Testimony to the Joint Committee
Adoption Tracking Tool, an initiative of Kansas Strong for Children and Families
and the Supreme Court Task Force on Permanency Planning
November 17, 2022

Prepared by:

Becci Akin, PhD, MSW,
Professor & PhD Program Director
Principal Investigator for Kansas Strong for Children & Families
University of Kansas School of Social Welfare

Lana Goetz, MSW
Court Program Specialist
Kansas Office of Judicial Administration

Kaela Byers, PhD, MSW
Associate Research Professor
Co-Principal Investigator for Kansas Strong for Children & Families
University of Kansas School of Social Welfare

Introduction
Hello, thank you for inviting us to speak with you today. We are here to share information about the Adoption Tracking Tool, which is an initiative of Kansas Strong for Children and Families, and the Supreme Court Task Force on Permanency Planning. **Kansas Strong for Children and Families** is a federal grant that was awarded in 2018 and runs through September 2023 with the possibility for an additional year through September 2024.

Kansas Strong for Children and Families
Kansas Strong for Children and Families (Kansas Strong) a is a public-private-university collaboration on a five-year federally funded initiative. It is funded by the Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau and is one of five grantees nationally. It is a collaborative, data-driven approach to achieving positive outcomes for children and families. The project's key collaborators include: the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare, Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF), the Kansas Court Improvement Program (CIP) in the Office of Judicial Administration, the Supreme Court Task Force on Permanency Planning, Kansas' private providers of foster care and family preservation – Cornerstones of Care, DCCA, KVC Kansas, Saint Francis Ministries, and TFI Family Services; the Children's Alliance of Kansas; and, Kansas Family Advisory Network.

The first year of the grant (October 2018 to September 2019) was spent collecting and analyzing multiple types of data and developing a comprehensive implementation plan. We are currently completing year 5 of the grant and planning for a potential 6th year.

Purpose of Kansas Strong for Children and Families
The project purpose is summarized as follows: Kansas Strong aims to establish a collaborative and effective initiative that develops, implements, and evaluates strategies that will improve safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes, by enhancing agency practices and court/legal practices, and reducing systemic barriers.
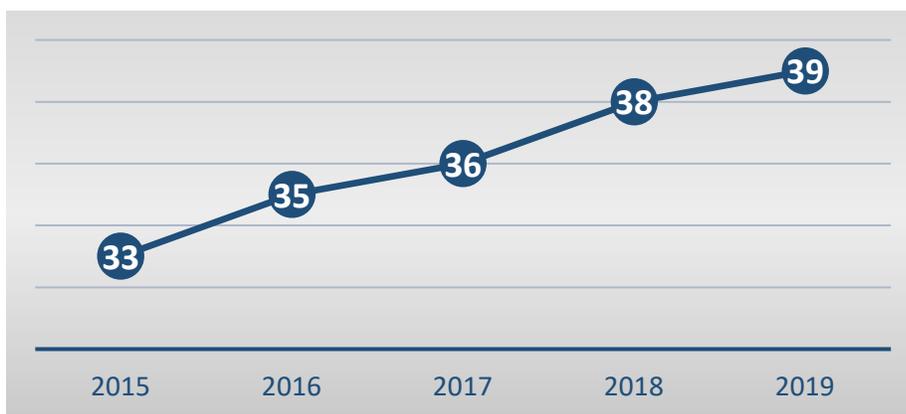
Adoption Tracking Tool
The Adoption Tracking Tool was identified as one of Kansas Strong's key strategies during our planning year. The idea was developed out of a 2-day planning event that involved multiple professionals from the court/legal system, including judges, county attorneys, court-appointed special advocates (CASAs), and guardians ad litem. Additionally, participants of this 2-day planning included staff from the Office of Judicial Administration, Court Improvement Program, Kansas DCF, and the case management providers. This planning event was facilitated by two staff of the national Center for Courts.

Why Develop an Adoption Tracking Tool
In addition to facilitating the 2-day planning event, the Center for Courts used Kansas adoption and foster care data to report on some adoption indicators. One key piece of information showed that Kansas ranked 7th worst in the nation on adoption timeliness. Additionally, KU's analysis of Kansas FACTS data showed that adoption timeliness was worsening. The average number of months from removal to adoption increased from 33 months in 2015 to 39 months in 2019 (see figure 1). According to the most recent data on DCF's public reports, the average time to adoption was 40 months in state fiscal year 2021.

