



North Carolina Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights

Examining the Implementation of Rylan's Law and Disparate Impact in North Carolina

Children in North Carolina suffer the consequences of an inadequate child welfare system. In 2017, Rylan's law was enacted in response to the death of Rylan Ott, which exposed critical gaps in the state's child protective services system. The Law outlines provisions to reform the state welfare system through organizational restructuring, enhancing state oversight and accountability of county departments, and requiring mandatory observations and court approval before parental reunification. Despite the new legislation, systemic deficiencies in training and supervision have been reported. Local agencies' lack of capacity to provide child welfare services in accordance with policy has continued to compromise child safety.¹

What are Rylan's Law's Provisions?

Create Regional Social Services Departments

Rylan's Law was grounded in several initiatives. One goal was to create regional offices to support the county-level Social Services Departments. The shift to a centralized model aims to ensure consistent practices, establish performance standards, and outline corrective action if local agencies fail to meet state regulations.

Establish State Supervision

The Law directed the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services to develop a plan for supervising the administration of social services at the local level and to establish corrective actions for local agencies that fail to comply with state regulations.

Improve Transparency

Rylan's Law invested in reforms to improve transparency and accountability, including a new child welfare information system. The expectation was to create a performance dashboard that tracks the outcomes of child welfare services, including statistics on the number of children in foster care, reunification, adoption, and permanency rates.

Key Points:

- People with disabilities remain overrepresented in the child welfare system.
- Black, Indigenous, and Latinx children are institutionalized more often than White children in the child welfare system
- Racial disparities exist within the child welfare system, and there have not been notable changes in the racial distribution of abuse investigations since enacting Rylan's Law.
- North Carolina's child welfare system needs systemic reforms to improve transparency and accountability.
- Rylan's Law was enacted in 2017 to reform the state's child protective services by creating regional support offices, developing best practices, and establishing performance expectations.
- A lack of funding has delayed the full implementation of Rylan's Law.
- Procedural errors, failure to adequately assess parental fitness, and lack of compliance with case plans persist, leading to significant child safety concerns.

Modify the Supervised Visitation Schedule

The Law stipulates that social workers observe multiple interactions between parents and children before recommending parental reunification. Specifically, at least two visits must occur, seven days apart, to assess the safety and appropriateness of returning the child to the parents' care.

¹ Full and complete citations can be found in the [report](#).

Child-Centered Decision Making

Rylan's Law was designed to strengthen families and promote the well-being of children. However, the North Carolina default visitation schedule was not changed under the Law. Visitation occurs "in the best interest of the child." This ambiguity allows for local interpretations, norms, and cultural practices. As it stands, social workers provide only one hour of supervised visitation per week, or 52 hours per year, limiting the ability for stable parental relationships, bonding, and reunification.

What was Rylan's Law implementation status at the time of the report?

Under Rylan's Law, a state-appointed committee of stakeholders was tasked with recommending structural reforms and developing best practices within the child welfare system. State funding deficiencies necessitated the gradual implementation of the committee's plan and other statutory provisions outlined by the law.

North Carolina underinvests in child welfare compared to similar states. Several years after Rylan's Law was passed, regionalization is ongoing, and key leadership roles have only recently been appointed. Budgetary shortfalls have delayed the state's ability to fully staff the regional support model and adequately train employees.

An advanced case welfare case management system to improve data collection practices has yet to be established. Despite a \$100 million investment to launch a cohesive, statewide information platform, the technology has been implemented only in select counties and is rudimentary and ineffective. As a result, the state awarded a new contract to a different vendor to rebuild the data system from the ground up, with the rollout planned for 2025.

What are the consequences of the lack of full implementation of Rylan's Law?

Rylan's Law was intended to bring consistency and oversight to North Carolina's child welfare system. However, procedural errors, failure to adequately assess parental fitness, and lack of compliance with case plans have persisted with devastating outcomes, including child death.

Inadequate funding of Rylan's Law has perpetuated high worker turnover and employee vacancies. Staffing shortages create a lack of continuity of care for children within the system and delays in investigating new abuse allegations. The slow implementation of Rylan's Law has compromised the ability of staff to conduct the comprehensive home assessments and supervised visitations necessary to restore parental custody. High variability in staffing in chronically underfunded rural counties, in particular, has contributed to disparate foster care rates in these areas.

