



Department of
Children & Youth

State Fiscal Year

2025

ANNUAL REPORT

Grounded in Purpose.
Guided by Families.
Delivering Results.

DO WHAT'S RIGHT FOR KIDS



ANNUAL REPORT

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MESSAGE FROM DIRECTOR KARA B. WENTE



“ Together, we’re building a better, brighter future, for every child in Ohio.



As Director of the Department of Children and Youth (DCY), I’m honored to share our State Fiscal Year 2025 Annual Report. In just our second year, this new department is already demonstrating the power of our commitment to **DO WHAT’S RIGHT FOR KIDS**.

Two years ago, Governor Mike DeWine signed legislation creating DCY with a bold vision: to break down barriers, strengthen prevention, and give every Ohio child a real opportunity to thrive. That vision remains our compass, not just as a policy priority, but as a promise to families across the state.

Children are at the center of every decision we make. We know that behind every statistic is a child, a parent, a community. Behind every policy is a person.

This year, we brought that belief to life in meaningful ways.

We listened—truly listened—to more than 700 youth, parents, and caregivers across Ohio. Their insights and lived experiences helped us shape better strategies and more responsive systems.

We also invested deeply in the people and infrastructure that make progress possible—building stronger partnerships, more coordinated programs, and a culture rooted in connection, transparency, and results.

Our work is organized around three Bold Goals:

- Giving every baby a fighting chance
- Giving every child a strong start
- Keeping families together

These goals guide everything we do, helping us stay focused, accountable, and grounded in what matters most.

This work isn’t just about improving services, it’s about reimagining how we support children and families, and making sure our systems reflect their dignity, strength, and potential.

We can’t do this work alone. Thank you to our partners, local communities, and especially the families who continue to lead, inform, and inspire us.

Together, we’re building a better, brighter future, for every child in Ohio.

Kara B. Wente
DIRECTOR

VISION, VALUES, AND THE WORK AHEAD

MAKING SURE WE DO WHAT'S RIGHT FOR KIDS—EVERY DAY, IN EVERY DECISION

When Governor Mike DeWine created the Department of Children and Youth (DCY) in 2023, he did more than consolidate state programs. He called for a transformation in how Ohio shows up for children and families, from fragmented systems to a unified, prevention-first approach rooted in what works.

That bold vision continues to guide us.

Our mission is to make it easier for families to access what they need, when, where, and how they need it. Our values keep us grounded: listen first and build strong systems that prioritize children's well-being and family stability.

We are not just managing programs. We are rethinking how government serves families and children. And we are guided every day by a simple but powerful standard: **DO WHAT'S RIGHT FOR KIDS.**

This value is more than a tagline. It's the foundation of our culture and our promise to families. It shapes how we engage communities, how we measure impact, and how we hold ourselves accountable.

And that mindset is already delivering results.



Katina Bays, Nicole Sillaman, and Melissa Palmer greeting Governor Mike DeWine and First Lady Fran DeWine

DRIVING CHANGE FROM THE GROUND UP

LISTENING, LEADING, DELIVERING RESULTS

In our first full year of operation, DCY put those values into action across every part of the department. We connected with more than 700 parents, youth, and community leaders through Family Listening Sessions, site visits, and roundtables. These weren't just check-the-box exercises. They were honest, solution-driven conversations. In Family Listening Sessions on maternal infant wellness, families shared their needs, frustrations, and hopes. We returned months later to report back, closing the loop and reinforcing trust. Families were compensated for their time and insight and supported with child care, meals, and transportation. They weren't just heard—they were honored.

In partnership with Governor DeWine, we also hosted the first-ever Ohio Kids Summit to strengthen coordination across education, health, housing, and human services. Hundreds of local leaders and national experts came together to tackle the challenges and opportunities of building more responsive systems for kids.

Internally, we laid the foundation for long-term transformation.

