



Volunteer Review Board Member Handbook

Procedures and Best Practices

Monika E. Gross, J.D. Director

January 1, 2021

Dear FCRO Local Review Board Member:

The Volunteer Foster Care Review Board Members serving on boards across the State of Nebraska are our greatest assets. We could not complete the work the Legislature has given us to do without each, and every board member.

The board members help abused and/or neglected children, and delinquent/status offender youth, by reviewing the cases and making findings and recommendations. A written final report includes the Board's findings and recommendations. All legal parties to the case, including the court, receive a copy of this report.

Reviews make a difference for children and youth in out-of-home care in the following ways: Children receive attention from agencies and the courts, cases make greater progress, and placements are monitored to ensure they are safe and appropriate.

Studies done by Dr. Ann Coyne of UNO's School of Social Work have shown that children who receive citizen reviews are as much as 3.9 times more likely to move from foster care into adoptive placement when compared to children similar in every way except not reviewed.

Data collected from reviews is included in our quarterly and annual reports to help to educate key stakeholders such as the Legislature, stating what is working and what needs corrected within the system.

Your commitment to the board you serve on and the review process is critical. Thank you for your efforts and dedication.

Sincerely,

Monika E. Gross

Monika E. Gross J.D., Executive Director

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Volunteer Review Board Member Acknowledgement

I am in receipt of the FCRO Review Board Member Procedures and Best Practice Handbook, and I understand that I should consult with the Training Specialist, or another person from the FCRO Management Team if I have any questions about policies or procedures contained herein.

I have entered into my volunteer relationship with the FCRO voluntarily, and I acknowledge that while there is no mandatory length of time that a board member must serve, I understand that volunteer board members should commit to a 3-year term if possible. No other terms bind this volunteer relationship, and either the FCRO or I can terminate the relationship at will, with or without cause, at any time.

Furthermore, I acknowledge that this Volunteer Board Member Handbook is not a contract of employment or volunteering, nor is it a legal document.

By signing below, I acknowledge that I have read and agree to the attached **Statement on Conflict of Interest**, and **Confidentiality** and I further acknowledge that this confidentiality requirement and notification continues after my service as a volunteer board member ends.

Although some or all of the procedures and best practices were explained verbally, I understand that it is my responsibility to fully read and comply with the procedures and best practice guidelines contained in this handbook, and any revisions made to it that I receive in the future.

By signing below, I acknowledge receipt of the **FCRO Review Board Member Procedures and Best Practice Handbook**.

Volunteer Board Member *Signature*

Volunteer Board Member *Print Name*

Date

By signing below I agree to abide by the **Conflict of Interest, Confidentiality, Code of Conduct, Best Practices and Procedures** as outlined in this handbook.

Volunteer Board Member *Signature*

Date

Received By FCRO

Date

1. ABOUT THE FCRO

a. MISSION and VISION Statement

The Foster Care Review Office's **Mission** is to provide oversight of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems by tracking and reviewing children in out-of-home care, reporting on aggregate outcomes, and advocating on individual and systemic levels to ensure that children's best interests and safety needs are met. Our **Vision** is that every child involved in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems becomes resilient, safe, healthy, and economically secure.

b. FCRO STATUTORY RESPONSIBILITY

The Foster Care Review Office is an independent state agency put in place by the Legislature in 1982. The FCRO has been given the authority and responsibility for reviewing cases of children in out-of-home care through Department of Health and Human Services, Juvenile Probation, or on a Trial Home Visit through DHHS, and making required recommendations regarding the plan for the child's future (known as the permanency plan), services for the child and family, and the appropriateness and safety of the child's placement (foster home, group home, detention facility, or specialized facility). Central to all recommendations is what is in the best interest of the child.

Per Nebraska State Statutes, the FCRO is responsible for the following:

- Collecting and updating data on children who are in out-of-home care. This includes evaluating judicial and administrative data collected and disseminating data on children in out-of-home care (DHHS and Probation) and who have returned home on trial home visits;
- Disseminating data and findings through means such as Quarterly Reports, Annual Report, trainings, community meetings, and legislative hearings;
- Using trained citizen volunteers review the plan, services, and placements of children in out-of-home care and trial home visits;
- Making recommendations and findings based on case file reviews and information gathered from participants at the FCRO local board meetings;
- Sharing the recommendations and findings with all legal parties to the case;
- When deemed appropriate by the Executive Director, requesting appearance in court proceedings through limited legal standing on behalf of the best interests of children and families;
- Advocating for children, youth and their families through individual case review, legislation, and policy reform; and
- Organizing, sponsoring, and participating in educational programs.

