

# Department of Children's Services 4-Year Strategic Plan

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2024-  
2027

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# Commissioner's Message

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Ensuring positive impacts in the life of a child is the Department of Children's Services greatest responsibility. Our mission and values are grounded in acting in the best interest of children. At DCS our commitment is to find answers that draw on best practices and, as our Vision states, to put Children First.

Our four-year strategic plan sets DCS goals to:

- Improve placement and the permanency experience for children.
- Revolutionize technology to achieve our financial, operational, and informational objectives.
- Drive a people-first culture.
- Enhance prevention strategies through focused resources, efforts, and relationships.
- Align processes to increase efficiency and effectiveness.

We are laying the groundwork for a better, brighter future for the agency and being positioned to care for Tennessee's most vulnerable children. The framework is one that modernizes the state's system to care for the needs of kids today, tomorrow and the days after.

Everyone is a key member of our DCS family and team. Our commitment is to give our employees the tools to solve problems, to build a team that does rigorous work, to reward their efforts, and to be an agency they want to serve well.

Through the successful implementation of our strategic plan, we see healthier childhoods, life-skill development, successful reintegration of all children and youth into communities, and fulfilling our Vision of Children First!

DCS is a statewide agency that provides services and assistance to children and families in need. The Department was established through legislation in April 1996 and through its almost 4,000 employees investigate complaints of child abuse and child sex abuse, runs the state foster care, adoption, and juvenile justice systems, and oversees child health for children and youth in the custody of the state.

Through the four-year strategic plan, the Departmental goals seek to improve processes and intentionality around relative caregivers and kinship placements as well as recruit, support and maintain our Foster Family network and incentivize adoption and subsidized guardianship so children find permanency with families.

Modernizing one of the largest state departments through technology innovation and new real estate infrastructure will create efficiency and enable staff to spend more time with children and families supporting service delivery. A new Internet Technology system will revolutionize how DCS documents and communicates from Memphis to Mountain City. It will improve accuracy and evidence collection for case workers in the field thereby improving safety for children, a key goal for our child safety teams.

The current system and facilities were built for the needs of children decades ago, not for the needs of children and youth of today. A new Real Estate Plan, approved by the State Building Commission will allow DCS to address the increase in the acuity of care needs demonstrated by children. Modern,

leading practice facilities employ a more trauma-informed and rehabilitative approach, bringing technology-enabled clinical services to purpose-built spaces. Juvenile Justice youth will benefit from these modern facilities as we plan to support their reintegration into communities.

Recruiting, training, and retention of great employees demands that we drive a people-first culture within our agency. Promoting wellness and a work-life balance for all employees ensures that staff feel heard and seen. Investing in training and skills building opportunities for our employees, as well as opportunities for healing and building resiliency mean staff can handle the day-to-day challenges of the job.

The strategic plan is aggressive and envisions a modern practice and facilities for today's children and families. Lastly, DCS relies on strategic partners and stakeholders across the state to deliver on the mission and vision of Children First! The Values of the Department very intentionally include and highlight Partnerships as critical and integral to everything that DCS does in all 95 counties. Together, we will continue to make progress on the goals and objectives.

When we succeed, children succeed.

# Mission, Vision, & Values

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**Mission:** Act in the best interest of Tennessee's children and youth.

**Vision:** Children first!

**Values:**

- **Integrity:** Ethical Conduct
- **Trauma Responsive:** Realize, Recognize, Respond and Resist Re-Traumatization
- **Do good:** When children succeed, we succeed.
- **Partnerships:** Collaborating for better outcomes.

# Goal 1: Improve the placement and permanency experience for children.

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## **Objective 1: Expand the use of kinship to support children and families by December 31, 2025.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Redefine, strengthen, and standardize the roles of Kinship Coordinators and Foster Parent Support Units by December 31, 2025.
2. Reconfigure the organizational structure of Kinship Coordinators and Foster Parent Support staff by December 31, 2025.
3. Develop performance metrics that measures the progress of utilizing kinship to support children and families by December 31, 2025.

## **Objective 2: Increase the network of placements to support children and youth in DCS custody by December 31, 2026.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Review current placement assessment tools to identify areas that would expand DCS' capacity to provide assessment-focused placement by March 31, 2024.
2. Identify and implement focused retention efforts for new and existing foster homes by June 30, 2024.
3. Reconfigure the organizational structure to provide consistent placement processes statewide by July 31, 2024.
4. Develop and implement a centralized utilization review process for network of placement by July 31, 2024.
5. Identify ways to expand the network of high-quality residential treatment services (detention, JJ, and residential), including through stakeholder collaboration by December 31, 2025.
6. Increase the number of quality foster homes available to serve children in DCS custody by prioritizing recruitment by December 31, 2026.

## **Objective 3: Increase the intentional movement of children towards permanency by December 31, 2025.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Refocus efforts on concurrent planning to decrease the number of days a child is in temporary placement by minimizing the barriers to permanency by December 31, 2024.
2. Begin realigning performance metrics with tasks related to permanency outcomes by December 31, 2024.

