



Center on  
Children,  
Families,  
—— and ——  
the Law

REFLECTING AND REIMAGINING POSSIBILITIES



## A LETTER FROM OUR DIRECTORS

Have you ever been in a dressing room with multiple mirrors? You look into one and see yourself stretching infinitely into the distance. Each reflection is a new angle, an unexpected detail, a different view of who you are. This year, at the Center on Children, Families, and the Law (CCFL), we have done our own kind of mirror work. We have looked hard at our challenges, changes, and achievements, while discovering new dimensions to our purpose and potential. Through it all, we have come back to one question: how can we best **help the helpers** who serve children and families?

We have adjusted, adapted, explored, and pivoted in our approaches, all while reflecting on the exceptional contributions of those who have been a part of our CCFL family over the years. Reimagining, we have opened up possibilities that once felt out of reach. Every challenge became a chance to see ourselves more clearly, ask tough questions, draw upon our people and partners' expertise, and find fresh, innovative ways to move forward.

In the following pages, you will read about collaborations that grew out of honest conversations regarding what was working, what was not, and what could be. These project highlights demonstrate that we are dedicated to meeting the university's challenge to become "extraordinary" by staying committed to deep reflection, continuous growth, authentic connections, and bold thinking about what is possible.

Our work ahead will not be easy. System change is complex. Needs are rising. But this year, we have clarified something important: strength is not about having all the answers. Strength is asking hard questions so that answers can emerge. We face the future with steady optimism—reflecting and reimagining the possibilities—knowing that transformation happens one conversation, one relationship, one moment of understanding at a time.

Eve Brank, JD, PhD

Director

Christine Henningsen, MPA, JD

Associate Director

# REFLECTING & REIMAGINING POSSIBILITIES



## HELPING THE HELPERS

We provide an interdisciplinary and collaborative approach to improve systems and outcomes for children and families.



## Center on Children, Families, and the Law

The Center on Children, Families, and the Law (CCFL) 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 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 Center



**14** project directors and leads oversee **49** grants focused on improving systems that impact individuals and families.



Delivers **11** additional trainings to partner agencies and organizations.



**36** undergraduate and **44** graduate student workers have benefited from experiential learning over the last five years.



**80%**

FY grant success rate



Provides services or training in all **93** counties in Nebraska.

## Our Commitment

In 2019, the University of Nebraska–Lincoln celebrated its 150th anniversary and unveiled N2025, a faculty-led strategic plan identifying six ambitious aims driven by the tenet that at Nebraska, every person and every interaction matters.

Our belief that **“every person and every interaction matters”** continues to guide us each day.

In the following pages, you will see our commitment to the University of Nebraska’s new strategic plan, **Odyssey to Extraordinary**: a transformative journey designed to guide the university from an excellent institution to a truly extraordinary one.



**TEAM:** Jill Knox, Mindy Liebelt, Christine Henningsen, Krista Roebke, Angela Gebhardt, Shelly Johnson, Allison Jones, Paulette Sombke-Hansen, Charlie Lewis, Cheryl Turner, Angie Graham, not pictured: Jessica Cook, Laurie Voelker

**NEW | Training Collaborative**

CCFL has a new Training Collaborative. This team of award-winning trainers is partnering with various organizations to provide a wide array of evidence-based training to service professionals.

The curriculum offered is tailored to various levels and specializations. Topics focus on essential learning areas that enhance skills and knowledge, helping professionals provide the highest level of support to the individuals they serve.

The Training Collaborative offers agencies:

- Tailored training by multidisciplinary experts
- Customizable monthly training calendars developed collaboratively
- Comprehensive participant attendance tracking
- Documentation of training completion and certification
- Post-session course evaluation and quality assurance measures
- Individual course selections for tailored professional growth
- Facilitator observations and feedback on participant engagement

The Training Collaborative also offers training with specialized certifications, such as:

**Suicide Prevention QPR:** Participants learn that QPR stands for Question, Persuade, and Refer—the three simple steps anyone can learn to help save a life from suicide.

**The Mandt System®:** Participants learn key skills to build positive relationships and handle challenging interactions effectively.

over **38** research-based training courses available



See how the Training Collaborative can meet your training needs.

**PARTNERS:** Blessing of Hope LLC; Bridge of Hope Child Advocacy Center, North Platte; Building Blocks Learning Center; Educare Lincoln; Early Learning Connection; Grand Island Community Foundation; Hands of Heartland; UNL-CCFL Community Services Division, Homeless Management Information System; HopeSpoke; Jenda Family Services; Kawasaki; LAUNCH Leadership; Nebraska Early Development Network; Primesite Real Estate Management; The Mediation Center; Thriving Family Alliance Iowa

Loved the mixture of activities and keeping everyone interactive.