Figure 1. Average Months from Removal to Adoption for state fiscal years 2015 to 2019
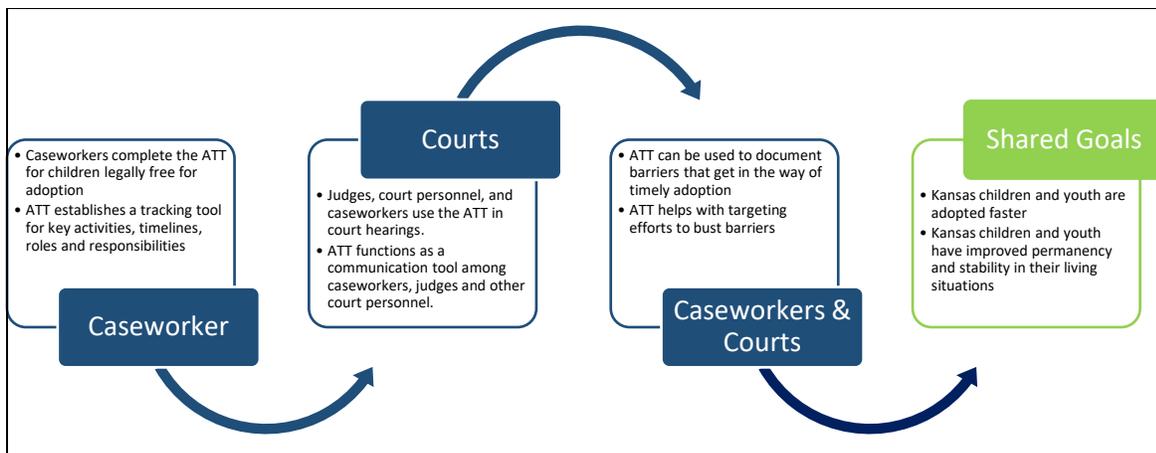
What is the Adoption Tracking Tool

The Adoption Tracking Tool is designed to reduce time to adoption by using a standardized tool for tracking key benchmarks and time schedules for children legally free for adoption. The content of the Tool was developed by a small committee of judges, staff of the Office of Judicial Administration, and staff of DCF administration. Drafts of the Tool were reviewed by and revised with feedback from the case management providers. The Tool outlines key activities, timelines, roles, and responsibilities involved in the adoption process. These activities are organized into 11 sections as follows:

1. Legal History
2. Adoptive Resource
3. Best Interest Staffing
4. Child's Consent
5. Adoption Subsidy
6. DCF Consent to Adopt
7. Supplemental Security Income
8. Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children
9. Indian Child Welfare Act
10. Adoption Hearing
11. Additional Information Requested by the Court

The process and primary purposes of the Adoption Tracking Tool is shown in Figure 2. Caseworkers at the case management providers complete the Tool for all children who are legally free for adoption. Judges, court personnel, and caseworkers use the Tool in court hearings with its purpose focused on being a communication tool that can identify the status of adoption process, including remaining activities and potential barriers to completing those activities.

Figure 2. Adoption Tracking Tool Process and Purposes

Pilot-Testing the Adoption Tracking Tool

The Adoption Tracking Tool was pilot tested in 6 counties for 12 months. These counties included: Allen, Douglas, Franklin, Norton, Reno, and Shawnee. After receiving largely positive feedback from the 6 pilot counties, 3 additional counties were added for 3 months of the pilot testing (i.e., Chase, Lyon, Wyandotte). KU evaluators surveyed court/legal, DCF, and case management provider staff in 9 pilot counties during the pilot-testing period. Additionally, 20 focus groups and interviews were held with court/legal, DCF, and case management provider staff.

Statewide Implementation of the Adoption Tracking Tool

After largely positive feedback from surveys and focus groups/interviews, the Supreme Court Task Force on Permanency Planning recommended expansion to all Kansas counties in February 2021. The recommendations were reviewed and approved by DCF's policy/procedure committee in spring 2021. Upon DCF's approval, the Adoption Tracking Tool was adopted and published in DCF's Policy and Procedures Manual on July 1, 2021. It is identified as PPS 5400.

Evaluation of Statewide Implementation of the Adoption Tracking Tool

The KU team continues to evaluate the implementation of the Adoption Tracking Tool since its statewide implementation on July 1, 2021. One key piece of data is being collected through DCF's quarterly case read. Additionally, KU evaluators conducted approximately 10 more focus groups in late 2021 and early 2022 to seek input from DCF and case management provider staff who are responsible for completing the Adoption Tracking Tool.

Within the case read, two questions were asked about the Adoption Tracking Tool.

1. For a child who is legally free for adoption, did the agency utilize the Adoption Tracking Tool (ATT), PPS 5400, to compile and track information as the case moves toward adoption?
2. If the ATT – PPS 5400 – was utilized, were the appropriate sections of the form completed based on the status of the case?

While the first question was asked of 170 cases, 112 were not applicable as the child was not legally free for adoption. There were 58 cases legally free for adoption and, of these, 23 (39.7%) were marked as having evidence of the Adoption Tracking Tool being used. These data, showing fewer than 40% of cases using the Tool, would suggest low uptake. However, answers to the second question indicated high fidelity to the Tool. That is, 21 of 23 cases (91.3%) were marked as having the Tool appropriately completed based on the status of the case. In sum, we believe these findings are consistent with our focus group findings that uptake has been variable. One key implication is to broaden the use of the Adoption Tracking Tool. Second, when it is used by workers, it is easily applied.

KU staff and staff of the Court Improvement Program continue to identify strategies that can support the full and effective implementation of the Adoption Tracking Tool. This fall, the Court Improvement Program added the Adoption Training Tool to its Nuts & Bolts training for child in need of care judges.

We thank you for your attention to our presentation and welcome your questions.