

Multidisciplinary Legal Representation of Parents in Dependency Proceedings: Fiscal Year 2024-25

Report 25-06

November 2025



OPPAGA

Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability

Multidisciplinary Legal Representation of Parents in Dependency Proceedings: Fiscal Year 2024-25

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2021 Legislature amended statute to encourage and facilitate the use of multidisciplinary legal representation (MLR) programs by Florida's five Offices of Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel (RCs). Attorneys in regional counsel offices represent indigent defendants in two primary types of cases: criminal cases in which the public defender has a conflict and some types of civil cases, including child welfare dependency cases. This report focuses on representation of parents in dependency cases.

Since OPPAGA's prior report, the overall number of cases reported as served by MLR programs increased by 36%, and four of the five RCs added staff. The RCs have received a total of \$14.6 million in federal Title IV-E funds since the offices began receiving funds in Fiscal Year 2023-24.

OPPAGA received case-level data from four of the five RCs for cases served by MLR programs from July 2021 to June 2025. Using this data, OPPAGA determined that children in out-of-home care whose parents were served by MLR

programs have higher percentages of domestic violence as the reason for entry into care but are similar to children whose parents were not served by MLR programs for other maltreatment types.

OPPAGA also found that relative to a comparison group, children whose parents participated in MLR programs had higher rates of family reunification (79% compared to 61%) and lower rates of adoption by other families (7% compared to 21%) as a permanency type. However, the dependency cases of children with parents in MLR programs tended to take longer to achieve permanency, with family reunification taking an average of 64 days longer for parents in MLR programs relative to family reunifications in the comparison group. In addition, children whose parents were served by MLR programs were somewhat less likely to experience subsequent child welfare investigations resulting in the removal of a child from their home.

REPORT SCOPE

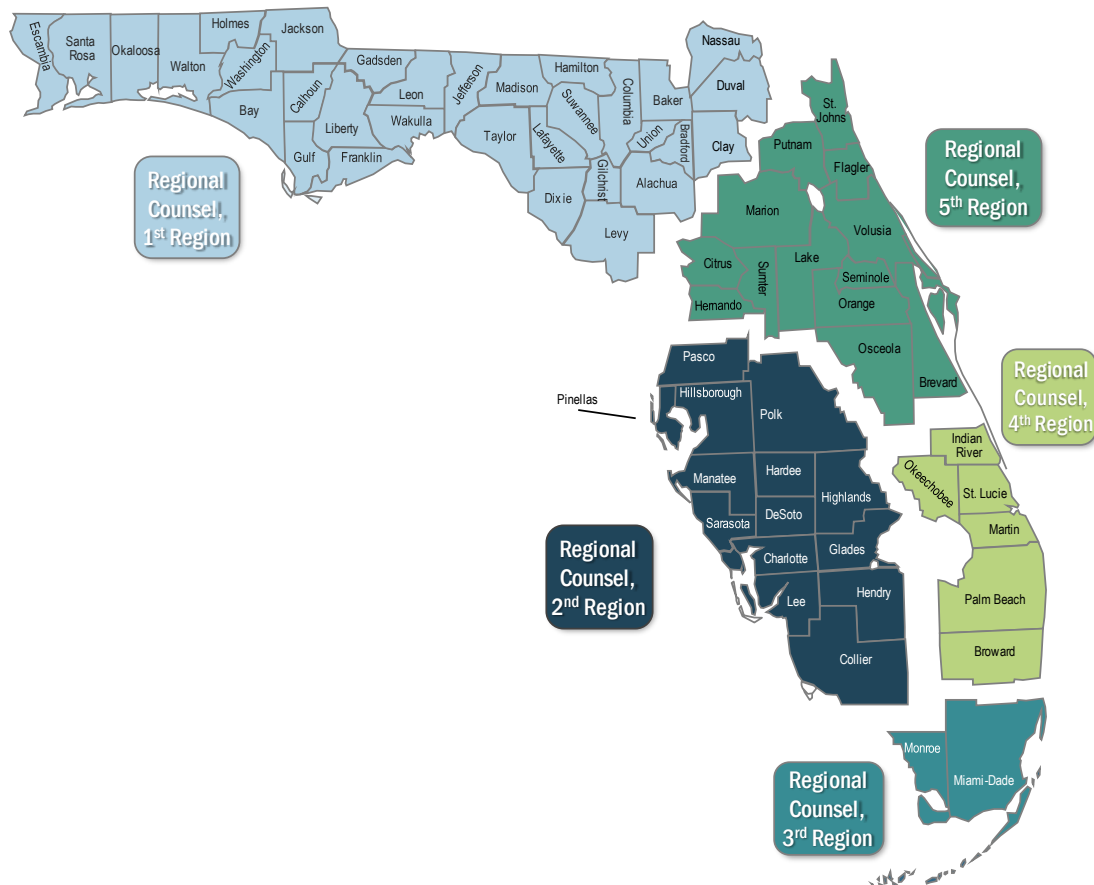
Section 39.4092, *Florida Statutes*, directs OPPAGA to conduct an annual study of multidisciplinary legal representation (MLR) provided by Offices of Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel. The reports have included an annual update on the implementation of the approach as well as an analysis comparing outcomes for MLR programs to known outcomes for children whose parents are not served by MLR programs. This is the final report in the series of four reports.