We created the department's first shared values statement, launched all-staff learning events, and embedded continuous improvement practices across teams. We streamlined hiring, improved retention, and built partnerships to grow Ohio's child-serving workforce. Programs like TEACH Early Childhood® OHIO and POWER Ohio helped address staffing shortages in early childhood education, while new fellowships and university partnerships expanded pathways into children services careers.

We also got to work on the details—where transformation really lives.

DCY cross-trained licensing staff across programs, reduced duplicative site visits, and improved safety oversight for more than 8,600 child care providers. These efforts saved over \$300,000 in outside contracts while strengthening quality, consistency, and trust.

We upgraded the Central Intake and Referral system to provide faster, simpler access to local services. We expanded the Ages & Stages Questionnaire, screening over 3,400 preschoolers, and helping 140 newly-identified children get the special education services they needed, none of which happened previously. In four counties, we launched the Early Intervention Exiter Pilot to close gaps for young children aging out of Early Intervention but not qualifying for special education.

Every one of these wins—large and small—was rooted in a shared belief:
When we focus on what's right for kids, the right decisions follow.

That's what it means to be a modern public agency: not just managing grants and programs, but listening, learning, and building systems that deliver for real people.

This is the promise of DCY. And this is the work ahead.

TURNING VISION INTO ACTION

ADVANCING DCY'S BOLD GOALS WITH PURPOSE, PARTNERSHIP, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Ohio aims to be the best place in the country to start and raise a family. DCY has outlined the following goals to become a top 10 state in the nation.

The progress that the Department of Children and Youth has made is only the beginning. Everything we do, from listening to families to reworking internal systems, is designed to achieve impact where it matters most: in the lives of Ohio's children.

That's why we organize our work around three Bold Goals. These goals guide our strategy, shape our partnerships, and hold us accountable for results. In the next sections, you'll see how DCY is making measurable progress on each goal, and why it matters for Ohio's future.

MATERNAL & INFANT WELLNESS

DCY has the goal of **reducing the rate of infant mortality from 6.6 to 6.0** deaths per 1,000 live births by June 2027.

DCY has the goal of **increasing the rate of children demonstrating readiness on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment from 36.6% to 48%** demonstrating readiness by June 2027.

EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

CHILD SERVICES, KINSHIP, FOSTER & ADOPTION

DCY has the goal of **reducing the rate of children entering foster care from 3.3 to 2.0** children in foster care per 1,000 children in the population by June 2027.



BOLD GOAL 1: GIVING EVERY BABY A FIGHTING CHANCE

Every baby in Ohio deserves a healthy start, regardless of race, zip code, or income. DCY is working to reduce infant mortality and improve maternal health by investing in communities, building data-driven partnerships, and supporting proven programs.

HELP ME GROW HOME VISITING

Home visiting is a cornerstone of our prevention strategy, encompassing voluntary programs that support new parents with in-home guidance, education, and resources during pregnancy and early childhood. In SFY25, DCY expanded access to five evidence-based models: Family Connects, Healthy Families America, Mothers and Babies First, Nurse-Family Partnership, and Parents as Teachers. These programs provided support to more than 13,000 Ohio families, offering coaching on infant health, development, and safety while helping parents navigate complex systems. Through sustained investment, Ohio is building a more resilient and responsive home visiting infrastructure, and we invest in these programs because of results. Families who enroll in home visiting during their pregnancies are 60% less likely to experience an infant death than other similar families not enrolled.

As part of Governor DeWine's commitment to improving the lives of Ohio's youngest residents and their families, DCY launched the Family Connects Ohio (FCO) model within the Help Me Grow Home Visiting umbrella, offering every new parent at least one home visit within the first month after birth. During the second half of SFY25, Family Connects Ohio (FCO) began in 11 counties. These visits not only reach families where support is most needed, but tailor services to maximize return on investment. Families who received visits reported increased confidence in parenting and better access to local resources. During the first full six months of implementation in Ohio (January-June 2025), 95 percent of families received one visit from an FCO nurse with the others receiving two visits.