2. VOLUNTEER BOARD MEMBER POSITION DESCRIPTION

Review board members are volunteers who are appointed to serve on a local review board in the area where they live and/or work. Trained board members review the cases of children who are placed in out-of-home care through the Department of Health and Human Services, Probation and/or those children who have returned home on a Trial Home Visit.

Review boards, each consisting of five or more trained volunteer board members, conduct the reviews. They are responsible for reviewing the cases of children and/or youth at least once a year to ensure that the case plan provides for appropriate services and treatment to address the child's safety, health and well-being, and provides permanency in the shortest time possible.

Review boards may also review the cases of youth in the custody of State of Nebraska Probation if they are placed out-of-home. These reviews occur to ensure that the public safety is protected, youth offenders are held accountable, and youth are provided the opportunity for reformation. Only select boards review these cases.

3. REVIEW BOARD MEMBERSHIP REQUIREMENTS AND STATUTE

Board member applicants must meet State Statutory Requirements. *In order to meet our statutory mandate, not all review board applicants will be appointed.*

43-1304. Local foster care review boards; members; powers and duties.

There shall be local foster care review boards to conduct the foster care file audit, case reviews of the children in foster care placement, and carry out other powers and duties given to such boards under the Foster Care Review Act. The executive director of the office shall select members to serve on local boards from a list of applications submitted to the office. Each local board shall consist of not less than four and not more than ten members as determined by the executive director.

The members of the local board shall reasonably represent the various social, economic, racial, and ethnic groups of the county or counties from which its members may be appointed. A person employed by the office, the Department of Health and Human Services, a residential child-caring agency, a child-placing agency, or a court shall not be appointed to a local board. A list of the members of each local board shall be sent to the Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of Probation Administration.

Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest procedures are critical to the work done within the FCRO and that extends to every local board member involved in the case review process. These procedures are in place to protect the children, families and other participants in the review. Every board member is expected to read all information and agree to adhere to these important procedures.

Board members must review and abide by the FCRO **Code of Conduct**. It is important that the board members selected for these local review boards are able to meet the high standards set forth by the FCRO.

Every person that comes in contact with the FCRO at a board meeting will be treated with the utmost respect. Board members must not be biased or disrespectful of any participant or party to the case, or to a fellow board member.

Board members are not employees. Board members are volunteers and cannot seek unemployment benefits or worker's compensation if injured going to and from a board meeting or training, during a board meeting or in a training recommended or provided by the FCRO.

4. APPLICATION AND SELECTION PROCESS

Before serving on a review board, a potential board member must first meet the requirements for serving on a board, submit an application packet, pass a background check, review the Board Member Handbook, complete comprehensive training, and observe a local meeting.

Background checks are completed to ensure that each board member is qualified to serve in this important role. Background checks include criminal background (NDEN – Nebraska Data Exchange Network) and the Nebraska Adult and Child Abuse and Neglect Central Registry. References are also requested.

Applicant Requirements

- Must be **at least 21 years of age**
- Application Process – New board member applicants must complete items 1-3 below (**complete, sign and date**) then submit to the FCRO Training Specialist or Online, for processing.
 1. Application
 2. Adult Abuse and Child Abuse Central Registry (On-Line)
 3. Active Directory (Sign in to establish ID to use with SharePoint)
 4. Willingness to use SharePoint to review cases.
 5. Review the Board Member Handbook at training and agree to follow all procedures in the handbook. *Sign and submit the acknowledgement form.*
- Pass a background check
- Review online materials prior to face-to-face training
- Complete initial face-to-face training with Training Specialist
- Observe a local board meeting.
- Agree to complete 3 hours of ongoing training per year (*including 1 hour of cultural training every 2 years*)

NOTE:

Not all Volunteer Board Member Applicants are accepted. The FCRO retains to right to qualify or disqualify an applicant.

Volunteer Board Member applicants may not be immediately appointed due to lack of a vacancy on a preferred board, or the FCRO's need for specific experience and/or professional background on a board.