Rylan's Law emphasizes family reunification by requiring the right to legal representation in child abuse cases. However, without adequate funding, some counties lack the resources to support parents in securing sufficient legal counsel, and children can be left in foster care for extended periods.

Due to budgetary constraints and inconsistent practices, county courts may not schedule hearings for Rylan's Law visitation cases in a timely manner. Without court availability for judges to hear reunification cases, families may remain separated, compounding emotional and economic hardships.

The lack of a comprehensive data system has negative consequences for involved families. Robust data is vital in the context of civil rights. Failure to capture and report data accurately, especially for marginalized groups in the child welfare system, leads to compromised transparency and accountability.

The delay in implementation has perpetuated barriers to family reunification. The failure to administer standardized training for child welfare workers and the use of outdated risk assessment tools have allowed for broad discretionary decision-making when removing or returning children to their parents.

How has Rylan's Law affected low-income and protected groups of people?

Racial disparities exist within the child welfare system. However, Rylan's Law was not crafted because of civil rights concerns, and there have not been any notable changes in the racial distribution in abuse investigations since its enactment.

In North Carolina, Black children are involved in one-third of child welfare investigations and are overrepresented among children waiting for permanent homes. Indigenous children make up one percent of the state's population but are disproportionately subject to CPS investigations, representing up to four percent of maltreatment cases.

The Law does not address disparities affecting families with low socioeconomic status. Poverty-related challenges, like housing instability and lack of childcare, can sometimes be characterized by neglect. Seven out of ten child welfare cases in North Carolina involve allegations of neglect rather than abuse.

Rylan's Law was also not designed to address the special needs of individuals with disabilities, and child welfare employees continue to be inadequately trained to support these children. This group remains overrepresented in the child welfare system and still has difficulty accessing necessary services.

Many children with intellectual or developmental disabilities

are placed in treatment facilities, rather than kinship or foster homes with outpatient services. Black, Indigenous, and Latinx children are institutionalized more often than White children, and Black children are more likely to be admitted to psychiatric residential treatment facilities, stay longer, and have worse outcomes.²

Recommendations (*selected*):

The North Carolina Governor and General Assembly should:

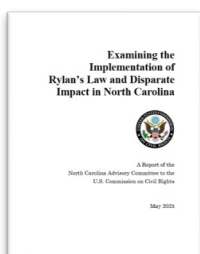
- Conduct an inquiry to identify why Rylan's Law provisions have not been fully implemented and determine the steps needed to ensure their prompt and successful implementation.
- Fully fund the regional oversight model outlined by Rylan's Law.

The North Carolina Supreme Court, District Court Judges, and the Administrative Office to the Court should:

- Improve court timelines to ensure timely hearings for Rylan's Law visitation cases.
- Without focusing solely on the speed of resolution, establish a robust hearing process to ensure a meaningful opportunity to litigate shelter placement cases.

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services should:

- Expedite the implementation of Rylan's Law to the full extent.
- Expand the default visitation schedule to weekly, multi-hour, supervised visitation to increase the potential for family reunification.
- Restrict family visitation only if there is an imminent safety risk to the child.
- Reevaluate the visitation provisions of Rylan's Law based on new data, explore best practices, and align visitation requirements accordingly.
- Enhance accountability and transparency by requiring counties to release their decision-making processes and ensure the implementation of a new data management system as mandated by Rylan's Law.



Policy Brief

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (Commission) is an independent, bipartisan agency established by Congress and directed to study and collect information relating to discrimination or a denial of equal protection of the laws under the Constitution because of race, color, religion, sex, age, disability, national origin, or in the administration of justice. This product is part of the North Carolina Advisory Committee's study, Examining the Implementation of Rylan's Law and Disparate Impact in North Carolina. This policy-oriented summary of the published report is intended to aid stakeholders seeking solutions to this complex issue. You can find the full report here: <https://www.usccr.gov/files/2025-05/nc-rylans-law-report.pdf>.