”

Training Participant

This was an incredible training! The facilitators were engaging and made it very interesting!

”

Training Participant





TEAM: Sara Ibrahim, Cheryl Turner, Jessica Cook, Dawn Davis

CCFL is pleased to offer a new training series, Building Trauma-Capable Schools, developed by Cheryl Turner, MA, LIMHP, LPC. This comprehensive training initiative offers a phased, accessible approach to building a trauma-capable system of support that educators can easily integrate into any educational environment. Through its progressive learning model, educators learn a nuanced, empathic approach that supports students who have experienced trauma, transforming the classroom into a space for resilience and success. Building Trauma-Capable Schools was honored to receive an award from Women Investing in Nebraska to help implement this powerful program across the state.

Center on Children, Families, and the Law



Reflective Practice FAN Training Program



Protecting Tomorrow: Foundations of Child Welfare

The CCFL Training Collaborative is now providing online training through the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Online Education site. UNL Online offers opportunities for continuing education, including micro-credentialing and badges to enhance professional profiles. CCFL's Nebraska Resource Project for Vulnerable Young Children (NRPVYC) also provides a micro-credentialing badge for those who participate in reflective practice training available through the NRPVYC website. CCFL looks forward to developing many more online courses to choose from in the coming year. This exciting expansion of how training is offered promises to open a world of possibilities for career growth and deliver a rewarding learning experience to our CCFL training participants.

Research demonstrates that equipping teachers with effective interventions not only reduces classroom challenges but also dramatically improves teacher retention and student outcomes.

PHASE 1

Establishes a foundation for advanced knowledge of trauma-capable care.

PHASE 2

Synthesizes learning into application and self-sustainable assessment.

In 2024, we reimagined how we could best support educator resilience and student well-being in schools. Women Investing in Nebraska's belief and partnership in this vision is empowering us to create sustainable, trauma-capable learning environments that will positively impact thousands of students and educators across Nebraska for years to come.



Cheryl Turner,  
Project Lead



View CCFL's Training on  
UNL Online

CCFL is thrilled to partner with UNL Online to broaden our reach, opening up the possibility for busy service professionals to access high-quality continuing education training to benefit them and their community.



Christine Henningsen,  
Associate Director

NEW | Nebraska Youth Homelessness System Improvement Project



A CELEBRATION | Nebraska Resource Project for Vulnerable Young Children



**TEAM:** Sarah Cruz, Jay Schalk, Jeff Chambers, Brittany Brakenhoff, Chad Gressley, Angela Gebhardt, Zane Frank, Danell McCoy Vaughan, Stacie Vandenberg, not pictured: Brooke McBride, Ciara Orr

In November 2024, CCFL’s Community Services Division became the lead agency in a statewide partnership for the Nebraska Youth Homelessness System Improvement (YHSI) project. In 2025, YHSI achieved significant success in developing a cross-system team with 92 members engaged across Nebraska. YHSI has offered training to help increase awareness and understanding of youth homelessness and established workgroups to create collaborative solutions. In addition to engaging system partners, YHSI has facilitated the creation of Youth Action Boards (YABs). YABs are comprised of young adults who have experienced homelessness and focus on providing a platform for them to use their lived expertise to inform system improvement.



**TEAM:** Samantha Byrns, Tracey Kock, Melissa Villarreal, Ashtyn Beck, Lily Lagerman, Kelli Hauptman, Lindsey Ondrak, Emily Starr, Krista Roebke, Dayna Goff, not pictured: Cassie Roberts, Haifaa Al-saadi, Jamie Bahm, Meredith Cartwright, Natalie Chin, Pamela Caudill Jordan

CCFL is celebrating a remarkable 10 years of the Nebraska Resource Project for Vulnerable Young Children (NRPVYC). NRPVYC began by providing technical support to juvenile courts and training clinicians in Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP) in 2015. NRPVYC’s biennial CPP cohorts rapidly expanded into an entire training platform that supports young children and families, as well as the professionals helping them. The initial reflective consultation for caseworkers grew into the Nebraska Center on Reflective Practice, which trains professionals in reflective practice. The center has recently launched a new reflective practice training program, Components for Enhancing Career Experience and Reducing Trauma (CE-CERT).