BACKGROUND

The 2007 Legislature established five Offices of Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel to represent indigent clients in certain criminal and civil cases. There are five Offices of Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel (RCs) in Florida.¹ (See Exhibit 1.) Each office is led by a regional counsel who is appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Senate for a four-year term.

Exhibit 1

Florida's Offices of Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel Serve Five Regions in the State



Source: Section 27.511, F.S.

The RCs represent indigent defendants in two primary types of cases: criminal cases in which the public defender has a conflict and some types of civil cases, including dependency cases. Dependency cases are civil cases based on allegations of abuse, abandonment, or neglect of a child. The Department of Children and Families (DCF) investigates the allegations and will remove the child from the home if the department believes that the child is at imminent risk of harm due to abuse, abandonment, or neglect. Within 24 hours of removal, the court will conduct a shelter hearing to determine if the child will remain out of parents' custody or be returned home.² If the child remains sheltered, DCF will file a petition for dependency; at a hearing called an arraignment, the court reviews the petition and asks the parents to admit to the allegations, consent to a case plan without admitting to the allegations, or deny the allegations.

¹ The boundaries of the five offices matched the boundaries of the District Courts of Appeal until the 2022 Legislature established a Sixth District Court of Appeal encompassing Charlotte, Collier, Glades, Hardee, Hendry, Highlands, Lee, Orange, Osceola, and Polk counties.

² Parents have a right to counsel in dependency proceedings and parents who are unable to afford counsel must be appointed counsel.

Case plans identify specific services necessary to resolve issues alleged in petitions and to alleviate the risks to the child. A case manager coordinates services for the family and reports to the court on case plan progress. Parents receive services such as parenting classes, substance abuse evaluation, drug treatment, mental health services, and any other services necessary to achieve reunification. Children who have been removed from their homes will be reunified when the court determines that the risks are alleviated, and the child can return home safely. This finding is usually related to parents' compliance with the case plan.

The 2021 Legislature enacted legislation to encourage the use of multidisciplinary legal representation in dependency cases. The Legislature found the use of multidisciplinary legal representation (MLR) effective in reducing safety risks to children and providing families with better outcomes.³ Further, the legislation encourages and facilitates the use of multidisciplinary programs by the RCs to provide families with the best opportunity to be successful in creating safe and stable homes for their children. A multidisciplinary approach in dependency cases integrates social workers into legal representation to provide various services such as helping clients access services ordered in case plans, acting as a liaison for clients with case managers, and collaborating with attorneys on strategy in cases.

The 2021 legislation also directed OPPAGA to annually compile case data provided by the RCs and conduct an analysis comparing reported outcomes of MLR programs to known outcomes of children whose parents were not served by MLR programs; the analysis is due to the Legislature each year from December 1, 2022, until December 1, 2025. The information included in the annual reports varied by year.

- The 2022 report provided implementation status for all five RCs as well as information on the characteristics of children whose parents were served and not served by MLR programs in RC 1 and RC 3.⁴
- The 2023 report provided an update on implementation status and information from visits to all five RCs on the benefits the offices reported from using a multidisciplinary approach to parent representation.⁵
- The 2024 report found that while it took longer on average for children whose parents were served by MLR programs to achieve permanency, such children were more likely to achieve permanency through reunification and less likely to be adopted by other families.⁶

In this final report of the series, OPPAGA examines whether children whose parents were served by MLR programs continued to be more likely to achieve permanency through reunification and the time to permanency for MLR cases. Additionally, the report examines the rate of subsequent abuse or neglect post reunification for children whose parents were served by MLR programs compared to those not served by MLR programs.

