



# NORTH CAROLINA SAFE BABIES COURT



## NORTH CAROLINA SAFE BABIES COURT VISION

*A North Carolina where children grow up in families that are safe, nurturing, and able to thrive.*

## NORTH CAROLINA SAFE BABIES COURT MISSION STATEMENT

- *To transform the child welfare court process from an adversarial one to a collaborative, trauma-informed partnership between the court system, the child welfare system, involved families, people with lived experience, and communities.*
- *To improve the long-term well-being of parents, children, and families involved in the child welfare court system by providing them with trauma informed support and services.*
- *To achieve timely permanence, reduce generational trauma, and eliminate maltreatment.*

## NORTH CAROLINA SAFE BABIES COURT PILOT SITES

1. Avery, Mitchell, Yancey, and Watauga Counties - Implementation began July 2023  
Note: Madison County will be added to this site in 2026.
2. New Hanover County - Implementation began in July 2023
3. Durham County - Implementation began in July 2024
4. Brunswick County - Implementation began in July 2024
5. McDowell and Rutherford Counties - Implementation began in February 2025

## FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

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In early 2022, the Chief Justice's Task Force on ACEs (adverse childhood experiences; adverse community environments)-Informed Courts recommended implementing Safe Babies Court (SBC) in North Carolina, through a three-year, five-site pilot program. In July of 2023, the Administrative Office of the Courts, in partnership with North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), began working with local stakeholders, including district court judges and Directors of county's child welfare agencies (DSS), to implement SBC in the first two pilot sites.

SBC connects babies, toddlers, and their families involved in the child welfare court system with intensive support and services designed to promote healthy child development while working to ensure a safe and timely exit from foster care. This means there are frequent judicial status conferences and family team meetings to provide additional oversight and ensure the family's needs are met and the case is not lingering in the court system.

## THE NORTH CAROLINA SAFE BABIES COURT ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

1. The case must be under the court's jurisdiction (i.e., an abuse, neglect, or dependency petition has been filed with the court).
2. The petition must include one child between the ages of 0 through 3 years (or 0 through 5 in certain sites).
3. One parent of the child 0 through 3 (or 0 through 5 depending on the SBC site) must be willing to voluntarily participate Safe Babies Court. All children in the petition will be included in SBC if a respondent of the child 0 through 3 (or 0 through 5 depending on the SBC site) voluntarily enrolls in SBC. The parent can choose to leave SBC and their case will continue on the traditional child welfare court track.



**Safe Babies Court is an evidence based approach that targets families with childcare from birth to 3 years of age who are in foster care or at risk of removal. Safe Babies Court applies the science of early childhood development in meeting the urgent needs of infants and toddlers and strengthening their families so they can flourish.**

## QUICK FACTS ABOUT SAFE BABIES COURT

### 1. THE URGENT NEED FOR THIS FOCUS:

- Of the 7.2 million children in the U.S. referred to child protective services, children under the age of 3 enter the child welfare system more than any other age group. In fact, every seven minutes, a baby or toddler is removed from their family due to child adversity and placed in out of home care.

### 2. WHY DOES SAFE BABIES FOCUS ON BABIES, TODDLERS, AND THEIR FAMILIES?

- The rate and acceleration of the brain's development in the first 6 months is unmatched. The neurological connections are already happening at birth. By 1 month of age, they have doubled and almost tripled by their 3rd month. In the first three years of life, a child's brain will grow faster than any other point in their entire lifespan.
- This time is critical because healthy and positive child development emerges best in the context of nurturing, warm, and responsive early parent/caregiver and child relationships when children are surrounded by safe communities with strong trust and social connectedness.

### 3. WHAT SAFE BABIES IS DESIGNED TO DO:

- Safe Babies Court is not a program or a model but is a systems-change approach designed to reduce the time a child spends in foster care before reaching a permanent, safe home, preferably through reunification. The approach seeks to improve the long-term well-being of children and families involved with the child welfare court system by providing information about the unique mental health and developmental needs of infants and toddlers and increased case oversight.

### 4. NATIONAL OUTCOME DATA FROM ZERO-TO-THREE:

1. Among children at SBC sites, 93% were placed permanently within a year, which is double the national standard for time to permanency.
2. Compared to child welfare outcomes as a whole, SBC sites showed a clear improvement in reducing multiple placements and serving children of all races and ethnicities equally well.
3. The SBC approach focuses on addressing the root causes of safety concerns, and closely monitoring each child's case. Between April 2015 and June 2018, SBC sites showed 0.7% recurrence of maltreatment within 12 months, as compared to a national performance standard of 9.1%.
4. Based on recent outcome evaluation data, the SBC approach is estimated to generate over \$14,000 in public savings per family served, including \$12,000 in child welfare system savings and \$2,000 in healthcare savings.
5. The model has achieved successes across the country, in both rural and urban counties and there are no disparities based on race or ethnicity.

## SAFE BABIES COURT STRUCTURE

### ► STATE TEAM

1. Provides strategic and administrative leadership and coordination to the state's implementation of SBC, in collaboration with multi-sector partners, while driving policy, advocacy, and funding to support and sustain the Safe Babies approach.
  - State Director
  - State Coordinator
  - State Data and Evaluation Lead

### ► STATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

2. Comprised of professionals who have influence and decision-making authority to coordinate solutions by sharing expertise on financing and sustaining programs in early childhood, child welfare, and other family-related support areas.

### ► LOCAL SITE STRUCTURE

1. DISTRICT COURT JUDGE
  - Judges have essential "in court" and "out of court" functions in the Safe Babies approach pertaining to both practice and leadership. These functions are realized through a set of core practices and leadership activities and aligned with best practice standards for child abuse and neglect cases. They will promote collaborative problem solving with all members of the court process, create a trauma-responsive climate in the courtroom, engage with parents to elicit their perspective and empower them to achieve their goals, and lead a collaborative implementation of the Safe Babies approach.
2. COMMUNITY COORDINATOR
  - Has essential 'community level' and 'family level' functions that promote best practices in family engagement, promoting protective factors, trauma-responsive care, and cross-sector collaboration. They support frequent, quality Family Team Meetings, lead the Active Community and Site Implementation Team meetings.
3. SITE IMPLEMENTATION TEAM
  - The Site Implementation Team functions as a working group, meeting more frequently in the planning and early stages of implementation and then continuing to provide support in an ongoing way once the program is established. Members include the Judge, key child welfare professionals with decision-making authority, the Community Coordinator, and representatives from each role in a court hearing.
4. ACTIVE COMMUNITY TEAM
  - Collaborates on efforts to improve access to comprehensive prevention, early intervention, and therapeutic services and supports for families with young children.