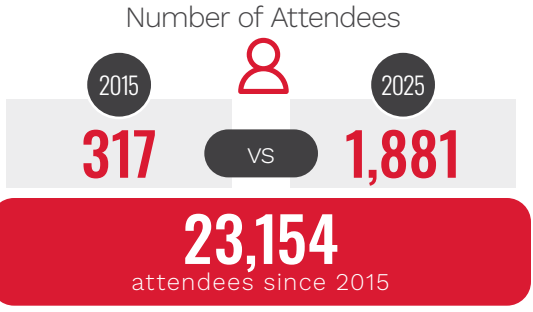
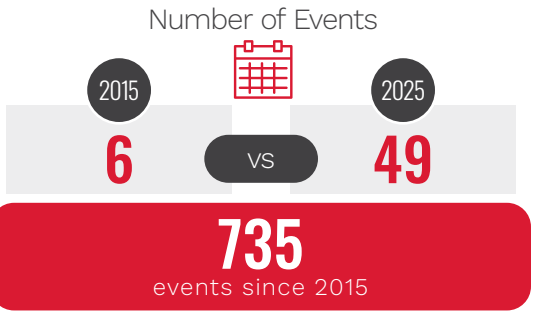
In 2025, YHSI has:

- ✓ Developed a cross-system team with 92 members engaged across Nebraska.
- ✓ Established multiple interagency workgroups to develop collaborative solutions.
- ✓ Created 5 Youth Action Boards ranging in size from 3 to 25 members across the state.

The Youth Homelessness System Improvement grant has strengthened collaborations across Nebraska agencies with the goal of creating a more responsive, young-adult-centered approach. The work underscores the importance of elevating young-adult voices to reduce barriers and improve outcomes.



**Chad Gressley,**  
YHSI Coordinator



We carefully listen to real needs on the ground and respond with possibilities drawing from our experiences as former or current clinicians, caseworkers and attorneys. We greatly appreciate our partners and look forward to continuing to empower professionals as they support Nebraska’s children.



**Samantha Byrns,**  
Assistant Project Director

**PARTNERS:** U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, City of Lincoln, Lancaster County Human Services, Omaha Tribe of Nebraska, Ponca Tribe of Nebraska, Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska, 47 community-based partner agencies across the State of Nebraska, Youth Action Board Members

**PARTNERS:** UNL Extension, Nebraska Department of Education, Lancaster County, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, Nebraska Association of Infant Mental Health





**TEAM:** Stacie Vandenberg, Jessica Cook, Kyle Brown, Allison Jones, Charlie Lewis, Mitchell Hesseltine, not pictured: Josh Rice

Answers4Families was pleased to assist with the creation of the new Nebraska Educational Clearinghouse. Nebraska continues to face teacher shortages, with the most critical gaps in special education, STEM, early childhood, counseling, and rural districts. Retention also remains a challenge. The Nebraska Educational Clearinghouse helps address these issues by serving as a one-stop hub for educators and aspiring teachers. It connects users to certification pathways, endorsement, and degree programs, making it easier to enter the profession, expand qualifications, and meet state standards. By supporting both recruitment and retention, the Clearinghouse plays a vital role in strengthening Nebraska’s teaching workforce and advancing educational stability statewide.



**TEAM:** Mel Baur, Jessica Cook, Katharina Stokes, Chen Xian

CCFL’s Tax Credit Alliance of Nebraska (TCAN) is volunteer based and utilizes the IRS’s Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program. Over the last fiscal year, TCAN has focused on expanding its reach and reimagining the possibilities for financial stability and education across the state. By educating households on critical tax credits, such as the Child Care Tax Credit, TCAN has helped hundreds of families unlock new opportunities. This initiative extends beyond simple tax preparation, laying a foundation for economic resilience and empowering clients to build a more secure financial future. TCAN is dedicated to expanding opportunities for Nebraska families and facilitating stronger, more vibrant communities.

For the **2024–2025 school year**, Nebraska reported **669** unfilled positions, made up of:

**469** positions covered by underqualified staff

**200** vacant positions

Special education remains the most critical shortage area.

Empowering educators starts with access to the right tools. The Clearinghouse makes it easier for teachers, school staff, and aspiring educators to explore programs, earn certifications, and continue their professional growth. It’s rewarding to support their journey and help strengthen the future of education in Nebraska.

