

Judgment rendered October 7, 2026.
Application for rehearing may be filed
within the delay allowed by Art. 2166,
La. C.C.P.

No. 57,181-JAC

COURT OF APPEAL
SECOND CIRCUIT
STATE OF LOUISIANA

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STATE OF LOUISIANA
IN THE INTEREST OF
K.S.

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Appealed from the
Fourth Judicial District Court for the
Parish of Ouachita, Louisiana
Trial Court No. 2023 - JUV - 24297

Honorable Sharon I. Marchman, Judge

* * * * *

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* * * * *

Before STONE, THOMPSON, and MARCOTTE, JJ.

THOMPSON, J., concurs with written reasons.

MARCOTTE, J., concurs in the result.

STONE, J.

This Child in Need of Care (“CINC”) matter, concerning the minor child, K.S.,¹ arises from the Fourth Judicial District Court, the Honorable Sharon I. Marchman presiding. The biological father, James Bradley Taylor (“Mr. Taylor”), appeals the trial court’s permanency judgment which changed from the dual case plan goal of reunification/adoption to adoption only. The mother, Amanda Sanderson (“Ms. Sanderson”), does not appeal; the state, however, filed a one-sentence brief opposing the appeal for the reasons expressed in the trial court’s reasons for judgment.

FACTS AND PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Overview

Ms. Sanderson and Mr. Taylor conceived K.S. in early 2023. After having impregnated Ms. Sanderson, Mr. Taylor left Louisiana in May 2023 and returned to Kansas City, Missouri, to be with his then ex-wife, Connie Lawson² (“Ms. Lawson”) — and has had no contact with Ms. Sanderson since. On November 9, 2023, Ms. Sanderson gave birth to K.S. in Monroe, Louisiana — and the newborn tested positive for methamphetamines (“meth”), amphetamines, benzodiazepines, and marijuana.³ The Department of Children and Family Services (“DCFS”) removed K.S. from Ms. Sanderson’s custody pursuant to an instant order on November 20, 2023, and placed him in foster care where he remains to this day.

¹ Pursuant to URCA 5-2 and La. R.S. 46:1844(W) we use only the minor’s initials.

² She and Mr. Taylor remarried in February 2026.

³ Ms. Sanderson has a long history of heavy drug addiction, especially methamphetamine. She has been arrested several times for possession of meth, possession of stolen things, and for vehicular burglary.

There has been a total of nine trial court hearings in this case.⁴ K.S. was adjudicated a CINC on February 8, 2024, and subsequently, Ms. Sanderson was assigned a case plan. Mr. Taylor could not be located or contacted as of March 28, 2024 — i.e., the date of the hearing on the DCFS motion to approve the case plan. On May 2, 2024, approximately 6 months after the birth of K.S., the DCFS successfully contacted Mr. Taylor. Like Ms. Sanderson, Mr. Taylor was assigned a case plan which was filed with the court on November 18, 2024.

Mr. Taylor's original case plan included: (1) a parenting course; (2) substance abuse assessment and treatment, if any, as recommended by the assessor; (3) random drug screens; (4) maintenance of suitable housing and income; (5) availability to meet with the agency once per month, with at least one visit inside Mr. Taylor's home; (6) developing a permanency plan for K.S.; (7) visiting with K.S. as scheduled; and (8) paying \$10 per month toward K.S.'s support. An anger management program was added to his case plan after DCFS discovered that Mr. Taylor failed to disclose his negligent homicide conviction and Ms. Lawson's protective order application against him.