³ Section [39.4092](#), F.S.

⁴ *Review of Multidisciplinary Legal Representation of Parents in Dependency Proceedings*, OPPAGA Report [22-07](#), December 2022.

⁵ *Multidisciplinary Legal Representation of Parents in Dependency Proceedings: Fiscal Year 2022-23*, OPPAGA Report [23-11](#), November 2023.

⁶ *Multidisciplinary Legal Representation of Parents in Dependency Proceedings: Fiscal Year 2023-24*, OPPAGA Report [24-09](#), November 2024.

FINDINGS

Implementation Update

The overall number of cases reported as served by MLR programs increased as did the number of staff for some RCs; all RCs received federal funding for attorney expenses

Between Fiscal Years 2023-24 and 2024-25, the overall number of reported MLR cases increased, as did the number of cases in each Office of Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel. The number of total dependency cases served by MLR programs increased from 573 in Fiscal Year 2023-24 to 779 in Fiscal Year 2024-25. (See Exhibit 2.) All RCs experienced increases in cases during the same period. RC 1 saw the greatest increase, from 74 cases in Fiscal Year 2023-24 to 251 cases in Fiscal Year 2024-25.

Exhibit 2

The Number of Cases With Multidisciplinary Legal Representation Services Has Increased for All Offices of Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel

Regional Counsel	Fiscal Year 2021-22	Fiscal Year 2022-23	Fiscal Year 2023-24	Fiscal Year 2024-25
1	74	90	74	251
2	0	12	36	44
3	132	172	106	114
4	Did Not Report	129	177	180
5	Did Not Report	134	180	190
Total	206	537	573	779

Note: Data presented for Regional Counsel 4 represent the number of cases closed during the fiscal years. Due to methodological and client confidentiality concerns stated in its response to OPPAGA's 2022 report, Regional Counsel 4 provided aggregated summary statistics of closed cases. Data presented for other regional counsels represent both open and closed cases in each fiscal year. Some cases span multiple years and thus may be counted in more than one fiscal year.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of information from Regional Counsels 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Because there are not enough social workers to be assigned to all dependency cases managed by the RCs, regional counsel attorneys prioritize certain types of cases or parent (client) characteristics for MLR services. The case or client characteristics considered included if the client was formerly a child in foster care; was pregnant; was a victim of domestic violence; or had mental health issues or substance use disorders.

Four of the five RCs have increased multidisciplinary staff. To expand the use of MLR to more dependency cases, RCs 1, 3, 4, and 5 have added staff since 2024. RC 4 increased its multidisciplinary staff the most, from 9 staff in 2024 to 12 in 2025. (See Exhibit 3.) The RCs have three main types of staff assisting attorneys with dependency cases: forensic social workers, forensic family advocates, and parent peer advocates. Forensic social workers have a master's degree in social work, while forensic family advocates have a master's degree in a related field, such as family therapy. The RCs have also hired staff with bachelor's degrees in social work to serve as assistant forensic social workers. RC 5 includes social work bachelor's and graduate students in its MLR program; these students are from a nearby university and are required to complete internship field placements as part of their programs.

Exhibit 3

Offices of Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel Employ Professional Social Services Staff to Partner With Attorneys

Regional Counsel	Multidisciplinary Staff 2024	Multidisciplinary Staff 2025
1	11 4 forensic social workers 7 forensic family advocates	12 4 forensic social workers 8 forensic family advocates
2	1 1 assistant forensic social worker	1 1 assistant forensic social worker
3	6 2 forensic social workers 1 assistant forensic social worker 3 parent peer advocates	7 2 forensic social workers 1 assistant forensic social worker 4 parent peer advocates
4	9 5 forensic social workers 1 assistant forensic social worker 1 forensic family advocate 1 parent peer advocate 1 social services director ¹	12 6 forensic social workers 3 assistant forensic social workers 1 forensic family advocate 1 parent peer advocate 1 social services director ¹
5	7 5 forensic social workers 1 forensic family advocate 1 social services director ¹	8 6 forensic social workers 1 forensic family advocate 1 social services director ¹

¹ The social services director position is shared between Regional Counsel 4 and Regional Counsel 5.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of information from Regional Councils 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

In Fiscal Year 2024-25, each regional council received funding through the federal Title IV-E program to reimburse some of the cost of attorneys representing parents. Under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, state child welfare agencies are entitled to claim partial federal reimbursement for the cost of providing foster care and adoption assistance to children who meet federal eligibility criteria. In 2019, the federal government began allowing the agencies to claim matching funds through Title IV-E to help pay for the costs of attorneys representing parents and children in dependency proceedings. Before this change, the funds were only available to help pay for attorneys representing child welfare agencies. The total amount of Title IV-E funds received by the RCs from Fiscal Year 2021-22 through Fiscal Year 2024-25 was approximately \$14.6 million. (See Exhibit 4.)