5. TERMS OF SERVICE

Board members are appointed to a board for a term of **3 years**. After 3 years, the board member is asked to serve an additional 3 year term. To serve another 3 years the board member would complete and submit the re-application forms. Upon undergoing the re-application process, the board member maybe re-appointed to serve an additional 3 year term.

There is no limit as to the number of terms served, as long as both the Volunteer Board Member and the FCRO agree.

a. Board Introductory Period (6 months)

A **Board Introductory Period** shall be in effect for all volunteer board members during their first **6 months** of service. It will begin on the date of board assignment and concludes at the end of the first **6 months** of service. The intent of the introductory period is to ensure that each volunteer board member receives ample support and guidance. It also allows time for the volunteer board member to determine if this volunteer service is a good fit for them.

During this introductory period the System Oversight Specialist will mentor volunteer board members, and their Training Specialist will be in contact to offer additional training. The new volunteer board member may be matched with a seasoned member from their assigned board to co-lead on cases the first few months. This person may be contacted with questions about the process and questions regarding their case reviews (*in a confidential environment*).

At the end of the board introductory period, the volunteer board member may choose to complete an assessment to help identify areas where more training and support is needed.

b. Reapplication Process

A Renewal Application packet will be sent by mail to all Volunteer Board Members when their 3-year renewal is due.

Board members may choose review their past performance and attendance record with their System Oversight Specialist and/or the Training Specialist before reapplying if they are questioning whether they would like to continue to serve an additional 3-year term.

Board members who choose to stay on for an additional term after their original **3-year term** must submit a brief renewal application to the Training Specialist, and complete the Child and Adult Abuse Central Registry Request process online.

c. Resignation Process

A resignation process is in place should a board member need to resign mid-term. (See 11.h)

d. EMERITUS

Board members who have served for at least 1 year are active or recently resigned board members, may be asked to serve on the EMERITUS board. The EMERITUS board members are experienced and provide a valuable insight into the FCROs process and procedures. These board members may be called upon to speak to Senators and/or review changes regarding FCRO procedures and policies. EMERITUS board members may serve a 3-year term, and meet quarterly or as needed. Mileage costs are reimbursed.

6. CODE OF CONDUCT

- Make a commitment to attend assigned board meeting once per month.
- Notify the FCRO System Oversight Specialist prior to the board meeting if unable to attend. (Members may be excused from attending a meeting with good cause, no more than 3 meetings in a calendar year unless pre-approved by Director.)
- Contact the System Oversight Specialist ASAP if a meeting is missed due to an emergency. *Do this prior to meeting if at all possible.*
- Disclose any and all potential conflicts of interest on a specific case prior to the board meeting. DO NOT REVIEW the case if there is a conflict of interest.
- Come fully prepared to each board meeting, *e.g., having **fully** read each case, prepared questions for participants, developed recommendations and made preliminary findings for each case.*
- Complete and report a minimum of 3 hours of relevant additional approved training annually, including one (1) hour of training related to cultural responsiveness every two years.
- Be a respectful team member – Listen to other board member’s opinions.
- Be respectful, objective, honest, and professional.
- Maintain a non-biased, non-judgmental demeanor in reviews, including sensitivity to the child and family’s culture, ethnic identity, religion, gender, and socioeconomic status.
- Be committed to respecting cultural and economic diversity.
- Be cognizant of appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication, *even when participants are not present in the meeting.*
- Respect the confidentiality of all parties.
- Represent the FCRO and the Local Review Board in a professional manner.

7. **GROUNDS FOR REMOVAL**

Reasons a local board member may be removed from a board include, but are not limited to:

- Divulging confidential information about a case. This is a law violation that could be prosecuted.
- Failing to disclose a conflict of interest in a case.
- Missing two consecutive board meetings or three board meetings in one year without justifiable cause, as determined by the System Oversight Specialist. Extended leave must be approved by the Training Specialist or Executive Director..
- Missing a board meeting more than once (“NO SHOW”) without notifying the System Oversight Specialist as soon as reasonably possible.
- Any action or behavior that is inconsistent with the purposes and objectives of the Foster Care Review Office.
- Using Social Media to look up a party to a case.
- Any contact with parties to the case outside of the board meeting regarding a current or past case that your board has reviewed.
- Being disrespectful to a participant, board member or staff member at a board meeting.
- Exhibiting controlling or monopolizing behaviors at a board meeting.
- Failure to notify the Training Specialist when a personal law violation has occurred (other than traffic citation), or when a Board Member or household member has had an allegation of child abuse or adult abuse, is involved in any juvenile court action, has been placed on the sex offender Registry, and/or has been placed on the Child Abuse or Adult Abuse Central Registry. In such case, the Board Member would not be able to serve on the board until they (or their family member) is cleared of charges, or allegations or the juvenile court proceedings are completed.