Ms. Vick with Help Me Grow Home Visiting and Declan

MODEL	CHILDREN SERVED
Family Connects Ohio	200
Healthy Families America	6,300
Mothers and Babies First	1,500
Nurse-Family Partnership	2,300
Parents as Teachers	1,800
2025 Total	12,100

“ I've received advice and healthy tips to be a healthy mom and care for a healthy baby. I would not know the important things I know now.

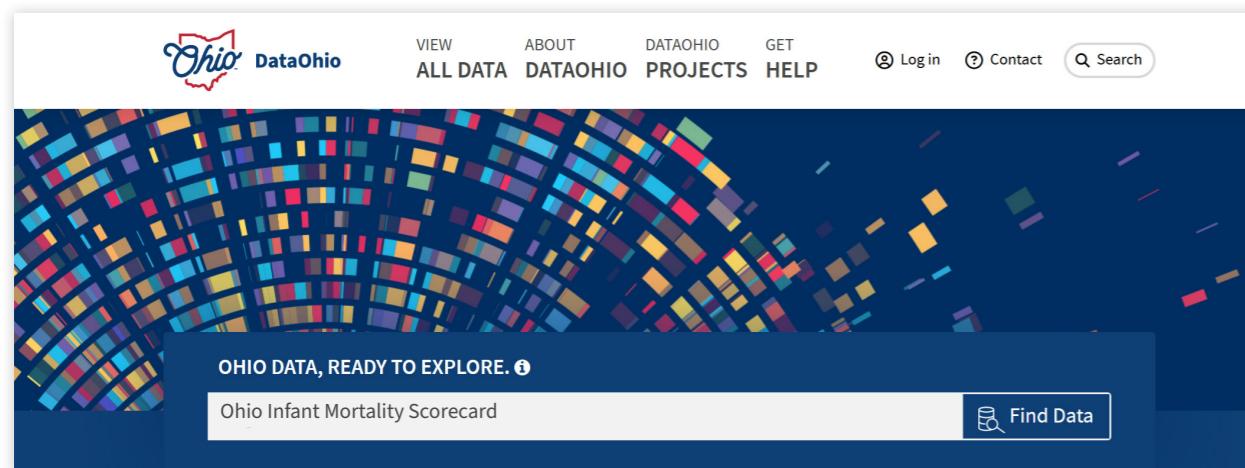


— KIARA, MOM OF FOUR-MONTH-OLD TWANNA

FAMILIES WHO ENROLL IN HOME VISITING DURING THEIR PREGNANCIES ARE 60% LESS LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE AN INFANT DEATH

INTEGRATED DATA EFFORTS

To drive outcomes, DCY continued its investment in data integration. Through enhancements to the Early Childhood Integrated Data System and partnerships with the Health Data Collaborative, DCY enabled better tracking of prenatal and infant health indicators. Public-facing dashboards allow local partners and community members to see where disparities persist and where progress is happening. This transparency ensures accountability and guides smarter investment. [Ohio Infant Mortality Scorecard | DataOhio](#)



FATHERHOOD INITIATIVES

With engaged and healthy fathers, mothers are more likely to receive prenatal care, have healthy births, and are at lower risk for post-partum stress. DCY elevated the importance of father engagement through the 2025 Ohio Commission on Fatherhood Summit, which convened more than 300 dads, advocates, and providers. The department expanded father-focused services in five counties, offering parenting classes, workforce support, and peer mentoring programs designed for dads.



Panelist at the OCF Fatherhood Summit



OCF Director Kimberly Dent speaking at the summit

SAFE SLEEP AWARENESS

To address one of the leading causes of preventable infant death, DCY launched a robust safe sleep campaign grounded in the ABCs of safe sleep: Alone, on their Back, and in a Crib. In SFY25, DCY partnered with 72 birthing hospitals, 18 local health departments, and dozens of nonprofits to distribute more than 10,000 safe sleep kits. These kits included portable bassinets, wearable blankets, and educational materials for parents and caregivers. By pairing education with tangible supports, DCY is saving lives. In fact, in the most recent program year (CY24) there were 25 fewer babies who died due to a sleep related risk.