Exhibit 4

Offices of Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel Received More Than \$14 Million in Title IV-E Funds Between Fiscal Year 2021-22 and Fiscal Year 2024-25

Regional Counsel	Title IV-E Funds Received
1	\$3.2 million
2	\$2.2 million
3	\$2.4 million
4	\$4.3 million
5	\$2.5 million
Total	\$14.6 million

Source: Justice Administrative Commission.

Outcomes

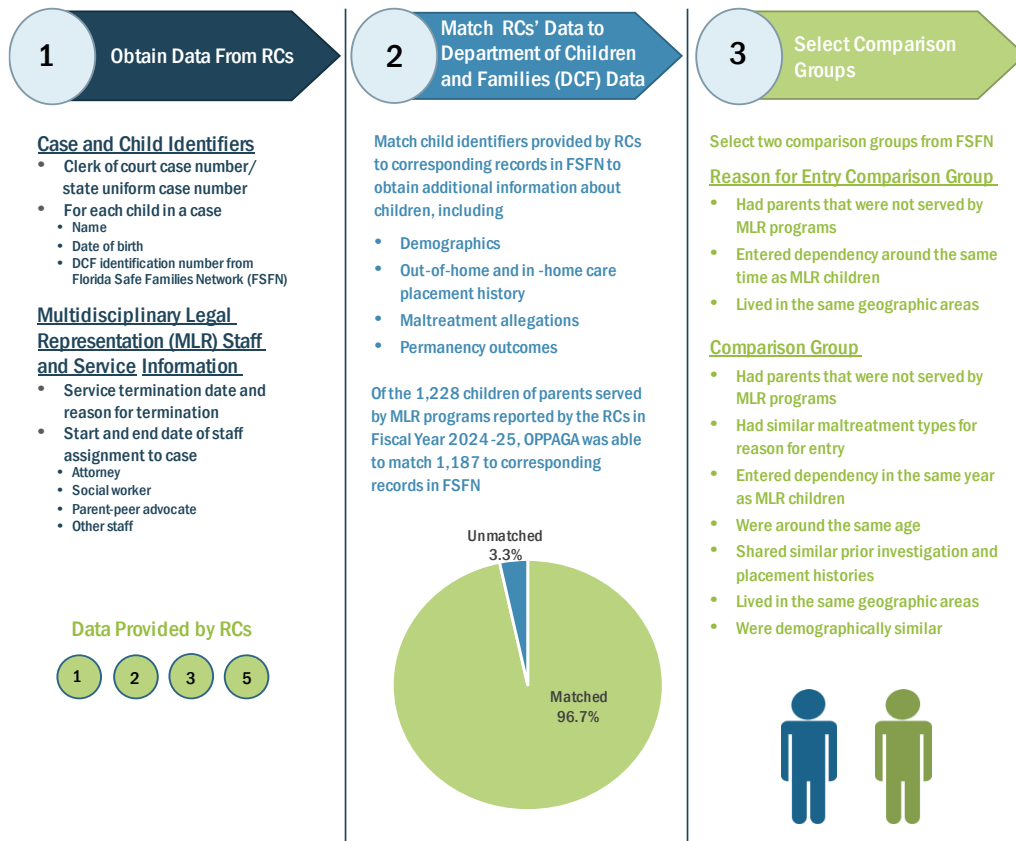
The Legislature directed OPPAGA to compare outcomes for children whose parents were served by MLR programs to outcomes for children whose parents were not served by MLR programs. The four outcomes that OPPAGA was directed to examine were the

- reasons the family became involved in the dependency system;
- length of time it takes to achieve a permanency goal;
- frequency of each type of permanency goal achieved; and
- rate of subsequent abuse or neglect that results in removal.

