

The Child Welfare Advocate newsletter



Upcoming Events:

10-14-26
8:30a-4p

Applied Learning Series | 1 day - 3 sessions | CEUs available



10-21-26
4p-6p

ARCH Institute | Fall Research Symposium | Alumni Center

11-12-26
5p-7:30p

Unity in Action | Topic: Substance Use and Child Welfare



Quarterly Recap

- Community Leadership Collaborative is a newly launched interdisciplinary mentoring and leadership program for WKU students who are interested in improving the well-being of children and families. The Center for Child Welfare hosted the six students for an orientation in August.
- The Center for Child Welfare welcomed students back to campus with the College of Health and Human Services department celebrating with pizza, popsicles, and face-painting!
- The KASWE Conference was held at Knicely Conference Center on September 17-18. Participants learned about what is going on in social work education across Kentucky with an emphasis on self-renewal and professional development. The Center for Child Welfare was represented with presentations by Dr. Daniel Boamah, Dr. Whitney Cassity-Caywood, Dr. Monica Hines, and Dr. Erin Warfel.



A Note from the new Director and Assistant Director



Erin Warfel DSW, MSS,
MLSP, LCSW;
CCW Director

We are honored to take on new leadership roles with the CCW. Under the direction of Austin Griffiths, the Center has flourished, and we are excited to build upon that strong foundation alongside our exceptional team. We are grateful for the opportunity to continue collaborating with incredible staff and faculty as we advance the Center's mission of supporting children and families. We look forward to engaging with the university and broader community partners through initiatives that strengthen communities and create meaningful opportunities for children and families to thrive.



Whitney Cassity-Caywood,
Ph.D., LCSW;
CCW Assistant Director

We are thrilled about the new initiatives and upcoming events such as the Applied Learning Series and Unity in Action. We are also very happy with the start of the Community Leadership Collaborative, engaging students across disciplines to learn more about what their role can be in the child welfare system. We welcome your ideas and contributions as we strive to advance this important work together.



Staff Spotlight

Ashley Barnes, MSW, LCSW, serves as the Integration Specialist for the WKU Center for Child Welfare. A Warren County native and proud WKU alumna, Ashley brings more than 20 years of experience working with children, families, and communities through roles with the Kentucky Department for Community Based Services, private practice mental health, and Warren County Public Schools.

She is passionate about supporting children and families, strengthening communities, and connecting people with valuable resources. In her role with the Center, Ashley focuses on building relationships with community partners and advocates, supporting Center programs and outreach, and highlighting the important work happening across the Center and throughout the community.



Child Welfare Analytics Collaborative

The Division of Protection and Permanency (DPP) provides consultative services and assistance to local child protective services offices. DPP is responsible for coordinating permanency services, establishing standards of practices, and gathering data to monitor the state's progress in child welfare. The Child Welfare Analytics Collaborative (CWAC), a partnership between Western Kentucky University (WKU) and DPP, supports the division by monitoring data and developing reports. CWAC analysts use statistical software, including IBM SPSS and Microsoft Excel, to analyze data and address data-related needs.

Learn more: <https://www.chfs.ky.gov/agencies/dcbs/dpp/Pages/default.aspx>

Integrated Family Trauma Treatment Clinic

The IFTTC is a collaboration with the KY Cabinet for Health and Family Services aimed at reducing the impact of trauma and alleviating the risk of its reoccurrence. The IFTTC provides evidence-based trauma treatment services for parents and children, creating positive outcomes for families.



If you are seeking to refer a family for our services, please scan the QR code.

Cultures of Child Protection

Cultures of Child Protection (CCP) is a three-year collaborative research project between University of Virginia's College at Wise and WKU's CCW examining child welfare practitioners' experiences across the United States. Since Spring 2025, more than 200 practitioners from 38 states have participated through surveys and qualitative interviews.



Preliminary findings highlight concerns related to burnout, workforce demands, resource limitations, and organizational challenges, while also demonstrating the resilience and commitment of practitioners. More than 60% have worked in child welfare for five or more years and identified supportive relationships, self-care, lifelong learning, advocacy, and professional values as important to sustaining the workforce. The study continues through the coming year, expanding participation and examining state-level child welfare data. Child welfare professionals with at least one year of experience are invited to participate in the [anonymous online questionnaire](#) or contact Dr. Christa Moore at cjm4vx@uvawise.edu to learn about participating in a qualitative interview.

Christa Moore, Ph.D., LCSW | Univeristy of Virginia Wise

Training Resource Center



Training Resource Center (TRC) staff members Cassie Sutton, Lori Dowdy, and Gail Dick partnered with the Cabinet for Health & Family Services (CHFS) to pilot Taking Root, a training program for foster families moving toward adoption, using a curriculum developed by adoptive parents and experts.