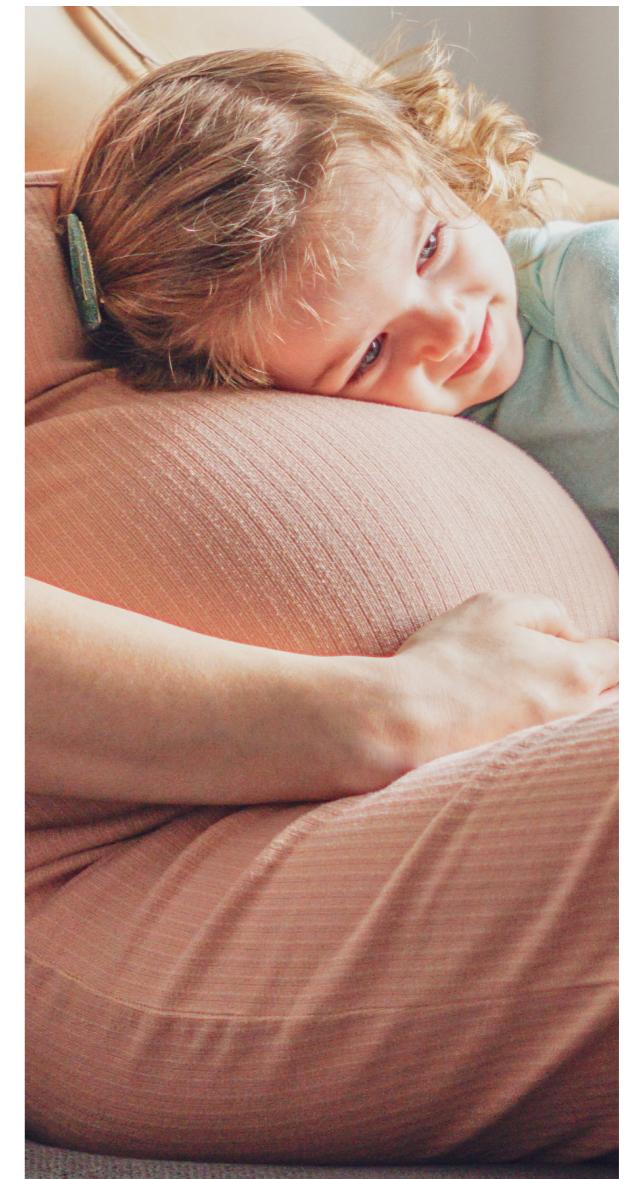
PARTNERS FOR CHANGE

Through Governor DeWine's Partners for Change grant, DCY funded four local collaboratives to create and implement community-driven plans to reduce racial disparities in birth outcomes. The program expands the successful Cradle Cincinnati model, which brings together parents, caregivers, healthcare professionals, and community members to support moms and babies in areas with the highest birth and infant mortality rates. Grantees received not only flexible funding but also technical assistance, coaching, and peer learning opportunities. The initiative reflects DCY's belief that local solutions, when supported and resourced, can drive measurable statewide progress. It is time to look at what we measure and scale it when it works.

NEIGHBORHOOD NAVIGATORS

DCY's Neighborhood Navigator model, supported through the Maternal and Infant Vitality Initiative, puts trusted community members at the center of outreach. In SFY25, more than 45 navigators, in 10 counties, were trained to support expectant and new parents in communities disproportionately impacted by infant mortality, helping assess comprehensive needs. Navigators completed more than 4,000 outreach visits and made 3,500 warm handoffs to services offered by DCY and our local partners, offering families both practical help and social connections.