To compare outcomes for children in these two groups, OPPAGA used several steps to obtain data, combine datasets, identify appropriate comparison groups, and measure outcomes. These steps included requesting and receiving data from the regional counsels about clients receiving MLR services; matching MLR program clients' child dependency cases to child records in the Department of Children and Families' information system—Florida Safe Families Network—to obtain additional information about cases and outcomes; and selecting a similar comparison group of cases for which parents did not receive MLR services. Thus, OPPAGA attempted to account for several key factors that could contribute to differences in outcomes between the MLR group of cases and the comparison group of cases. (See Exhibit 5.)

Exhibit 5

OPPAGA Took Several Steps to Select Comparison Groups of Children Whose Parents Were and Were Not Served by Multidisciplinary Legal Representation Programs



Source: OPPAGA analysis.

Children in out-of-home care whose parents were served by MLR programs have higher percentages of domestic violence as the reason for entry into care compared to children not served by MLR programs; outcomes were similar for other maltreatment types. To address the first measure specified in statute—the reasons the family became involved in the dependency system—OPPAGA analyzed DCF and RC data to determine the reasons children whose parents were served and not served by MLR programs entered the dependency system. OPPAGA defined the reasons for entering the system as the alleged maltreatments found during child protective investigations that resulted in the child’s in-home or out-of-home placement.

OPPAGA’s analysis found that compared to children whose parents were not served by MLR programs, children in out-of-home care whose parents were served by MLR programs had higher rates of domestic violence as alleged maltreatments associated with their entry into care. For example, 34% of children in out-of-home care whose parents were served by MLR programs entered care due to domestic violence, compared to 25% of children in the comparison group. Children whose parents were served by MLR programs had lower rates of threatened harm as the reason for their entry into care compared to children whose parents were not served by MLR programs (6% compared to 15%).⁷ The percentages of children entering care due to substance abuse are similar for both groups: 51% for the MLR group and 54% for the comparison group. (See Exhibit 6.)

Exhibit 6

Children in Out-of-Home Care Whose Parents Were Served by Multidisciplinary Legal Representation (MLR) Programs Have Higher Percentages of Alleged Maltreatments Involving Domestic Violence as the Reason for Entry Into Care

	Out-of-Home Care		In-Home Care	
Alleged Maltreatment Type ^{1,2}	Percentage of Children Whose Parents Were Served by MLR	Percentage of Children in Comparison Group	Percentage of Children Whose Parents Were Served by MLR	Percentage of Children in Comparison Group
Substance abuse	51%	54%	44%	47%
Neglect	53%	49%	42%	38%
Domestic violence	34%	25%	31%	38%
Environmental hazards ³	25%	22%	19%	16%
Physical abuse	16%	15%	16%	17%

¹ Because each child may have more than one maltreatment type identified, percentages sum to greater than 100%.

² Other alleged maltreatment groupings not shown in this exhibit include sexual abuse, mental injury, abandonment, and threatened harm.

³ Environmental hazards are living conditions or situations that create a significant threat to a child’s immediate safety or longer-term physical, mental, or emotional health due to the actions or non-actions of the caregiver.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of data from Regional Counsels 1, 2, 3, and 5 and the Department of Children and Families.

Children whose parents were served by MLR programs are more likely to achieve permanency through reunification and less likely to be adopted. Before examining outcomes, OPPAGA selected cases for the comparison group that would be similar to the MLR group for several case factors, including alleged maltreatment type and the year of and reason for entry into care. Compared to children whose parents were not served by MLR programs, children whose parents were served by MLR programs were more likely to have reunification as the type of permanency achieved within two years of entering out-of-home care. For example, 79% of the MLR group who achieved permanency were reunified compared to 61% of the comparison group. Conversely, in the non-MLR group, 21% of the children achieved permanency through adoption by other families compared to 7% in the MLR group. (See Exhibit 7.)

⁷ Threatened harm is a behavior that is not accidental and that is likely to result in physical, emotional or mental impairment to the child.