In addition to meeting his monthly child support obligation to K.S., Mr. Taylor also provided extra diapers, food, blankets, toys, and clothing. His drug screens were all negative except for one positive screen for an apparently prescribed opiate painkiller and one instance of alcohol. Mr. Taylor and Ms. Lawson (who also submitted to random drug testing) were

⁴ November 27, 2023; February 8, 2024 (CINC adjudication, judgment); May 9, 2024 (case review, judgment); November 18, 2024 (permanency hearing, judgment); May 5, 2025 (case review, judgment); November 6, 2025 (case review); January 12, 2026; March 19, 2026; May 18, 2026 (permanency judgment).

both positive for alcohol on that occasion, and were referred to a treatment provider in Missouri. The treatment provider recommended an 8-hour alcohol education course and abstinence from alcohol. The couple complied and the treatment provider furnished proof thereof to DCFS. In its November 12, 2024, report to the court, DCFS recommended placement with Mr. Taylor as the case plan goal and affirmed his compliance with his case plan.

As indicated in the oral reasons for judgment, Mr. Taylor's apparent dishonesty in these proceedings (mostly regarding events that occurred before K.S.'s birth) weighed heavily in the trial court's decision. These matters are summarized in the following sections.⁵ As of May 2026, however, the DCFS recommended trial placement with Mr. Taylor. The Missouri Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children ("ICPC") twice completed a home study on Mr. Taylor's residence and approved the placement of K.S. with him.

The trial court rejected the DCFS recommendation and the associated case plan proposal of placement with Mr. Taylor, and changed the case plan goal to adoption only.

Evidence

Mr. Taylor is now 53 years old and admitted to using meth "on and off" ever since he was 13 or 14 years old. In 2010, Mr. Taylor was riding as a passenger in a car driven by his late wife when he lost his temper and pulled the car's emergency brake while it was traveling. Mr. Taylor thereby

⁵ After these belated revelations (detailed below), the agency, in April 2025, recommended that anger management be added to the case plan and Mr. Taylor was referred for a 10-week course. The DCFS also recommended *at that earlier time* that the case plan goal be changed to guardianship.

caused a wreck that killed his own son and paralyzed his son's friend, who were also passengers in the car. He pled guilty to negligent homicide and was sentenced to 10 years of incarceration. Mr. Taylor's wife (and the driver in fatal car accident) committed suicide while he was in prison.

While Mr. Taylor did not disclose this conviction during the DCFS investigation, the DCFS eventually discovered the conviction anyway. At trial in the instant matter, Mr. Taylor attempted to repudiate his guilty plea. He claimed that his late wife was driving and was "high," *while he was sober* and riding as a passenger. Mr. Taylor further claimed that his late wife's driving caused the wreck. However, immediately after the wreck, Mr. Taylor told police that the wreck happened because he pulled the emergency brake while the car was traveling (and later pled guilty to negligent homicide).

Mr. Taylor was released from prison on parole after five years, but in his words, "caught a shoplifting charge" which caused his parole to be revoked; the trial court questioned what he meant that he "caught" a charge and he admitted that he shoplifted. Later, he was released on parole again, but it was *again* revoked because he was found in possession of meth. Sometime after Mr. Taylor's most recent release from prison, he had a short-term marriage with a woman named April, who was a drug court client. April terminated their relationship on the drug court's order that she not associate with Mr. Taylor because he was "disreputable" and a bad influence on her recovery efforts.

Thereafter, Mr. Taylor moved to Missouri and married Ms. Lawson. However, according to their accounts of the matter, he just whimsically (and while sober) decided to abandon the marriage and return to Monroe while

Ms. Lawson was vacationing in Alabama. This occurred less than a year after they married. He testified that his reason for abandoning his new wife was that he realized that married life was just not what he thought he wanted at that time.

After Mr. Taylor's allegedly conflict-free departure, Ms. Lawson filed a divorce petition and a *sworn protective order application* against him. Therein, she alleged Mr. Taylor was on meth, was "very dangerous," had kicked in doors of their house, was stalking her, and had stolen a copious amount of money from her. At trial in the instant matter, Ms. Lawson attempted to back away from most of these allegations like a Louisiana crawfish. She insisted that Mr. Taylor was not dangerous, had never stalked her, nor kicked in doors — except when they did so together because they were locked outside. She said that she had only inferred that he was on meth because of his distinctive "tweaking" mannerisms. However, Ms. Lawson explained too much, i.e., that actually these mannerisms were equally consistent with mere "perma-tweak," meaning that Mr. Taylor acts like he is high on meth even when he is not because its effects — in some ways — have become a permanent alteration of his mannerisms.