3. Establish a consistent permanency review process in all regions to reinforce best practices by December 31, 2024.
4. Expand support to young people receiving extension of foster care services through earlier identification by December 31, 2025.

**Objective 4: Enhance the experience of families adopting from foster care by December 31, 2027.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Realign adoption casework practices by adjusting policy to adhere to new laws related to pursuing Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) beginning July 31, 2024, and ongoing as laws are passed.
2. Increase supports for adoptive families by expanding the role and reach of permanency specialists to include assisting with full disclosure and gathering/processing adoptions paperwork beginning July 31, 2024.
3. Develop and implement training that reinforces and clarifies Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) best practices, timelines, and case preparation beginning December 31, 2025.
4. Collaborate with external adoption agency partners and adoption support partners to increase support services for adoptive families by December 30, 2025.

## Goal 2: Revolutionize technology to achieve the Department's financial, informational, and operational objectives.

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### **Objective 1: Implement financial solutions to maximize federal funding and timely provider payments by December 31, 2026.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Improve federal funding compliance for FFPSA and "Title IV-E maintenance" by July 31, 2025.
2. Modernize claims systems and processes to align with industry standards by July 31, 2026.
3. Analyze and improve current billing payment process by July 31, 2026.
4. Replace financial ERP via CCWIS modernization project by December 31, 2026.

### **Objective 2: Secure technology that supports efficiency and safety of agency and populations served by December 31, 2026.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Explore different system options regarding "Electronic Health Record System" and "Legal Case Management System" by April 1, 2024.
2. Partner with research and academic institutes to develop algorithms designed to address efficient case assignments, workflow, workload, and burnout/stress, time use/time management needs by July 31, 2025
3. Determine technology budget needs by September 30, 2024.
4. Update fleet vehicles to include GPS by December 31, 2024.
5. Integrate the selected Electronic Health Record system and Legal Case Management system into the CCWIS replacement by June 30, 2026.

### **Objective 3: Replace legacy technologies with modernized enterprise applications by December 31, 2026.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Evaluate current technology gaps in existing systems with STS by July 31, 2024
2. Design non-case management modules for the transition to the CCWIS platform by December 31, 2025.
3. Identify all operating legacy applications for updating and alignment with new CCWIS platform by December 31, 2025.
4. Implement interfaces between the CCWIS system and partner agencies (e.g., child support, court systems) to enable automated data exchange and ensure more accurate, timely, and reliable information by December 31, 2026.



5. Complete comprehensive people readiness activities and deliver just-in-time training for DCS employees and provider partners before the system's implementation deadline of December 31, 2026.
6. Replace TFACTS with modernized CCWIS platform by December 31, 2026.

**Objective 4: Increase ability to access quality data to support departmental decisions making, financial audit compliance, and regulatory needs by December 31, 2026.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Create plan to standardize data for future CCWIS and accurate reporting by March 31, 2024.
2. Develop comprehensive data dashboards and customizable reports within the new CCWIS system to provide real-time insights, improve decision-making, and support data-driven strategies by June 30, 2025.
3. Integrate external data sources and program monitoring tasks into the new CCWIS system to streamline operations, enhance oversight, and ensure a holistic view of program performance by June 30, 2025.
4. Identify checks and controls to proactively identify potential abnormality in data sets by April 30, 2024.
5. Identify necessary resources to achieve near live or live data for reporting, dashboards, and financial tracking by May 31, 2024.
6. Design solutions for agency and provider access to data by June 30, 2024.

## Goal 3: Promote a people-first culture within DCS.

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### **Objective 1: Identify most pertinent qualifications to implement intentional hiring practices by December 31, 2025.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Research & develop a vetting system by July 31, 2025.
2. Research and implement a hiring system that increases central office awareness and capabilities to hire the most qualified candidates by July 31, 2025.
3. Improve recruiting efforts to ensure that each bi-monthly pre-service class is filled with quality new hires to begin immediately and ongoing through December 31, 2025.

### **Objective 2: Develop and implement actions which lead to retention by December 31, 2025.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Establish leadership courses to be offered quarterly by December 31, 2025.
2. Establish Child Welfare Certification annually for all case managers, to begin immediately and ongoing through December 31, 2025.
3. Establish promotional opportunities by December 31, 2025, based on each employee's eligibility and assess on a yearly ongoing basis.
4. Fund the existing case manager career path through necessary state budgetary allocation by December 31, 2025.
5. Establish milestones to advance and achieve next case manager level by December 31, 2025.
6. Apply the 10-caseload cap for the first-year case managers to begin immediately and ongoing through December 31, 2025.
7. Establish and improve certification process for new case manager mentors by December 31, 2025.
8. Develop a plan to prevent case managers from sitting with kids while awaiting placement to begin immediately and ongoing through December 31, 2025.

### **Objective 3: Recruit the most qualified candidates by December 31, 2026.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Develop recruiting videos and materials that capture the passion and realities of a career in child welfare by March 31, 2025.
2. Implement a process for career development by partnering with Tennessee universities and colleges to initiate the child welfare certification by December 31, 2025.
3. Develop a partnership with Tennessee universities and colleges for internship opportunities by December 31, 2025.