Exhibit 7

Children Whose Parents Were Served by Multidisciplinary Legal Representation (MLR) Programs Are More Likely to Achieve Permanency Through Reunification

Permanency Goal Achieved	Percentage of Children Whose Parents Were Served by MLR	Percentage of Children in Comparison Group
Reunification	79%	61%
Adoption	7%	21%
Guardianship ¹	13%	17%

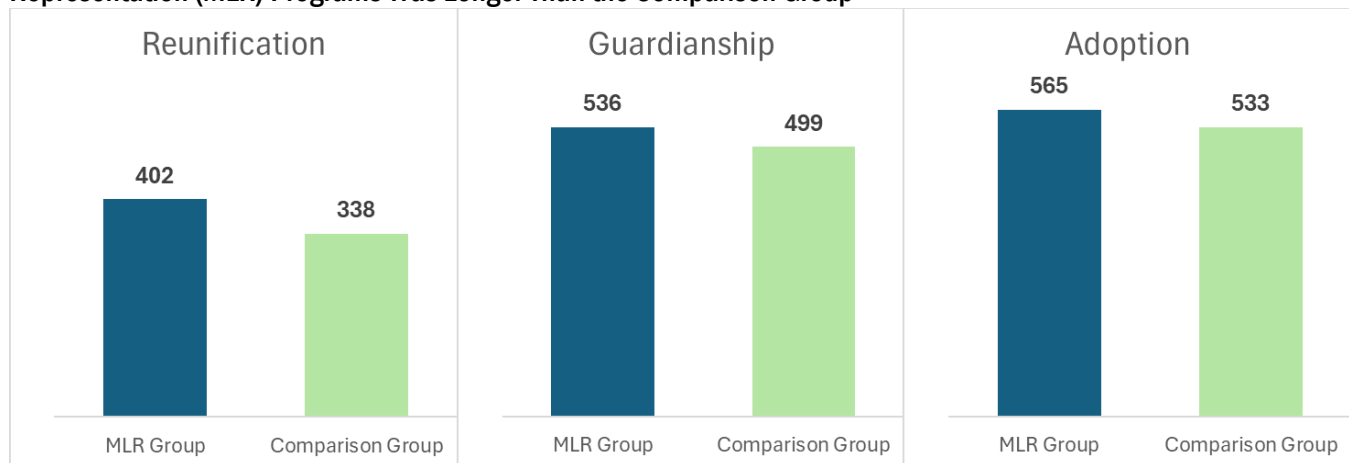
¹ If a court determines that reunification or adoption is not in the best interest of the child, the court may place the child in a permanent guardianship with a relative or other adult approved by the court. Placement of a child in a permanent guardianship does not terminate the parent-child relationship but is considered a type of permanency.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of data from Regional Counsels 1, 2, 3, and 5 and Department of Children and Families.

On average, it took longer for children whose parents were served by MLR programs to achieve permanency. Specifically, among children achieving permanency within two years of entering out-of-home care, the time to reunification for children in the comparison group was 338 days, while the time to reunification for children whose parents were served by MLR programs was 402 days. However, for both groups, adoption took the longest time, followed by guardianship and reunification. (See Exhibit 8.)

Exhibit 8

The Average Number of Days to Permanency for Children Whose Parents Were Served by Multidisciplinary Legal Representation (MLR) Programs Was Longer Than the Comparison Group



Source: OPPAGA analysis of data from Regional Counsels 1, 2, 3, and 5 and the Department of Children and Families.

In summary, relative to the comparison group, children whose parents participated in MLR programs had higher rates of reunification and lower rates of adoption as a permanency type. However, the dependency cases of children with parents in MLR programs tended to take longer to achieve permanency. One possible explanation is that MLR cases may be more likely to involve time-consuming requirements for parents to complete, such as drug treatment.

Children whose parents were served by MLR programs were somewhat less likely to experience subsequent abuse or neglect resulting in removal after reunification. To determine what percentage of the MLR and comparison groups experienced subsequent removals, OPPAGA analyzed cases in which at least one year had passed since a child was reunified with their family. Almost 4% of children whose parents were served by MLR programs experienced a subsequent removal based on alleged maltreatment in the household, compared to 6% of the comparison group. Similarly, 2.2% of children whose parents were served by MLR programs experienced a subsequent removal based on verified maltreatment in the household, compared to 4.1% of the comparison group.

AGENCY RESPONSE

In accordance with the provisions of s. 11.51(2), *Florida Statutes*, a draft of OPPAGA's report was submitted to the five Offices of Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel. Regional Counsel 1's written response has been reproduced in Appendix A.