Ms. Lawson did not, however, recant her sworn felony theft allegations. She affirmed that Mr. Taylor stole at least \$14,850 from her and had attempted to steal another \$15,000 in the form of a downpayment on a car, but she was able to stop the payment.

Upon his return to Monroe, Mr. Taylor began staying at the residence of his daughter, Summer. All three witnesses who testified in this case stated, essentially, that Summer is a bona fide heavy drug addict. Mr. Taylor reached out to Summer's friend, Ms. Sanderson, on Facebook and the two

began their romantic relationship, and their cohabitation at Summer's residence.

While Mr. Taylor denied using drugs and denied knowing Ms. Sanderson was using drugs, she candidly admitted the epic magnitude of their use of illegal narcotics. In Summer's residence, Mr. Taylor and Ms. Sanderson began a five-or six-month episode of bingeing on intravenous meth and heroin as well as Xanax. Eventually, they relocated their cohabitation to Ms. Sanderson's mother's residence, where they continued bingeing on intravenous meth and heroin. During this relationship, Mr. Taylor and Ms. Sanderson conceived K.S. She took a pregnancy test (again, during her period of cohabitation with Mr. Taylor) and it was positive. She shared the news with Mr. Taylor and he was excited, calling her his "future baby mama." Ms. Sanderson said she desired to stop using drugs since she was pregnant. She testified that Mr. Taylor did not want her to stop using intravenous meth and/or heroin because he wanted them to use *together*; as she put it, Mr. Taylor "kept moving to stick me [Ms. Sanderson] with a needle." Later, however, they concluded that Ms. Sanderson miscarried; this conclusion was based solely on a feeling she had in her abdomen. The couple ended their relationship shortly thereafter. As previously mentioned, in his testimony, Mr. Taylor denied using any drugs at all during this entire episode; he also denied knowing that Ms. Sanderson was using drugs.⁶

Mr. Taylor resumed contact with Ms. Lawson and they began cohabitating anew, despite their divorce. Five or six months after Ms.

⁶ Likewise, when asked about whether he has dogs in his home, he merely said that they had a "terrier" – of which there are many harmless varieties – when in fact they have a *pit bull* "terrier" living in their home. This alone may not suffice as proof of Mr. Taylor's intentional lack of candor, but it fits the overall pattern of hiding potentially derogatory facts quite well.

Sanderson and Mr. Taylor ended their relationship, she discovered that she had remained pregnant with K.S. and not miscarried as she previously thought. K.S. was born with a full complement of illegal drugs in his system that Ms. Sanderson had been using. She named Mr. Taylor as the alleged father, and the DCFS attempts to contact him were unsuccessful until K.S. was approximately 6 months old.

Upon being contacted, Mr. Taylor (and Ms. Lawson) came to Louisiana for DNA paternity testing — and consumed alcoholic beverages the night before meeting with the DCFS. The DCFS had the couple drug tested and both were positive for alcohol.⁷ Mr. Taylor stated that, at that point, he did not realize using alcohol would be a barrier to getting custody of K.S. and they would cease drinking accordingly. However, Mr. Taylor also claimed at trial to have completed three addiction treatment programs while in prison. It is hard to imagine that, if he really meaningfully participated in even one addiction treatment program, he honestly did not see drinking alcohol — which itself is a drug — as a problem. It is even more difficult to imagine that he was merely uneducated on this point if he actually completed *three* addiction treatment programs. Assuming Mr. Taylor attended such programs, it is evident he did not internalize the message. Instead, he merely offered to abstain from alcohol and elective prescription opiate pain medication as a matter of compliance with the

⁷ This is concerning in regard to Ms. Lawson as well, because she admitted she was “previously” a meth addict and went to federal prison for 5 years in connection with a meth manufacturing operation. She nonetheless indicated that she has consumed alcohol (a drug) without problems since being released from prison, and that she does not need to be involved with Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, does not need to stop drinking (but will do so as a matter of compliance), and that she “cannot” relapse on meth. This evidence reasonably supports the conclusion that Ms. Lawson is not in recovery from her addiction either.

court's wishes, claimed he quit meth "cold turkey," and admitted he has no involvement with Narcotics Anonymous or Alcoholics Anonymous or any other recovery program.

