

# When Do Judges Make Reasonable Efforts Findings?

## Key Results From the Reasonable Efforts Findings Study

OPRE Report 2024-351

### About the Reasonable Efforts Findings Study (REFS)

**Goal:** Understand factors associated with judges' findings of reasonable efforts by child welfare agencies and how they relate to case outcomes.

#### Research Questions:

- ▶ What factors are associated with judges' findings of reasonable efforts to prevent removal?
- ▶ What factors are associated with judges' findings of reasonable efforts to achieve permanency?
- ▶ How are reasonable efforts findings related to the likelihood of reunification?
- ▶ How are reasonable efforts findings related to time to permanency?

**Case Sample:** Random sample of 348 closed child welfare cases from five sites in three states between 2018 and 2019. The practices observed and study results are not representative of practices or outcomes in other child welfare courts.

#### Data Collection Methods:

- ▶ Court observation (327 initial hearings)
- ▶ Case file review (348 case files)

### JUDGES' REASONABLE EFFORTS FINDINGS



Judges make two key findings in child welfare hearings about child welfare agencies' efforts to work with families:

1

Reasonable efforts to prevent a child's removal from the home

2

Reasonable efforts to achieve permanency

Judges' reasonable efforts findings can help—



Resolve cases efficiently



Ensure careful, sound permanency decisions for the child and family

### When Judges Make Reasonable Efforts to Prevent Removal Findings

**96%** of cases had a reasonable efforts to prevent removal finding made at some point during the case, usually at the initial hearing.

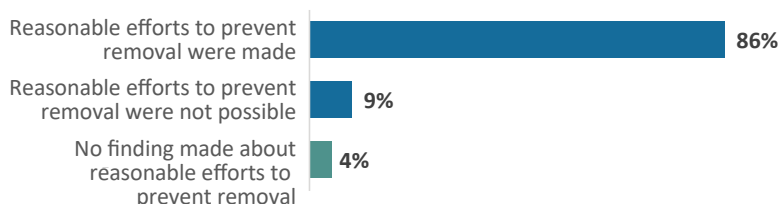
Hearings When Judges First Made Reasonable Efforts to Prevent Removal Findings



#### Results:

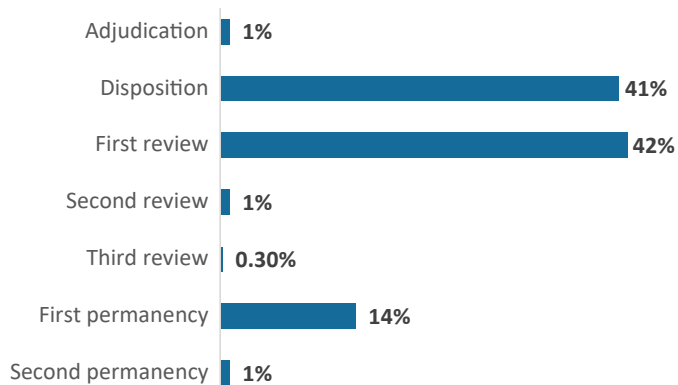
- ▶ Most judges are making the required reasonable efforts to prevent removal findings in a timely manner based on federal and state statutes.
- ▶ At the initial hearing, most judges found child welfare agencies made reasonable efforts to prevent removal.

Judges' Reasonable Efforts Findings at the Initial Hearings

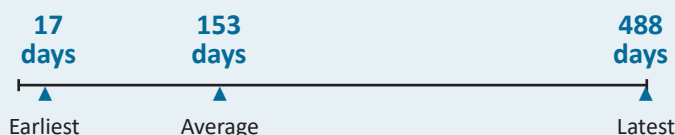


## When Judges Make Reasonable Efforts to Achieve Permanency Findings

Percentage of Hearings Where Judges First Made Reasonable Efforts to Achieve Permanency Findings



Timing of First Reasonable Efforts Finding to Achieve Permanency



The earliest reasonable efforts finding was made 17 days after removal, and the latest was made 488 days after removal. The average was 153 days after removal.

### Results:

- ▶ Most judges make the reasonable efforts to achieve permanency findings required by federal and state statutes within 12 months.
- ▶ Judges addressed reasonable efforts to achieve permanency early in the case—84% made reasonable efforts to achieve permanency findings by the first review hearing.

**99%** of cases open for at least 12 months had a finding of reasonable efforts to achieve permanency.

## Study Results



Judges are making findings of reasonable efforts to prevent removal and to achieve permanency.



In most cases, judges make reasonable efforts to prevent removal findings at the initial hearings and reasonable efforts findings to finalize permanency within 153 days of removal.



Judges are meeting legal timeframes for reasonable efforts determinations.

## Learn More

To learn more, visit the [Understanding Judicial Decision-Making and Hearing Quality in Child Welfare project](#). Staff from James Bell Associates, the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, and Co-Principal Investigators Dr. Alicia Summers and Dr. Sophia Gatowski conducted the study, with funding from the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) and the Children's Bureau of the Administration for Children and Families.

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