



2026 STATE ROUNDTABLE REPORT: LEGAL REPRESENTATION



Background

At the 2025 Pennsylvania State Roundtable (SRT), members voted for Legal Representation as the top priority for the upcoming year. During the 2025 SRT discussions, the following four themes emerged as focus areas for Legal Representation:

- Collaboration,
- Compensation,
- Self-care, and
- Training.

History of the State Roundtable's Legal Representation Work

In the spring of 2009, the State Roundtable commissioned a Legal Representation Workgroup to develop recommendations regarding pre-service and ongoing training for Guardians ad Litem (GALs) and parent attorneys.

During the workgroup's first year, members reviewed national models regarding training, surveyed Pennsylvania regarding issues specific to GALs and parent attorneys, and developed plans and objectives for pre-service and core training.

By 2016, the workgroup had achieved the following:

- Created a legal booklet titled "Standards of Practice for Parent Attorneys, Guardians ad Litem, and Legal Counsel practicing in Pennsylvania's Child Dependency System;"
- Created a children's court activity book, "What's Happening in Dependency Court;"
- Trained over 1,200 attorneys statewide through Core I and Core II education sessions;
- Created a pre-service video for GALs to meet the federal Child Abuse and Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) for county reimbursement of GALs; and
- Created a video entitled "A Parent's Guide to Understanding the Pennsylvania Dependency System."

In 2016, the SRT disbanded the Legal Representation Workgroup as its assigned tasks had been successfully completed.

2016 to present

Since the Legal Representation workgroup disbanded in 2016, the Office of Children and Families in the Courts has continued its work to enhance Legal Representation.

In March of 2022, the Core One training was released on an online platform. The credited version continues to meet CAPTA requirements. The online session was expanded to be relevant to parent

attorneys and solicitors. Advanced attorney education has also been provided to solicitors, parent attorneys, and GALs on dependency topics prioritized by the SRT. A few examples of attorney training include three regional training sessions on kinship care in 2023 and mental health education in June of 2025 and May of 2026.

Leadership Roundtables

Legal Representation has continued to come up in discussions at Leadership Roundtables. Given that this was a frequent topic, at the Spring 2025 Leadership Roundtables, attendees were asked whether recruitment or retention was an issue for parent attorneys, GALs, and solicitors. As a follow-up question, counties were then asked what steps they had taken to address those issues.

While not all counties had issues with GAL or solicitor recruitment and retention, the majority of counties identified issues with parent attorney recruitment and retention. Counties shared various ideas regarding what they had done in these areas, including:

- Increased pay,
- Worked with neighboring counties to share attorneys,
- Provided more flexibility for attorneys,
- Offered continuing legal education credits, and
- Held regular meetings with attorneys.

As a result of the legal representation discussions at the Spring 2025 LRTs, Legal Representation was identified as one potential priority area for the 2025 SRT. After a vote by SRT members, Legal Representation was selected as the priority topic for 2025.

Since the 2025 State Roundtable selection, Legal Representation was prioritized at the Fall 2025 Leadership Roundtables. First, counties were asked if their attorneys had received the Standards of Practice. Of the counties responding, 14 said their attorneys had received the Standards of Practice, 19 counties said they had not, and 30 counties were unsure of whether their attorneys had received the Standards of Practice. Counties shared that, while most of the standards of practice remained relevant, some sections needed updating.

Counties were then asked to rank each Legal Representation theme area identified by the 2025 State Roundtable: training, collaboration, compensation, and attorney self-care, in order of priority for their county. Collaboration was the top priority, with training a close second.

Finally, Leadership Roundtables were asked to split into groups and answer the following questions in each category.

- **Collaboration:** What ideas do you have to get attorneys to work well together outside of the courtroom?
- **Training:** Based on your observations in court, what would you like to see attorneys in your county do better?
- **Compensation:** Is attorney compensation an issue for your county? What have you been able to do in your county to address this issue?

- **Attorney Self-Care:** What has your county done to encourage dependency attorneys to take care of themselves? If you have never discussed this topic, what do you think would work well in helping dependency attorneys to take care of themselves?

After group discussions, a few ideas emerged in each category.

- **Collaboration:** team approach for attorneys, regular attorney meetings, attorneys invited to roundtable meetings, social/team bonding events.
- **Training:** suggested topics included the Juvenile Act and Rules of Juvenile Court Procedure, solicitor-specific training, understanding child welfare agency requirements and obligations, client relationship, communication and advocacy, case preparation, and progress vs. compliance.
- **Compensation:** address workload in relation to pay, flexibility in scheduling, and benefits.
- **Attorney Self-Care:** attorney appreciation days, social events, exercise programs, breaks during lengthy hearings, and addressing trauma.

Progress and Update on the 2025 SRT Legal Representation Priority

After a thorough review of the history of the Legal Representation Workgroup, feedback received from the 2025 SRT and Fall 2025 LRT, and ongoing education provided by the Office of Children and Families in the Courts regarding Legal Representation, it is highly recommended that the following areas be addressed:

1. Revision of the Standards of Practice for Parent Attorneys, Guardians ad Litem, and Legal Counsel practicing in Pennsylvania's Child Dependency System

The Standards of Practice were initially published in 2015 by the Legal Representation Workgroup. Laws and practices have changed over the past 11 years. The Standards of Practice should be updated to reflect current law and current best practices. For example, much work has been done across the state regarding Family Finding, Kinship Care, Autism, and courtroom best practices. The role of attorneys in these areas should be addressed in the Standards of Practice.

2. Ongoing training for dependency attorneys

As workgroups are commissioned, attorney training is often part of each workgroup's goals. Feedback on proposed training for attorneys and assistance with implementation is necessary. In addition, based on feedback from Fall 2025 Leadership Roundtables, areas of concern identified by a majority of counties could be presented in a training. The most frequently mentioned areas where counties felt attorneys needed more training were:

- The role of the agency and the caseworker;
- Reasonable Efforts;

- Child Welfare laws and rules; and
- Communication with clients, children and youth agencies, and opposing counsel.

3. Updates to online training

As laws and best practices change and more knowledge is acquired, the online Core One training needs to be updated regularly. While the Office of Children and Families in the Courts maintains this online training, practitioners' review and input would be helpful and appreciated.

4. Recruitment and retention of attorneys

Counties clearly stated at the Spring 2025 Leadership Roundtables that attorney recruitment and retention are a struggle, particularly parent attorney recruitment. Further examination and analysis are needed to determine which resources exist to help counties struggling in this area.

After a thorough review of the SRT's priority topic, Legal Representation, the Office of Children and Families in the Courts respectfully submits the following recommendations:

2026 State Roundtable recommendations:

1. Convene a Legal Representation Committee to:

- Explore possible statewide and national practices to enhance Legal Representation for dependent children and their families;**
- Update the current Standards of Practice to include current law and best practices;**
- Assist, aid, and support the Office of Children and Families in the Courts with attorney training; and**
- Examine, analyze, and consider resources available for counties struggling with attorney recruitment and retention.**