DISTRIBUTED OVER
10,000
SAFE SLEEP KITS



BOLD GOAL 2: GIVING EVERY CHILD A STRONG START

DCY is committed to helping every Ohio child access high-quality early learning and care, because we know it builds the foundation for lifelong health, academic achievement, and success.

SCIENCE OF READING

Governor DeWine's commitment to ensuring all Ohio children have the opportunity to build foundations for success drove his administration's investment of over \$1.6 million to support training for teachers at early care and education programs on how to harness the Science of Reading to enrich their young students' literacy skills from an early age. Through the Governor's initiative, nearly 1,000 programs, including child care centers, family child care homes, and school-based programs received financial incentives for nearly 2,200 administrators and lead teachers who completed at least 10 hours of Science of Reading training.

“ Providing Science of Reading training for those who teach and care for our young children, we will be empowering the educators to lay the groundwork for more of our kids to reach their full potential.

— GOVERNOR DEWINE

...OVER \$1.6 MILLION TO SUPPORT TRAINING FOR TEACHERS AT EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS ON HOW TO HARNESS THE SCIENCE OF READING...



Governor Mike DeWine engages with young learners

QUALITY EARLY LEARNING

DCY introduced a simplified Step Up to Quality rating system with three tiers—Gold, Silver, and Bronze—to help families understand quality and support continuous improvement. The new system aligns with what research shows matters most for child outcomes, including curriculum, assessment, and family engagement. As of the end of May 2025, more than 5,200 programs participated, and 60 percent earned Silver or Gold ratings.



**60%
EARNED SILVER
OR GOLD RATINGS**

CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION

As part of the improvements to Step Up to Quality, DCY now requires all rated programs implement a classroom curriculum aligned with the Early Learning and Development Standards and the Science of Reading. This means that teachers have a good understanding of how children learn and grow and activities that can be individualized to support each child. During SFY 25, DCY provided a free suite of curriculum materials, professional development, and coaching to over 2,500 licensed early care and education programs.



Director Kara Wente and a child at Murtis Taylor Early Childhood Education Center in Cleveland

EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP

DCY launched the Early Care and Education Business Partnership to strengthen Ohio's workforce by expanding access to affordable, high-quality child care. The initiative brings together businesses, nonprofits, and government partners to co-invest in local child care solutions, such as employer-sponsored drop-in care and extended-hour programs. These collaborations benefit working families, stabilize providers, and help employers retain a reliable workforce. Four partnerships are currently underway.

DOLLY PARTON'S IMAGINATION LIBRARY OF OHIO

Ohio's successful partnership with the Dolly Parton's Imagination Library of Ohio continued to expand in SFY25, providing free books to children under age five each month. The program served 513,640 children across all 88 counties, with a total of 4,918,758 age-appropriate books mailed during SFY 2025. Each book is specifically selected to match the developmental stage of the child receiving it, strengthening early literacy skills, fostering family bonding, and preparing children for kindergarten success.

Recognizing the importance of equitable access, DCY developed a dedicated enrollment process for children in foster care to ensure all children had the same opportunities for early literacy development. Through this focused effort, more than 5,500 children in foster care were enrolled in the program.



First Lady DeWine reading to young children

**NEARLY 5 MILLION AGE-APPROPRIATE BOOKS
WERE DELIVERED TO CHILDREN STATEWIDE,
INCLUDING MORE THAN 5,500 FOSTER CHILDREN
ENROLLED BY DCY**

“ The program is absolutely amazing and is the only reason I am able to afford to work and pay my bills. Plus, my children have learned so much from the program they attend.

— PARENT BENEFITING FROM THE CHILD CARE CHOICE VOUCHER

CHILD CARE CHOICE VOUCHER

Governor DeWine launched the Child Care Choice Voucher program through DCY in the final quarter of SFY 24, with full implementation achieved in SFY 25. This initiative serves families earning up to 200% of the Federal Poverty Level by giving them the freedom to choose from center-based care, family child care, or faith-based providers that best fit their specific needs.