”

**Jessica Cook,**  
Web Project Coordinator

During the **2025 Tax Season**, TCAN:

- ✓ Prepared **2,046** tax returns
- ✓ Returned **\$2.3M+** to the community with saved fees, volunteer time, and refunds
- ✓ Managed **9** sites in Lincoln and **4** sites across Nebraska
- ✓ Offered virtual and facilitated self-assistance tax preparation for those who could not come to a site

Many individuals face significant systemic barriers to financial stability, including confusing tax laws and inaccessible financial services. Our TCAN team helps to address these barriers by offering insights into tax law changes and financial best practices to those we serve.

”

**Mel Bauer,**  
Program Coordinator

**PARTNERS:** Nebraska Council on Developmental Disabilities, Nebraska Department of Education

**PARTNERS:** Internal Revenue Service (IRS), Lincoln Public Libraries, Lincoln Housing Authority, Asian Community and Culture Center, Good Neighbor Center, First Five Nebraska, Nebraska Department of Revenue, American Job Center of Lancaster and Saunders County, Southeast Community College, Nebraska Unions, Nebraska Appleseed, The Buffett Early Childhood Fund, Sherwood Foundation, NU Foundation, Union Adventist University, UBT Bank, Lincoln Food Bank, Salvation Army, WIC, AARP, Veteran’s Administration of NE and Western Iowa, United Way of South Central Nebraska, Ainsworth Public Library, Ashland Public Library, Wilson Public Library (Cozad)

# Safe and Healthy Families Initiative



# National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative



TEAM: Dayna Goff, Angela Gebhardt, Jamie Bahm, not pictured: Pamela Caudill Jordan

The Lancaster County Safe and Healthy Families Initiative (SAHFI) continues to strengthen the coordinated response at the intersection of domestic violence (DV) and child welfare. In 2025, SAHFI released a comprehensive report outlining successes from its first four years. A CCFL-led program evaluation documented significant improvements in professionals’ perceptions of Lancaster County’s response to DV. Building on this shift, SAHFI trained over 400 multidisciplinary professionals in DV-informed practices and strengthened community partnerships. Evaluation also showed positive impacts of the Safe and Healthy Families Court, with fewer child removals and more cases closing with children safely in parental custody.



TEAM: Sara Ibrahim, Spencer Gowin, Megan Paul, Sarah Stepanek, Eve Brank, Brittany Brakenhoff, Dawn Davis, Aditi Poudel, not pictured: Michelle Graef

CCFL is updating its evaluation approach for the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative (NTI) by developing new methods to utilize data to support improvement. This year’s launch of a dashboard shifts evaluation from static reports to current, accessible information on enrollment, progress, completion rates, and participant characteristics across four courses. More rigorous knowledge tests offer stronger indicators of learning, and a redesigned reporting approach gives a more comprehensive view of NTI’s impact over time. Trainees demonstrate significant gains in knowledge from pre- to post-tests. These changes create new opportunities for NTI and its partners to use data to strengthen training and improve outcomes.

“As a law enforcement officer, it better provides me with more knowledge of resources to provide to victims.”



“As a therapist for survivors and children, I can better understand and support my clients through what they are going through.”



“The insights into the behavior and thinking of DV offenders, as well as the strategies to address their behaviors, will all be useful tools.”

The Safe and Healthy Families Initiative is changing how we approach the connection between domestic violence and child welfare. Together, we are making meaningful strides toward a more effective and integrated system of support for children and families.



Pamela Caudill Jordan,  
Research Assistant Professor



Over **90%** of trainees said NTI training was relevant to their work and that they would recommend it to other professionals.



Three months after completing the training, **74%** of child welfare professionals and **88%** of mental health professionals reported using materials from the training in their work, with **50%** sharing training resources with parents.

It is rewarding to consistently reimagine how we can best support the child welfare and mental health workforce with data-driven training. In evaluation surveys, the majority of trainees agree that using NTI has enhanced the effectiveness of their work with children, youth, and families.



Sara Ibrahim,  
Research Specialist I



# THANK YOU



CCFL would like to recognize and honor the dedicated staff members we bade farewell to in 2024. As various grants and projects concluded, we said goodbye to valued colleagues and also celebrated the retirements of founding and long-term staff members. We dedicate this year's annual report to these CCFL family members (many pictured above), in recognition of their exceptional contributions and years of service.

We thank each of you for **helping the helpers** to improve the lives of children and families, and we celebrate how you continue to make an extraordinary impact, each and every day.

