facilitate responsive, reciprocal relationships with respite providers and the family caregivers they serve.

Everyone’s story matters. Our team strives to prepare taxpayers’ returns ethically and responsibly by maximizing credits. We build connections with humility, empathy, clarifying questions, and active listening. TCAN is committed to creating a learning community that serves, educates, and relieves taxpayer stress. - Linda Moody, Project Director

Caregivers need support. Answers4Families is deeply committed to working with the Nebraska Lifespan Respite Network to connect family caregivers to respite services and enhance statewide efforts to strengthen family well-being. - Charlotte Lewis, Project Director

There are over 179,000 identified family caregivers in Nebraska.

(source: AARP: Valuing the Invaluable 2023)
By listening and learning open-mindedly, we commit to rooting out reductive beliefs and biases and expanding equity and inclusion. By building community open-heartedly, we commit to breaking down barriers and increasing well-being and belonging.

There may be moments when authenticity feels absent, crises seem to diminish the capacity for curiosity, and some use differences to drive disconnection. That is when we must choose to dig deep. Disconnection harms. Connection heals.

At UNL’s Center on Children, Families, and the Law, we are grounded and growing in our mission of helping the helpers to improve the lives of children and families.

Relationships are the greatest resource for working toward real solutions. CCFL is deeply grateful for our collaborative partners—the extraordinary changemakers working alongside us.

We look forward to cultivating authentic curiosity and connection with you and all the children and families we serve this coming year.

Simply scan the QR code and tell us a little about yourself. You will be entered into a drawing to receive one of a dozen CCFL mugs or sweatshirts as a thank-you!