The Governor's program takes a flexible approach that better accommodates the schedules and requirements of working parents. In its first year of operation, more than 8,000 children from 5,000 families participated in the program. Family surveys revealed significant positive outcomes, including increased work hours, new job opportunities, and educational advancement through GED completion.

OHIO PROMISE

Promoting Resources, Opportunities, and Meaningful Inclusion through Support and Education ensures children with disabilities have access to integrated early care and education. In SFY25, 425 children were served in designated programs and 2,005 children in Publicly Funded Child Care received enhanced support.

The program creates welcoming environments that benefit all children by fostering understanding and acceptance. It provides training for early educators through a statewide Inclusion Center of Excellence, giving professionals tools to support every child's developmental needs while enabling parents to pursue education or employment.

WORKFORCE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

DCY invested \$20 million in early educator retention payments, reaching more than 12,000 professionals in SFY25. The department also launched new credentialing pathways, piloted apprenticeship models with community colleges, and expanded technical assistance to reduce provider burden and stabilize the workforce.

SIMPLIFYING THE SYSTEM

New tools and digital modernization efforts made Ohio's child care system easier to navigate. A new online eligibility tool and simplified Publicly Funded Child Care application process reduced barriers for families, while streamlined licensing and renewal processes improved efficiency for providers.

DATA AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Expanded child care dashboards now provide real-time insights into enrollment, quality ratings, and workforce trends. This transparency supports smarter decision-making, reveals gaps in rural access, and drives continuous improvement across Ohio's early childhood system.



425 CHILDREN WERE SERVED IN DESIGNATED PROGRAMS AND 2,005 CHILDREN IN PUBLICLY FUNDED CHILD CARE RECEIVED ENHANCED SUPPORT

BOLD GOAL 3: KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER

When families are supported early, before they're in crisis, children are more likely to remain safely with their families, and communities grow stronger.

CELEBRATING YOUTH RESILIENCE

In 2025, 579 young people in foster care earned their high school diplomas or GEDs—87 more than last year. These graduates overcame significant challenges with the support of caring adults and community partners. As Governor DeWine shared, “Graduating from high school is a tremendous achievement for any student, especially for those who have grown up in foster care.” DCY marked the milestone by sending graduation cards signed by Governor DeWine and Director Wente with a small gift, celebrating not only their past success but their bright futures ahead.

“ Graduating from high school is a tremendous achievement for any student, especially for those who have grown up in foster care.

— GOVERNOR DEWINE

579 YOUNG PEOPLE IN FOSTER CARE EARNED THEIR HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMAS OR GEDS



PROMOTING PERMANENT FAMILIES AND KINSHIP

To promote permanency for children, DCY continued to make the Ohio Adoption Grant program available to help offset expenses that families incur during and after adopting a child. During SFY25 over \$35 million was provided through approximately 2,300 grants. Children placed in kinship care with relatives or close family friends often experience better outcomes. DCY supports a continuum of kinship resources and grants to help with the additional expenses of unexpectedly bringing a child into their home.

\$35+ MILLION INVESTED IN PERMANENT FAMILIES FOR CHILDREN

BEHAVIORAL AND MENTAL HEALTH ACCESS

DCY launched a telehealth mental health initiative to provide immediate virtual support to children and families in crisis—especially in areas where these services are hard to access. This bridge support is available through referrals from county agencies and mental health consultants, reducing wait times and making care more accessible when it's needed most.



Director Kara Wente and Assistant Director Jeff Van Deusen at the Ohio Network of Children's Advocacy Centers Membership Meeting

DATA AND ACCOUNTABILITY

DCY strengthened accountability and oversight in residential care by implementing new reporting requirements and launching data-driven quality reviews informed by more than 12,000 critical incident reports. These efforts focus on safety, transparency, and continuous improvement in facilities serving Ohio's children. As a next step, DCY will roll out targeted technical assistance and pilot programs to further improve child outcomes and elevate residential care standards.