4. Ensure compensation remains market competitive and drives interest in qualified candidates by working with DOHR on an annual basis to determine market value on case manager salaries to begin immediately and ongoing through December 31, 2026.
5. Partner with Tennessee Board of Regents to research college credits and specific programming for potential Department of Children's Services employment by December 31, 2026.

**Objective 4: Develop clear and purposeful communication to both internal and external parties by December 31, 2025.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Establish Regional Director monthly newsletters which will be communicated with Regional and Central Office employees by March 31, 2025.
2. Establish proper and effective channels of communications to DCS employees through the intra-departmental monthly newsletter, known as Open Line, by March 31, 2025.
3. Develop a frequently asked questions page through the DCS intranet website to encourage employees to utilize solutions-based focus by March 31, 2025.
4. Update the DCS public-facing website for clarity and ease of use by December 31, 2025.

**Objective 5: Develop and improve a safer work environment for employees by December 31, 2026.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Process & trend frontline staff safety data annually, beginning January 31, 2025.
2. Process & trend Confidential Safety Reporting System feedback bi-annually, beginning March 31, 2025.
3. Purchase Fentanyl/Narcan training kits by July 31, 2024.
4. Implement Mentor/Peer-to-Peer training for a minimum of 20% of all Department of Children's Services employees by December 31, 2025.
5. Implement chaplain services for each region by December 31, 2026.

## Goal 4: Focus resources, efforts, and relationships to enhance DCS custody prevention strategies.

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### **Objective 1: Leverage current community relationships to align with DCS prevention strategies by December 31, 2025.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Disseminate education and messaging for staff related to DCS prevention strategies to begin January 1, 2024 and ongoing through December 31, 2025.
2. Increase outreach regarding community prevention grants, to begin immediately and ongoing through December 31, 2025.
3. Expand Child Protective Services specialty teams, particularly the areas of intervention, to begin immediately and ongoing through December 31, 2025.
4. Expand resources and use of relative caregiver programs, Safe Baby Courts, foster parent support services, to begin immediately and ongoing through December 31, 2025.

### **Objective 2: Optimize the identification and utilization of DCS' resource linkage personnel by December 31, 2025.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Redefine, strengthen, and standardize the role of court liaisons and Kinship Care Coordinators by December 31, 2024.
2. Redefine, strengthen, and standardize Family Support Services by December 31, 2024.
3. Redesign the utilization of resource linkage and Community Advisory Boards (CAB) by December 31, 2025.
4. Reduce recidivism by creating additional community opportunities through intervention and supervision that prevent recurring system involvement, ongoing through December 31, 2025.

### **Objective 3: Create new community relationships to support DCS prevention strategies by December 31, 2025.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Leverage faith-based stakeholders, in collaboration with the Office of Faith Based Initiatives, to assist in creating a pilot mentoring program for justice involved youth by July 31, 2024.
2. Increase the number of mentors for justice-involved youth through increased communication and identification efforts by December 31, 2024.
3. Continue to expand workforce development opportunities, in collaboration with the Department of Labor and Workforce Development for justice-involved youth to begin immediately and ongoing through December 31, 2025.

# Goal 5: Transform departmental processes to increase efficiency.

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## **Objective 1: Inventory and prioritize processes within DCS for OCQI evaluation by July 1, 2025.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Review DCS annual plan and risk assessment to prioritize department processes by February 28, 2025.
2. Review identified processes with leadership by March 31, 2025.
3. Finalize plan with the Commissioner by May 31, 2025.
4. Begin conducting process improvement events by July 1, 2025.

## **Objective 2: Develop a process for implementation of changes identified through OCQI evaluation by July 1, 2025.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. OCQI will create a change process to ensure implementation of annual plan and process improvement items by January 1, 2025.
2. CQI will begin developing supporting documentation with relevant stakeholders by July 1, 2025.

## **Objective 3: Assess process for appropriate design and operational efficiency within DCS by June 30, 2026.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Identify processes to be audited by January 31, 2025.
2. Develop annual audit plan to assess appropriate design and operating effectiveness of higher risk processes by June 30, 2025.
3. Execute annual audit plan completing all audits as assigned by June 30, 2026.
4. Report findings to appropriate levels of management by June 30, 2026.

## **Objective 4: Fully implement previously identified process improvements and align policies with those processes by July 1, 2026.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Coordinate with ELT to identify on-going process improvement events beginning January 1, 2026, and on-going.
2. Initiate policy and practice changes based on process improvements identified through process improvement events beginning no later than January 1, 2026, and on-going.
3. Update Policies to match practice by July 1, 2026.

**Objective 5: Management will address deficient areas identified in the annual Performance Audit Report by December 31, 2025.**

To meet this objective (action steps):

1. Resolve challenges with Special Investigations Unit & Child Protective Services' investigation timeliness and thoroughness by December 31, 2025.
2. Resolve issues with not completing monthly contact requirements with children by December 31, 2025.
3. Resolve issues completing background checks of employees and volunteers by December 31, 2024.