8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

It is important that *all* children receive an objective review of their case, and that FCRO reviews do not have any appearance of impropriety. In order to serve on a local board you agreed to avoid all conflicts of interest. If you are not sure, contact your System Oversight Specialist **before** you review.

The **following describes some, but not all, conflicts of interest for which board members must recuse them self from the child's review.**¹ These are provided to help clarify different situations that might occur.

a. **Personal contact with the child or family**

If a board member currently has or previously had a personal or professional relationship with a child in out-of-home care, or their biological / adoptive / guardianship / kinship family, then the board member must recuse their self. *Some common examples:*

- Former case manager for the family.
- Current or past guardian ad litem, or attorney for child or parent.
- Current or past CASA on the case or have discussed the case in the CASA office.
- Current or past foster parent or respite provider for a child or sibling of the child.
- Current or past teacher, school employee, Sunday school teacher, for child or parent.
- Current or past daycare provider for child or family.
- Current or past Scout volunteer, 4-H volunteer, team coach, or other involvement in extracurricular or community activities with child or family.
- Current or past employer or business associate for parents, foster parents or older children.
- Current or past neighbor to child, bio family or foster family.
- A current or past board member you served with as a FCRO local board is the foster parent of the child/children being reviewed.

b. **Personal contact with legal or service providers for the child or family**

If a board member currently has, or previously had a personal relationship with the children's current or former foster family, any of the parties to the case, including legal parties, or to a service provider for the case, then the board member **must** recuse their self.

If board members do fund-raising or serve on boards for child placing organizations such as Boys Town, Cedars, Christian Heritage, Nebraska Children's Home, etc., then the board member must recuse themselves from any case involving placement or services from that organization.

¹ *Recusing includes immediately notifying your System Oversight Specialist when you realize you know the children or family, returning any materials about the case to the System Oversight Specialist unread, and not being present during reviews involving the children or family.*

c. **If a board member has a change in employment**

If the board member changes jobs and is employed by the Department of Health and Human Services (*in any division or part of the agency*), or is employed by a residential child-caring agency, a child-placing agency, or a court they **MUST** immediately contact FCRO Administration. *If the board members is employed in any capacity for any of these entities they may not serve as a review board member as there are statutory restrictions regarding serving on a local board.*

If a board member has any questions regarding whether a possible conflict of interest exists, they need to contact their System Oversight Specialist or the System Oversight Specialist's Supervisor prior to the board meeting.

Contact information for all staff is provided at the end of this handbook. This information is kept current on our website located at www.fcro.nebraska.gov or call our office at 402-471-4420.

9. **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Nebraska Statute and the rules and regulations of confidentiality set forth by DHHS and the Foster Care Review Office (FCRO).

Neb. Rev. Stat §43-1310. Records and information; confidential; unauthorized disclosure; penalty. All records and information regarding foster children and their parents or relatives in the possession of the office or local board shall be deemed confidential. Unauthorized disclosure of such confidential records and information or any violation of the rules and regulations adopted and promulgated by the Department of Health and Human Services or the office shall be a Class III misdemeanor. [Class III misdemeanor: Maximum - Three months imprisonment, or five hundred dollars fine, or both. Minimum - None.]

Board members are required to adequately secure and protect confidential materials from unauthorized access while these materials are in their possession and **must return** all confidential information to the FCRO at the time of the meeting, or within 30 days if unexpectedly absent from the review board meeting. Board members are not to retain case summaries, supportive documentation or any personal notes on the cases after the date of review. Board members may not destroy printed information on their own. All materials and notes must be turned in at the meeting for destruction. If any information is downloaded on to a personal computer it must be deleted and trash emptied immediately after the meeting.

Board members may not disclose any information obtained from their participation in local board meetings, case meetings, court hearings, and/or any other duties performed on behalf of the FCRO with anyone for any reason outside FCRO staff and Administration – Whether actively serving the FCRO at the time or not. Failure to uphold the FCRO's confidentiality policies may be grounds for immediate dismissal and/or possible criminal charges.