We appreciate the Ohio General Assembly's recognition of the importance of accountability in residential settings. House Bill 315 underscores their commitment to child safety, introducing key safeguards such as immediate notifications when group home residents interact with emergency services, automatically triggering placement reviews and empowering DCY with enhanced authority to respond swiftly to safety concerns.

Together with provisions in House Bill 96, which strengthen background checks, staff training, and staffing ratios in group homes, these legislative efforts align with DCY's broader strategy of rigorous oversight and continuous improvement. This comprehensive approach ensures the well-being of Ohio's most vulnerable children remains at the forefront of residential care reform.

STRENGTHENING PLACEMENT STABILITY

DCY invested significantly in stabilizing placements for Ohio's most vulnerable children through two key initiatives. The Menu of Supports program provided targeted funding to hundreds of caregivers, supporting 420 treatment foster parents and 171 kinship families with \$3,000 grants to create safe, stable homes for children with complex needs. The program also helped transition 27 youth from hospital or institutional settings, with 11 successfully placed in treatment foster homes.

In partnership with Governor DeWine, DCY launched the Treatment Foster Home Pilot Program with over \$2.8 million in funding. Originally planned for 15 counties, overwhelming interest expanded the program to 42 counties through 11 partnerships. These programs provide 24/7 on-call support, crisis counseling, and specialized training to foster families caring for children with complex behavioral health needs. Treatment foster care can cost up to 33 percent less than congregate care, saving approximately \$135,000 per child annually while keeping children in family settings closer to their communities. Since launch, the programs have recruited 64 treatment foster homes with active placements supporting vulnerable youth across Ohio.

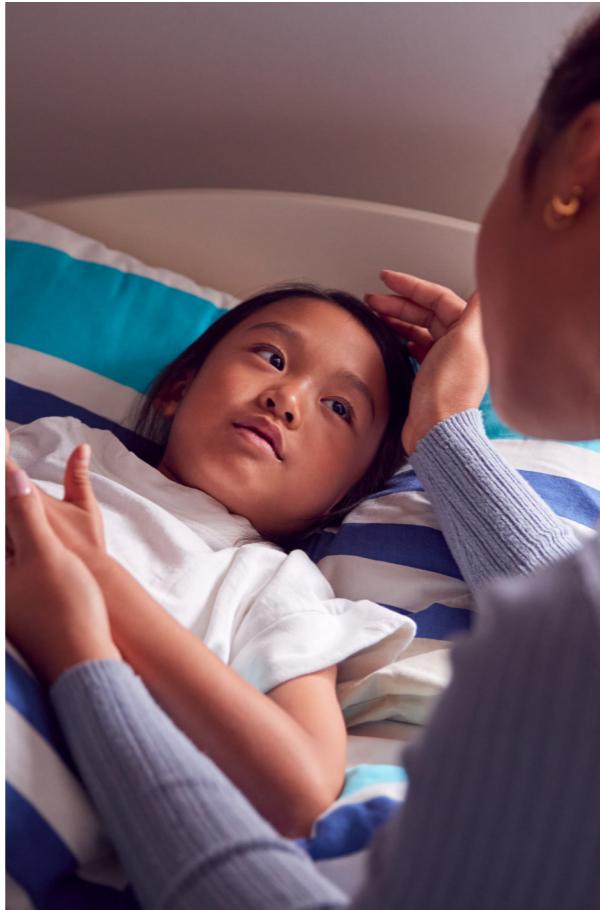
64 TREATMENT FOSTER HOMES WITH ACTIVE PLACEMENTS SUPPORTING VULNERABLE YOUTH ACROSS OHIO

CONGREGATE CARE REFORM

In 2025, DCY conducted a statewide review of youth in long-term congregate care. Working with local partners, the department helped safely transition 66 percent of those youth into family-like settings. This effort is helping to ensure that congregate care remains a treatment-focused, short-term option, and not a default placement. To sustain progress, DCY deployed five new Community Support Liaisons to help counties match youth with appropriate families and wraparound supports.