## Retirements



### AUDINE OEHM, AAS

**Lead Training Coordination Associate | CCFL 1999-2024**

As training coordinator, Oehm provided support to CCFL trainers and staff for 25 years. She managed the logistics of all New Worker and In-Service training by creating calendars, tracking attendance, and submitting scheduled reports. She also oversaw CCFL's entire office renovation during the pandemic. She received the 2020 Applause Award from the College of Arts and Sciences and, with the training team, the 2021 Quality Training Program Award from the National Staff Development and Training Association. Oehm daily helped the helpers, ensuring trainers and trainees had what they needed to succeed in their work with children and families.



### MARK ELLS, JD, LLM

**Research Assistant Professor | CCFL 1997-2024**

As a lawyer, Ells developed curriculum and trained probation officers and Child and Family Service Specialists for the last 27 years at CCFL. He also worked on regional and national projects that led to system change in child welfare. He served as a consultant for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and as a member of the Governor's Commission on the Protection of Children and the Nebraska Supreme Court Commission on Children in the Courts. Ells has committed his life to the investigation and prosecution of child abuse and the advancement of juvenile justice.



### BARBARA STURGIS, MLS, PHD

**Research Assistant Professor | CCFL 1993-2024**

As a clinical psychologist, Sturgis conducted research, created curriculum, and provided training in evidence-based child interviewing, motivational interviewing, and other child protection trainings at CCFL over the last 31 years. She taught forensic interviewing across Nebraska from 1999 to 2008 and is a member of the American Psychological Association, the Nebraska Psychological Association, and the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children. Sturgis is passionate about holding perpetrators accountable, educating service professionals, and protecting children.

### KATHRYN OLSON, MA, JD

**Associate Director | CCFL 1987-2024**

Associate Director Olson began her legal practice in 1983, focusing on juvenile and family law. Her commitment and expertise led her to become CCFL's first employee in 1987. She played a crucial role in the Nebraska Court Improvement Project, which started in 1995, aiming to enhance the state court system's response to cases involving maltreated or neglected children. Since 2011, Olson has been a member of the Supreme Court Commission on Children in the Courts, focusing on systemic issues and recommendations to ensure the court system is sensitive to children's needs. Her unwavering commitment to justice and advocacy for those most vulnerable has been evident as a legal practitioner, child welfare trainer, and member of local and state committees. Olson's contributions to CCFL's mission over the last 37 years are immeasurable, driven by her steadfast vision, dedication, and heart for helping the helpers.





# Nebraska Children's Justice and Legal Advocacy Center



TEAM: Lori Miller, Hannah Cook, Michelle Paxton, Megan Harris, Terra Garay

## **N** NEBRASKA CHILDREN'S JUSTICE AND LEGAL ADVOCACY CENTER *College of Law*

The Children's Justice Clinic (CJC) launched in 2017 as a partnership between CCFL and the University of Nebraska College of Law to train third-year law students. Led by Michelle Paxton, the CJC had the ambitious goal to elevate the standards of guardian ad litem practice in juvenile courts through clinical education. By 2020, the CJC had successfully changed the legal landscape of child welfare in Nebraska.

CCFL and Nebraska Law then developed the Children's Justice Attorney Education (CJAE) program in 2021. This innovative fellowship program, also led by Michelle Paxton, not only improved legal representation for children and families in rural communities but also inspired a new standard of excellence in the field.

"The realities we experience in Nebraska are not unique," said Paxton. "Our programs have already shown tangible benefits in addressing Nebraska's need for high-quality counsel for juveniles in rural communities."

In the spring of 2025, the CJC and CJAE merged to form the Nebraska Children's Justice and Legal Advocacy Center, housed under the Nebraska College of Law.

The Center employs a comprehensive three-component training model consisting of intensive training, multidisciplinary expert consultation, and reflective practice, which has been recognized as the best practice approach by national child advocacy organizations.

CCFL is thrilled by the success and expansion of these pivotal legal advocacy programs into the new Center and is pleased to continue providing multidisciplinary training and consultation support as an external partner.

This expansion positions the College of Law and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln to be state and national leaders in educating law students and lawyers on how to be effective advocates for children. The center will serve as a model for other states faced with the challenge of access to justice in rural areas.



Dean Richard Moberly,  
Nebraska College of Law

# REFLECTING & REIMAGINING POSSIBILITIES

As we reflect on the past year, we thank each of you for being part of our community and for supporting our work **helping the helpers.**

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln's Center on Children, Families, and the Law remains deeply committed to its mission to provide an interdisciplinary and collaborative approach to improve systems and outcomes for children and families.

As we embark on the university's Odyssey to Extraordinary, we reimagine the possibilities of what we can accomplish together in 2026.

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