APPENDIX A

Agency Response



STATE OF FLORIDA
OFFICE OF CRIMINAL CONFLICT & CIVIL REGIONAL COUNSEL
FIRST REGION

CANDICE K. BROWER
REGIONAL COUNSEL



FIRST CIRCUIT

- ❑ **ESCAMBIA**
Post Office Box 12273
Pensacola, Florida 32591
850-595-4070
- ❑ **OKALOOSA**
2018 Lewis Turner Blvd – Unit B
Fort Walton Beach, Florida 32547
850-586-7360
- ❑ **SANTA ROSA**
Post Office Box 369
Milton, Florida 32572
850-983-0302
- ❑ **WALTON**
Post Office Box 1403
DeFuniak Springs, Florida 32435
850-892-1042

SECOND CIRCUIT

- ❑ **LEON / ADMIN**
Post Office Box 1019
Tallahassee, Florida 32302
850-922-0179

THIRD CIRCUIT

- ❑ **COLUMBIA**
Post Office Box 2698
Lake City, Florida 32056
386-754-1076

FOURTH CIRCUIT

- ❑ **CLAY**
Post Office Box 1047
Green Cove Springs, Florida 32043
904-529-1050
- ❑ **DUVAL**
1 West Adams Street, Suite 200
Jacksonville, Florida 32202
904-301-1112
- ❑ **NASSAU**
961687 Gateway Blvd #201F
Fernandina Beach, Florida 32034
904-225-9737

EIGHTH CIRCUIT

- ❑ **ALACHUA**
235 S. Main Street, Suite 205
Gainesville, Florida 32601
352-377-0567
- ❑ **BAKER**
Post Office Box 1349
Macclenny, Florida 32063
904-712-2030

FOURTEENTH CIRCUIT

- ❑ **BAY**
1520 Jenks Avenue
Panama City, Florida 32405
850-767-3330
- ❑ **JACKSON**
Post Office Box 509
Marianna, Florida 32447
850-482-9922

November 19, 2025

Ms. Kara Collins-Gomez
Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability
111 West Madison Street Room 312
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1475

Dear Ms. Collins-Gomez:

Thank you once again for the opportunity to review the Multidisciplinary Legal Representation of Parents in Dependency Proceedings: Fiscal Year 2024-25 report. Please consider this the Office of Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel, 1st Region's (OCCRC1) official response in accordance with S. 11.51(2), Florida Statutes.

We would like to note that our response and recommendations for the Multidisciplinary Legal Representation of Parents in Dependency Proceedings: Fiscal Year Fiscal year 2023-24 report is relevant here and those are incorporated herein by reference.

The most striking findings of this year's report are that the program continues to show that children served through multidisciplinary legal representation (MLR) are more likely to be returned to their parents and less likely to be re-removed. Reunification is the primary goal for children in the dependency system, not just from a legal standpoint (See S. 39.621 (3), Florida Statutes) but from countless studies on what is best for children dating back to 2007. (See for example, [Disentangling the effect of out-of-home care on child mental health - PubMed](#), [helensdotter JMP child removal.pdf](#), [Child Protection and Child Outcomes: Center for Children. Measuring the Effects of Foster Care](#), [The association between out-of-home placement and offending behavior among maltreated youth: A systematic review - ScienceDirect](#), to name a few). Children who are reunified with a parent fare better in almost every measurable sense as compared to children who are not reunified.

In 2021, the importance of parental rights was recognized and strengthened through the passage of the Parental Bill of Right's Act. MLR has allowed the State to be true to the intent of enforcing and strengthening the bonds of Florida families as proven by the rise in reunification. While "permanency" is the goal of all children, reunification is and should be, the first and foremost goal for

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most children. We are proud that MLR has helped in that endeavor to enforce the goal of strengthening Florida's families.

We are grateful for OPPAGA and have enjoyed working with them throughout the years. We believe their detailed reports accurately reflect the importance of MLR and we hope this will help to ensure its continuity. We expect MLR to continue to improve the lives of Florida's children and families as the program itself continues to expand.

Sincerely,



Candice K. Brower
Regional Counsel, 1st Region

Defending you, protecting your family, preserving your rights.



OPPAGA

Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability

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OPPAGA supports the Florida Legislature by providing data, evaluative research, and objective analyses that assist legislative budget and policy deliberations. This project was conducted in accordance with applicable evaluation standards. Copies of this report in print or alternate accessible format may be obtained by telephone (850/488-0021), in person, or by mail (Claude Pepper Building, Room 312, 111 W. Madison St., Tallahassee, FL 32399-1475).

Project supervised by James Clark, Ph.D. (850/717-0575)
Project conducted by Laurie Scott and Anne Cooper
Kara Collins-Gomez, Coordinator