Nonetheless, once DNA testing confirmed his paternity, Mr. Taylor began a substantial pursuit of being a father to K.S.. He produced many negative drug screens, made all the visits he could be reasonably expected to make (driving all the way from Kansas City, Missouri, to Monroe, Louisiana), interacted well with K.S. in the visits, provided significant financial support for K.S., and otherwise "checked all the boxes" on his case plan. While it appears clear that Mr. Taylor sincerely feels fatherly love toward K.S., his testimony to the trial court jarringly lacked credibility, as demonstrated in the preceding paragraphs. Mr. Taylor denied using drugs during his "abandon and steal from his wife, Ms. Lawson, and shack up with Ms. Sanderson episode," while Ms. Sanderson's testimony and Ms. Lawson's sworn protective order application quite convincingly contradict that claim. Mr. Taylor denied even knowing that Ms. Sanderson was using drugs during that episode, while Ms. Sanderson herself admitted that — while they were cohabitating — they did intravenous meth and heroin together "all day." She even testified that she felt he wanted her to keep using meth and heroin even though she was pregnant with his child, stating "he kept moving to stick me with a needle," i.e., inject her with meth and/or heroin. Ms. Sanderson concluded in saying "if I'm a bad person, he's just as bad."

Moreover, the ICPC reports on which Mr. Taylor relies are not in the record.

ASSIGNMENT OF ERROR

The trial court committed manifest error by finding that Mr. Taylor failed to comply with his case plan and by changing the case plan goal from adoption/reunification to adoption only.

LEGAL PRINCIPLES

Constitutional precepts

Substantive Due Process. “[O]ur constitutional system long ago rejected any notion that a child is the mere creature of the State.” *Parham v. J. R.*, 442 U.S. 584, 99 S. Ct. 2493 (1979). On the contrary, the biological parent’s interest “in the care, custody, and control of their children — is perhaps the oldest of the *fundamental liberty interests* recognized by...[the United States Supreme] Court.”⁸ *Troxel v. Granville*, 530 U.S. 57, 65, 120 S. Ct. 2054, 2059–60 (2000). “The liberty interest in family privacy [which includes biological parent-child relations] has its source, and its contours are ordinarily to be sought, not in state law, but in intrinsic human rights, as they have been understood in ‘this Nation’s history and tradition.’” *Smith v. Org. of Foster Fams. For Equal. & Reform*, 431 U.S. 816, 843–45, 97 S. Ct. 2094 (1977). That is, parental rights are antecedent to government and its laws, and older than the constitution itself.

Procedural Due Process. Federal and Louisiana cases have addressed specifically the procedural due process validity of judicial proceedings infringing on parental rights. *Stanley v. Illinois*, 405 U.S. 645, 651, 92 S. Ct. 1208, 1212 (1972), held that a state law which presumed unwed fathers to be unfit parents upon death of the mother and placed their

⁸ Emphasis added.

children in guardianship indefinitely violated the father's due process right to a hearing before his children could be taken from him. Additionally, the state's presumption of unfitness likewise violated due process, which the court held requires a hearing wherein the state has the burden of *proving* unfitness and the court, based on evidence in the record, determines whether the state carried its burden of proving parental unfitness. There must be individualized evidence of unfitness, which does not include stereotypes or broad classifications. *Id.*

Children's Code

The Louisiana Children's Code was written with these constitutional boundaries in mind and explicitly affirms the legislature's intent for it to be construed and applied within those boundaries. La. Ch. C. art. 102 provides that the Children's Code:

shall be liberally construed to the end that each child *and parent* coming within the jurisdiction of the court *shall be accorded due process* and that each child shall receive, preferably in his own home, the care, guidance, and control that will be conducive to his welfare. In those instances when the child is removed from the control of his parents, the court shall secure for him care as nearly as possible equivalent to that which the parents should have given him. These Code provisions shall be construed to promote the stability of the family; to secure simplicity in procedure, fairness in adjudication and administration, and the elimination of unjustifiable delay[.] (Emphasis added.)

