



SOUTH CAROLINA'S CHILDREN'S JUSTICE ACT



WHAT IS THE CHILDREN'S JUSTICE ACT?

The federal Children's Justice Act provides grants to states to develop, establish, and operate programs designed to improve the investigation, prosecution, and judicial handling of cases of child abuse and neglect, particularly child sexual abuse and exploitation, in a manner that limits additional trauma to the child victim. This also includes the handling of child fatality cases in which child abuse or neglect is suspected and some cases of children with disabilities and serious health problems who also are victims of abuse and neglect.

CJA TASK FORCE

To be eligible for CJA funds, states are required to establish and maintain a Task Force on children's justice. In accordance with federal statutory requirements, membership must be multidisciplinary and comprise of at least one slot for each of a multitude of disciplines. South Carolina has maintained an active Children's Justice Act Task Force since 1994. The purpose and activities of the CJA Task Force (as defined by its bylaws and federal statute) are as follows:

- ▶ To **conduct an assessment** of the state's systems responding to abused and neglected children at three-year intervals;
- ▶ To **adopt recommendations** in each of the CJA categories;
- ▶ To **work towards implementation** of the recommendations;
- ▶ To **recommend** to the state's grantee (DSS) **projects to be supported by the CJA** grant funds; and
- ▶ To **express positions on legislation or state policy issues**, consistent with its mission and recommendations.

CJA FUNDING STRUCTURE

South Carolina currently receives approximately \$260,000 annually in CJA funding. The SC Department of Social Services has been designated the state's CJA grantee and contracts with USC's Children's Law Center as recommended by the Task Force. The Children's Law Center receives the CJA funding to support the Task Force and assist in implementation of its recommendations. CJA grants are to be used to implement Task Force recommendations in the following three categories:

- A. **Investigative, administrative, and judicial handling of cases**
- B. **Experimental, model and demonstration programs**
- C. **Reform of state laws, ordinances, regulations, protocols and procedures**

CJA ACCOMPLISHMENT HIGHLIGHTS FOR 2018-2021:

- Established a statewide child abuse response protocol document and secured a legislative mandate for its use
- Provided multidisciplinary training on communication strategies with children with limited communication skills and distributed consultation list of resource professionals
- Supported compliance with Best Legal Practices by monitoring an extended evaluation process
- Examined the prevalence of children testifying in SC courts and the usage of CCTV testimony, and hosted training for DSS/GAL attorneys to improve their skills when handling court cases with children who must testify
- Updated, printed, and distributed family court and general sessions child court notebooks for children having to appear in court
- Coordinated intensive child death investigation training for coroners and investigators
- Created and distributed an educational document for school personnel clarifying confidentiality requirements and what to expect following a report of child abuse
- Worked to broaden collaboration between schools and Children's Advocacy Centers by encouraging school representation on MDTs
- Supported the South Carolina Network of Children's Advocacy Centers (SCNCAC)
- Supported the operations of the Children's Law Center to provide applicable resources and trainings

CJA TOPICS OF PRIORITY FOR 2021-2024:

- Recognition, investigation, and prosecution of maltreatment of children with disabilities
- Improvement of child death investigations and the use of the Child Death Investigation Task Force rapid response
- Training events on family violence and the leading research in this area
- Improvement of the handling of cases with youth dually-involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems
- Trainings focused on strategies to reduce stress and trauma to children who must testify
- Collaboration with Court Improvement Program, Forensic Nurse Examiner Task Force, and Human Trafficking Task Force to supplement resources and address gaps in service
- Development of a training curriculum on the SC Child Abuse Response Protocol
- Support of the growth and success of the Safe Babies Court initiative
- Enhancement of protections for recordings of forensic interviews of child abuse victims
- Investigation of the feasibility of integrating data systems involving child abuse cases
- Examination of racial disparities of children involved with the child welfare system

To learn more about the Children's Justice Act programs, please contact Mandy Bowden at amandabowden@sc.edu or 803-576-7233.

The CJA Bylaws, members list, and current recommendations may be found at <http://childlaw.sc.edu/>