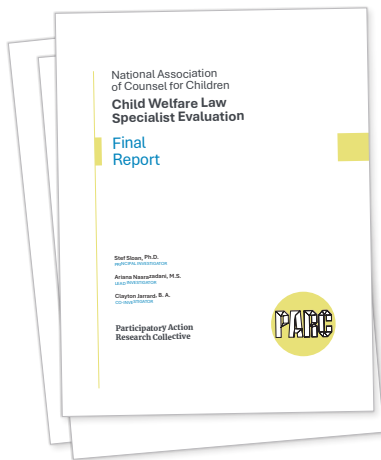


NACC Child Welfare Law Specialist Certification

A RESEARCH-BASED STRATEGY TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LEGAL REPRESENTATION



Take a deeper dive into the [CWLS evaluation reports](#) ►

NACC
National Association
of Counsel for Children

NACCchildlaw.org

Certification@NACCchildlaw.org

NEWLY RELEASED INDEPENDENT EVALUATION SHOWS IMPACT OF CWLS CERTIFICATION

As the Child Welfare Law Specialist (CWLS) certification program approached its 20-year anniversary, NACC sought out an independent evaluation to examine the program's efficacy. Led by the Participatory Action Research Collective, and co-designed by lived experience experts, the survey study found that:

- ✓ **CWLS attorneys scored higher on four of five key categories of high-quality child welfare legal representation**, including Advocacy and Procedural Competence, Legal Knowledge and Statutory Expertise, Individualized Case Planning, and Holistic Approaches.
- ✓ **CWLS attorneys consistently outperformed non-certified attorneys in procedural and statutory aspects of the study**, showing that the program can be a worthwhile return on investment by fostering these critical competencies that promote effective and efficient advocacy.
- ✓ **CWLS attorneys reported more frequently advocating for client-specific supports and accommodations than non-certified attorneys**, helping clients access basic needs and promoting protective factors that can prevent future systems involvement and decrease systemic burden on the child welfare court system.

CWLS CERTIFICATION IS A KEY STRATEGY TO IMPROVE QUALITY OF LEGAL REPRESENTATION

The U.S. Children's Bureau provided initial grant funding for NACC's CWLS program over twenty years ago and continues to encourage CWLS certification as a tool for improving representation. [ACYF-CB-IM-21-06](#)

The [National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges](#) and the [Conference of Chief Justices/Conference of State Court Administrators](#) have likewise endorsed the CWLS program.

CWLS certification is also an excellent investment of [Title IV-E legal representation funds](#) at a federal matching rate of 75%.



A RESEARCH-BASED STRATEGY TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LEGAL REPRESENTATION

What do CWLS have to say about the credential?

"I learned more things about child welfare law by studying to get the CWLS than I did from my practice in the area!"

"I am more knowledgeable about things like ICWA, educational advocacy, permanent guardianship, and I have a network of CWLS attorneys I can call on when I encounter something unfamiliar or challenging."

"Holding myself out to be an expert makes me stay on top of changes in the law."

"[I have] more confidence, more perspective on policy."

"We have found that the CWLS attorneys have more success in finding otherwise untapped resources and ideas to help the children and families we serve. They are able to be creative with problem-solving, which is valuable to the clients."

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to learn more about how CIPs can support CWLS certification.

HOW CAN CIP PROGRAMS SUPPORT CWLS CERTIFICATION?

- Include CWLS certification as a component of all projects to improve the quality of legal representation for children, families, and child welfare agencies
 - Include costs for CWLS applications and maintenance fees
 - Include costs for NACC's optional foundational prep course
- Ensure that all quality legal representation projects recognize that child welfare law is a specialized field of legal practice and incorporate strategies to decrease barriers to CWLS certification
- List increasing the number of CWLS as a CIP strategic plan goal
- Promote re-investment of Title IV-E legal representation funds into certification efforts
- Suggest focusing on CWLS certification as a remediation effort in CFSR Program Improvement Plans
- Recognize CWLS attorneys and judges in various ways: on websites, during statewide conferences or by hosting CWLS-only convenings
- Encourage judges to acknowledge or incentivize the CWLS credential in their courtrooms
- Ensure that CWLS attorneys and judges sit on the Statewide Multidisciplinary Task Force

HOW DOES SUPPORTING CWLS CERTIFICATION IMPACT QUALITY?

The breadth and depth of knowledge required to pass the CWLS exam is substantial. Intensive study is essential, and the knowledge gained from exam preparation impacts daily practice. The exam tests:

- Overarching Legal Structure and Themes (including FFPSA and other federal law);
- Legal Case from Beginning to End (investigations, removal, adjudication, reunification, permanency, and appellate advocacy);
- Discrete Issues (such as educational advocacy, trafficking, confidentiality, ICPC, immigration, and dual-status youth);
- Lawyering Roles (including agency, child, and parent representation, as well as multidisciplinary advocacy); and
- Lawyering Skills (such as trial skills, evidentiary issues, and systems-level advocacy).

The more practitioners who master this content and have the certification to prove it, the higher the bar is raised for quality legal representation.