Board members (*current or former*) must immediately notify FCRO Administration should they be contacted by a legal party regarding a child’s case or subpoenaed to appear in court.

Confidentiality procedures are applied equally to verbal, written and electronic communication and is subject to statutory penalties if FCRO procedures are not upheld.

Board members may not use or retain any case information or data at any time, nor use case information or data for personal, professional, or monetary advantage.

10. SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

Local Review Board Members must review only the information provided in the case summary sent to them prior to the board meeting, and may not seek out information from any other source regarding the case or the parties to the case. The System Oversight Specialist may provide board members with additional information or case updates, and/or from participant interaction at the board meeting. Information received from the System Oversight Specialist and from the participants at the board meeting is the only information that may be used.

Board members are **not** to look up any of the parties to the case on Facebook, Instagram, or any other social media site, or seek them out on other internet sites to see if they have a law violation, etc. **This means DO NOT look up moms, dads, boyfriends, family members, teens, children, foster parents, CASAs, service providers, attorneys, or any other person involved in the case.** It is out of the scope of the board member’s authority to do so, and now is specifically addressed in the FCRO Review Board Member Manual and in this Handbook.

Any violation of the social media use policy would be grounds for dismissal.

11. COMMUNICATION - Who to Contact

Every management team member is available to you if you have something you would like to discuss. The Director also has an open door policy and is interested in what you have to share.

a. Case Specific Questions:

If you have a question regarding a case you are currently reviewing, or an issue regarding an upcoming board meeting you should contact your System Oversight Specialist (*re: questions on cases, or scheduled meetings*).

b. Need Additional Training:

If you have a need for additional training in an area that you think would help you in the review process contact the Training Specialist.

c. Report On-Going Training:

Email the Training Specialist when you have completed training and would like to submit towards your 3 hours a year of training (6 hours every 2 years). Remember that one of the 6 hours should be cultural training.

- Face to Face or On-line Training - *Email must include:*
Topic, Date, Who the training was provided by, Hours of training.
- Book Read - *Email must include:*
Title and Author of Book. State if you would recommend it to others. Provide a paragraph on what you learned from the book. Books are given 2 hours of credit.

d. Change of Contact Information:

Email the Training Specialist all changes when your cell phone, home phone, email, or home address has changed. Also notify the System Oversight Specialist. We keep a current record for each board member in our volunteer date database.

e. Request to Move to a Different Board:

Email the Training Specialist if you are requesting to move to a different board. Provide the reason why (i.e., moving or need location closer to home). If there is a conflict on the board or a personal reason for wanting to move – please explain. Provide the date you need to move by. The Training Specialist will try to accommodate you if at all possible.

f. Request Leave of Absence:

Email the Training Specialist when you need to request a leave of absence due to educational pursuits, personal or medical reasons, or extensive travel. Board seats cannot be held for more than 3 months.

If your leave of absence is no longer than 6 months, and you were in good standing when you left your board, you may return to the board you left if there is a vacancy.

If you are gone for more than 6 months you may be required to get some retraining and depending on length absence may be required to complete a renewal application.

The Training Specialist will accommodate the board member when at all possible.

g. Change in Employment:

Email the Training Specialist if you have a change in employment to ensure that the new employer is not DHHS, a Court, a child placing, or child care agency as these would be a conflict of interest, and you would not be allowed to serve on a review board according to statute.

h. Resignation:

Board members who decide to resign from their review board are asked to so **in writing**. Notify the System Oversight Specialist and the FCRO Training Specialist. Please **provide the end date of service**. An email notification is preferred if possible.

Board members should give **at least a month's notice** if possible so a replacement can be found and trained.

All outstanding board packets **MUST** be returned to the System Oversight Specialist or the Training Specialist within 5 working days of notice of resignation. Arrangements can be made for pick up.

Please complete the **exit survey**. One will be provided by the Training Specialist or can be downloaded from the FCRO website, under the **Current Board Member** information.

A letter regarding end of service will be mailed to board members within 30 days of resignation indicating the amount of time served on the review board.

Note: If a Volunteer board member needs assistance with anything regarding their volunteer position at the FCRO they should contact the FCRO Training Specialist.