PREVENTION AND FAMILY SUPPORT

DCY awarded grants to more than 100 community-based organizations to address the root causes of child welfare involvement. Projects included kinship navigator programs, family resource centers, parenting initiatives tailored to specific cultures and communities, and economic mobility pilots. Each initiative was supported by technical assistance to ensure impact, scale, and alignment with what works.



YOUTH TRANSITIONS

The Bridges program continues to be a cornerstone of Ohio's commitment to supporting young adults transitioning from foster care. This voluntary program serves individuals aged 18-21 who have aged out of the system and are actively pursuing education, employment, or managing qualifying health conditions.

In SFY 2025, Bridges achieved remarkable growth with a 20% increase in participation, serving an average of 730 young adults monthly. This expansion demonstrates growing trust and engagement within Ohio's foster care alumni community. The program provided critical one-time stipends to address escalating costs of housing, food, and transportation, with support strategically delivered across three participant categories: general enrollees, parenting young adults, and those transitioning out at age 21.

Recognizing that 20% of participants are parents themselves, Bridges facilitated connections with DCY programs to secure essential items like cribs, ensuring the next generation receives proper care and safety. Program improvements throughout the year were driven by direct participant input through OYAB meetings, listening sessions, and focus groups, ensuring services remain responsive to the evolving needs of Ohio's young adults in transition.

**BRIDGES GREW BY
20%—ENROLLING 100
ADDITIONAL YOUNG
ADULTS TRANSITIONING
FROM FOSTER CARE,
BRINGING THE
MONTHLY AVERAGE
TO 730 PARTICIPANTS
STATEWIDE**



Parent and Youth Ambassador Team in March 2025

LIVED EXPERIENCE LEADERSHIP

DCY launched the innovative Parent and Youth Ambassador (PYA) program to bridge the gap between families and critical support services. This peer-based navigation initiative connects families with individuals who have lived experience in social systems, offering authentic understanding and trusted guidance during challenging times.

PYAs serve as single-point resources, assisting families via phone, chat, and in-person contact to access concrete supports, service referrals, and benefit navigation. Their lived experience allows them to navigate the complexities families face when engaging with multiple systems.

The program's strategic rollout ensures geographic coverage across Ohio, with each PYA representing a different Service Delivery Area (SDA). DCY plans to expand the program to ensure dedicated PYA support in every SDA statewide, making peer-based navigation accessible to all Ohio families.

As part of the state's infant vitality strategy, PYAs also facilitated community sessions in five counties with high infant mortality rates—Cleveland, Lima, Columbus, Chillicothe, and Cincinnati. Participation increased from 85 attendees in fall 2024 to 99 in spring 2025, a 16% rise that reflects growing community trust in peer-led support.

STAYING THE COURSE FOR KIDS

As we reflect on a year of progress, we remain clear about the work ahead. The challenges facing Ohio's children and families are complex, but not insurmountable. With a commitment to prevention, accountability, and collaboration, DCY will continue leading with purpose.

At every level of our work, one principle guides us: **DO WHAT'S RIGHT FOR KIDS**. It's more than a slogan, it's our standard. It shapes how we listen to families, how we partner with communities, and how we measure success.

We are grateful for the trust placed in us by Governor DeWine, by Ohio's General Assembly, by our partners across the state, and by the families who show up and speak out to make our work better.

Our second year proved that a unified vision for children is not only possible, it's powerful. And we're just getting started.

Together, we'll keep doing what's right for kids and build a stronger Ohio for generations to come.

CONNECT WITH US:

Website: childrenandyouth.ohio.gov

Email: info@childrenandyouth.ohio.gov

Family and Customer Support Center: (844)234-KIDS(5437)



**Department of
Children & Youth**





At DCY, we've taken the call to "**DO WHAT'S
RIGHT FOR KIDS**" to heart — because we
know that behind every policy is a child who
needs us all to do better.