Taking Root is designed to prepare families, before adoption is finalized, to ensure they have the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to continue meeting their child's need as their child grows and develops within their family. Cassie, Lori, and Gail have been co-leading this training with adoptive parents who can draw on their lived experience as related to the material. Foster parents interested in attending this training can more information at <https://www.jitkentucky.org/calendar.html>



Austin Griffiths, Ph.D., CSW
ARCH Institute, Intermin Director



I'm excited to share the launch of the CAYA Advancing Research and Community Health (ARCH) Institute at Western Kentucky University. Established in 2026 through a partnership between WKU's College of Health and Human Services and CAYA Collaborative Care (formerly, LifeSkills), ARCH brings together the College's applied research centers, clinics, faculty, staff, students, and community partners. The Center for Child Welfare is part of this new effort.

ARCH is designed to help people across these areas connect their expertise, pursue shared projects, and respond to needs they may not be able to address as effectively on their own. It will support applied research and evaluation, strengthen community partnerships, create opportunities for students, and help turn what we learn into useful tools, services, and solutions. That matters for child welfare because the challenges facing children and families often extend into health, education, and other parts of community life. I hope you'll stay connected, share your ideas, and look for opportunities to work with us as the CAYA ARCH Institute grows. Together, we can turn strong partnerships into meaningful change for the children, families, and communities we serve.

Sign up to receive future ARCH Institute updates





After nearly four decades under the LifeSkills name, the region's community mental health center announced in May 2026 that it would go forward as CAYA Collaborative Care, Inc. CAYA, pronounced "KAI-uh," standing for Come As You Are.

The change was deliberate, and it was structural: the rebrand stands as one of four core initiatives in the organization's strategic plan, adopted to unite under a single brand and a single identity a company that had merged years earlier but continued to carry two long-trusted names. The joining of LifeSkills and Pennyroyal Center created one provider serving 18 counties across south central and western Kentucky. The new name lets that one organization finally be seen as one by the families and communities it serves.

As a Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic, CAYA delivers behavioral health, physical health, and developmental services as integrated, whole-person care, and the name was chosen to say plainly what the organization has always tried to practice.

"We have always believed that the moment someone reaches out for help is one of the most courageous moments of their life. We will be here. No prerequisites. No judgment. Regardless of their diagnosis, their circumstances, or their ability to pay."

— Joe Dan Beavers, President and Chief Executive Officer, CAYA Collaborative Care

The legacies of LifeSkills and Pennyroyal Center remain. The same clinicians, the same offices, the same commitment to the communities both organizations have served since 1966. What has changed is the name on the door and the promise it makes to the person walking through it.

A Partnership Rooted in Bowling Green

CAYA's work and the WKU Center for Child Welfare's have been intertwined from the Center's beginning. Established in 2019 as Kentucky's first center dedicated to child welfare, the Center carried the LifeSkills name for its first years and has been a partner in the work that matters most to both organizations: preparing the next generation of child welfare and behavioral health professionals, advancing applied research on trauma, substance use, and family well-being, and translating that research into practice across the Commonwealth.

That partnership deepened again this year with the WKU Board of Regents' naming of the CAYA Advancing Research and Community Health Institute in the College of Health and Human Services, a home for the students, faculty, and practitioners doing this work side by side.

"We're bridging that gap between the academic and the professional world," Beavers said.

CAYA is grateful for the Center for Child Welfare's partnership, and for the faculty, students, and staff who share the conviction behind the name: come as you are.

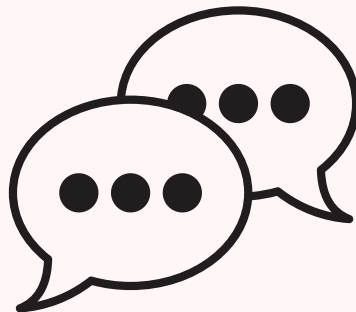
Learn more at cayacare.org.



Community Leadership Collaborative 2026-2027

Why they are here

Our CLC members share what this experience means to them, why they chose to be part of it, and what they hope to gain along the way.



"As a police officer, MSW student, and father, I have seen firsthand the difference it can make when the people and agencies involved in a child's life are able to work together instead of operating separately. I joined the CLC because I want to better understand each part of that system, build relationships with professionals outside of my own field, and ultimately be better prepared to support the children and families in my rural community."

Tycondi Whitaker, Social Work

"I chose to be part of the Community Leadership Collaborative because I want to better understand the people, resources, and organizations that make a difference for children and families in our community. For me, this experience is about building meaningful connections and gaining the knowledge to better support and advocate for the people I will have the privilege of serving throughout my career."

Jae McReynolds, Physical Therapy

"I chose to participate in the Community Leadership Collaborative because serving others has always been important to me, and my experiences in community service have shown me how much of an impact simply being there for someone can make. I hope CLC helps me grow as a leader, learn more about the needs in my community, and become someone who can create meaningful change in the lives of children and families."

Macy Reining, Criminology & Sociology