The purpose of Title VI of the Children's Code, Child in Need of Care ("CINC") law and procedure, is "to protect children whose physical or mental health, welfare, and safety is substantially at risk of harm by physical abuse, neglect, or exploitation and who may be further threatened by the conduct of others." La. Ch. C. art. 601. This is the threshold justification for CINC proceedings. Once that threshold is crossed, "[t]he health,

welfare, safety, and best interest of the child shall be the paramount concern in all [CINC] proceedings... Title [VI] shall be...administered and interpreted to avoid unnecessary interference with family privacy and trauma to the child, and yet, at the same time, authorize the protective and preventive intervention needed for the health, welfare, safety, and well-being of children.” *Id.*

La. Ch. C. art. 675, which governs case plans, states in paragraph (A):

The case plan shall be designed to achieve placement in the *least restrictive, most family-like*, and most appropriate setting available, *and in close proximity to the parents’ homes*, consistent with the best interest and special needs of the child. The health, welfare, and safety of the child shall be the paramount concern in the development of the case plan. (Emphasis added.)

This provision was not enacted in a vacuum. Rather, just as the rest of the Children’s Code, La. Ch. C. art. 675 “shall be...construed so that each parent...shall be accorded due process[,]...that each child shall receive, preferably in his own home...care...conducive to his welfare[,] [and to] promote stability of the family.” La. Ch. C. art. 102. The purpose of Title VI of the Children’s Code, to which La. Ch. C. art. 675 belongs, “is to protect children whose...health, welfare, and safety is substantially at risk of harm by physical abuse, neglect, or exploitation.” La. Ch. C. art. 601. This is the threshold justification for the government’s intrusion into parent-child relations. Title VI, and thus La. Ch. C. art. 675, “shall be administered and interpreted to avoid unnecessary interference with family and unnecessary trauma to the child.” La. Ch. C. art. 601. Correct application of La. Ch. C. art. 675 is guided by these precepts. Thus, the burden is on the state to prove

that La. Ch. C. art. 675 requires exclusion of reunification from the case plan goals.

The *ideal* best interest of the child is to be born to and raised by fit, responsible, law-abiding, loving, biological parents who are and remain married to each other. However, “best interest of the child” *under the circumstances* is the relevant metric in La. Ch. C. art. 675(A).

Case plans must include services *for parents* as necessary for assuring that the child receives (or would receive upon reunification) safe and proper care. La. Ch. C. art. 675(B)(2). The court has the duty and power to update case plans according to the success or failure of their implementation. La. Ch. C. art. 677.

Standards of review

Whether a parent has complied with a case plan, the expected success of rehabilitation, and the expectation of significant improvement in the parent’s condition or conduct are all findings of fact reviewed under the manifest error standard. *State ex rel. J.T. v. J.M.*, 46,090 (La. App. 2 Cir. 12/12/10), 56 So. 3d 1009. To reverse a trial court’s permanency plan determination, an appellate court, ordinarily, must find from the record that the trial court’s finding is clearly wrong or manifestly erroneous. *State in Int. of R.W.H.V.*, 53,065 (La. App. 2 Cir. 9/25/19), 281 So. 3d 800, 806–07; *State in Int. of P.F.*, 50,931 (La. App. 2 Cir. 6/22/16), 197 So. 3d 745.

Where there is conflicting testimony, reasonable evaluations of credibility and reasonable inferences of fact should not be disturbed upon review, even when the appellate court may feel that its own evaluations and inferences are as reasonable as those of the juvenile court. *Id.* If the juvenile court’s findings are reasonable in light of the record reviewed in its entirety, the

appellate court may not reverse, even though convinced that, had it been sitting as the trier of fact, it would have weighed the evidence differently.

State in the Interest of L.M., 46,078 (La. App. 2 Cir. 1/26/11), 57 So. 3d 518.

ANALYSIS

The trial court committed manifest error in making adoption the sole case plan goal *at this point*. Mr. Taylor’s personal history (including almost 40 years of using meth “on and off”), combined with his lack of honesty and forthrightness to the trial court and his lack of insight concerning alcohol and opiate painkillers, certainly *could* make the trial court’s decision reasonable; however, it did not do so because Mr. Taylor did substantially everything that was required of him under the case plan.⁹ Mr. Taylor’s addiction history alone proves that Mr. Taylor’s substance abuse assessment erred – potentially because of Mr. Taylor’s dishonesty therein – in not recommending *adequate* addiction treatment for Mr. Taylor.

The evidence clearly supports the trial court’s conclusion that Mr. Taylor is still not in *recovery* from his addiction; rather, it is *at best* temporary abstinence, i.e., part of a cycle of “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” episodes as he goes “on and off” using meth. Mr. Taylor’s (1) consumption of and attitude toward alcohol, combined with his elective use of prescribed narcotic painkillers, (2) his “abandon and steal from Connie/shack up with Amanda for adultery or at least fornication and an intravenous meth/heroin

⁹ Mr. Taylor’s failure to disclose the negligent homicide conviction (for which he was incarcerated), the protective order application (by Ms. Lawson), and the mutual intravenous meth and heroin binge he and Ms. Sanderson shared when they conceived K.S., shows a pattern of intentional concealment of facts that he estimated would weigh against him achieving his goals. The testimony of Ms. Sanderson (which was quite candid) and the content of Ms. Lawson’s sworn protective order application, gave the trial court a reasonable evidentiary basis to regard Mr. Taylor as having attempted to quite substantially deceive the court to bolster his bid for custody of K.S. Had he been honest and forthright about his past, the calculus would be less unfavorable to him.

binge for 5 months,” and (3) his dishonesty toward the trial court regarding (i) that episode, (ii) his conviction for the negligent homicide of his own son, and (iii) Connie’s (Ms. Lawson’s) sworn protective order application, affirmatively show that he is not recovering from his drug addiction and is currently not fit to be entrusted with raising K.S. Furthermore, he claims he quit using meth “cold turkey” and admitted he is not involved in Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous or any other recovery program.

While the evidence preponderantly shows that Mr. Taylor is untrustworthy, unstable, and unreliable, and therefore, is *currently* unfit for the awesome responsibility of raising a three-year-old to adulthood,¹⁰ he nonetheless *must* be given a fair opportunity to rebut that evidence of his unfitness by demonstrating a clean break from his past.¹¹ Instead, he complied with a case plan without manifesting any evidence of a sustainable lifestyle change. Therefore, Mr. Taylor’s case plan has failed to adequately address his profound need for extensive addiction treatment. Simply put, the trial court’s termination of reunification as a case plan goal was premature.

CONCLUSION

The decision of the trial court is **REVERSED**, and this matter is **REMANDED** with **INSTRUCTIONS** to amend Mr. Taylor’s case plan to

¹⁰ What would happen to K.S. if he were placed with Mr. Taylor and Mr. Taylor decided he just did not want to be a responsible adult anymore? What if Mr. Taylor decided that just a little meth or heroin would not hurt anything? Or that alcohol is safe for him because “he never had a problem with alcohol?” Or that he is entitled to electively use prescribed opiate painkillers? What if Mr. Taylor lost his temper and pulled the emergency brake again? Or goes back to jail for shoplifting or other theft and loses his high-paying job? Moreover, how long will Mr. Taylor stay married to Ms. Lawson this time?

¹¹ Mr. Taylor is not required to prove a negative (which is impossible), but to show a positive demonstration of sustained recovery.

include addiction treatment consistent with this opinion. Costs are not assessed.

THOMPSON, J., concurs.

I concur in the decision to reverse the trial court and write separately to address issues that are sadly too frequently present when children are found in need of interventional services. The opinion appropriately outlines the tragic and concerning history of how and why governmental intervention was necessary in this innocent child's life, and it takes the father to task for his numerous and well-documented shortcomings. What I feel is also an important consideration is what has gone right since this matter appeared on a docket.

The imperfect framework established to protect children and aid families comes in the form of the Department of Children and Family Services ("DCFS"), with the assistance of Court Appointed Special Advocates ("CASA"). These involved individuals are called upon to immerse themselves in the facts and circumstances, to make thoughtful evaluations, and make recommendations to the court consistent with the law and facts. Those most familiar with the history and circumstances in this matter did just that when DCFS recommended the permanency plan of reunification with the biological father. CASA similarly submitted formal reports recommending the child be reunified with his biological father. Despite both recommendations, the trial court declined to approve the proposed case plan and denied placement with the biological father, changing the permanency goal from reunification to adoption.

I do not question whether the trial judge was attempting to fashion a result that she believed provided the greatest opportunity for success for the child considering the substantial concerns and considerations detailed in her opinion and throughout the record. What is concerning is that within the

framework established, and when all interested parties coalesce on the best plan forward, as is the case here, the efforts and progress of the non-offending parent appear to be discounted. The father was given a list of steps necessary to achieve the result of reunification. That list was reduced to writing, and he worked toward successfully completing each item. I suggest those efforts and successes are worthy of more than a conclusion that he was only “checking off boxes” as opined by the trial court. Having a list and working on that list shows progress. The opinion discusses the father’s failures in life, but since this matter came before DCFS and CASA, he has demonstrated effort which merits consideration, including:

- There was full compliance with the case plan requirements.
- The out-of-state home placement was conducted under the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children “ICPC” and formally approved by both Missouri and Louisiana, confirming the home environment was suitable and all adult household members cleared agency and criminal background checks.
- Consistently submitted negative drug screens throughout 2025 and 2026, and temporary positive screens were verified by medical records as lawful post-surgery prescriptions, and his treating physician provided written clearance confirming he is physically capable of caring for the child following his heart procedure.
- Completed a 10-week Anger Management/Batterer’s Intervention course, with the provider noting he accepted responsibility and gained valuable insight.

- Maintained steady employment and has consistently paid statutory monthly parental contributions and provided lump-sum financial support in addition to providing clothes, toys, diapers, and supplies.
- Demonstrated a consistent relationship and bonding with the minor child with regular long-distance visitations, traveling from Kansas City, Missouri to Monroe, Louisiana to conduct monthly in-person visits, which expanded to weekend community outings, restaurant visits, and trips to the paternal grandfather's home.
- Demonstrated nurturing, attentive, and highly appropriate interactions with the child, establishing a clear emotional bond between father and child as was repeatedly documented by DCFS workers and CASA volunteers.
- Was formally classified by DCFS as a non-offending biological father who fulfilled his case plan objectives, which prompted DCFS to request court permission to initiate trial placement.
- Was independently evaluated by CASA, which repeatedly urged the court to reunify the child with him.

The history of this matter and background of the parties is astounding and would be shocking to anyone unfamiliar with the thousands of similar cases across the state. These extraordinary circumstances, however, are not new to the professionals at DCFS and devoted volunteers with CASA. Here, the non-offending biological parent promptly asserted his rights, substantially complied with the case plan, demonstrated parental fitness, and his efforts earned the recommendation of DCFS and CASA that he be reunited with his child. Those efforts are more than “checking off boxes,”

and I respectfully assert that changing of the goal from reunification to adoption was premature and contrary to the weight of the record and recommendations of everyone most familiar with the tragic history of this matter. If the father is going to fail, he still has that opportunity under the watchful eyes of DCFS, CASA, and the court. If he is going to succeed, as is believed possible by DCFS and CASA, he should be given ample opportunity to string together a series of victories demonstrating a continued desire, ability, and pattern of appropriate effort.