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IN THE COURT OF CIVIL APPEALS OF THE STATE OF OKLAHOMA

DIVISION II

FILED
COURT OF CIVIL APPEALS
STATE OF OKLAHOMA
OCT 23 2025
SELDEN JONES
CLERK

IN THE MATTER OF C.L., alleged deprived child:

JONATHON LAWSON,

Appellant,

vs.

STATE OF OKLAHOMA,

Appellee.

Case No. 122,823

APPEAL FROM THE DISTRICT COURT OF
OKLAHOMA COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

HONORABLE NICHOLE M. GILLETT, SPECIAL JUDGE

AFFIRMED

Susan K. Johnson
Edmond, Oklahoma — For Appellant

Vicki Zemp Behenna
DISTRICT ATTORNEY
Jaclyn Rivera
ASSISTANT DISTRICT ATTORNEY
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma — For Appellee

Brigette Biffle
PUBLIC DEFENDER
Kenna Bolton
ASSITANT PUBLIC DEFENDER
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma — For Child

OPINION BY GREGORY C. BLACKWELL, JUDGE:

Rec'd (date) 10·23·25
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Jonathon Lawson, the father of the minor child at issue here, appeals the court's order terminating his parental rights after a bench trial. He alleges that the state failed to present sufficient evidence to terminate his rights and that the trial court erred by not providing him with sufficient remedial services. Based on our review of the record and the applicable law, we affirm the court's order.

BACKGROUND

Lynette Sadler is the biological mother of the three minor children involved in this case: S.C., H.C., and C.L. Mr. Lawson is the biological father of C.L. Ms. Sadler and Mr. Lawson began dating in 2022, met for the first time in person in November 2022, and moved in together in January 2023. Mr. Lawson and Ms. Sadler had a child, C.L., who was born in December 2023. Ms. Sadler, Mr. Lawson, S.C., H.C., and C.L. all lived in the home together. Multiple DHS referrals were made regarding this family between in 2023 and 2024, primarily regarding the oldest child, S.C., who reported instances of physical, emotional, and mental abuse. None of these reports were substantiated and all were screened out.

In February of 2024, DHS recommended that Comprehensive Home-Based Services (CHBS) provide the family with services and resources. CHBS began in-home services, meeting with the family once a week, which continued until the removal of the children from the home in April 2024. On April 17, 2024, the state filed an application to take the minor children into emergency custody which was granted by the court. The basis for removal was that DHS had received a referral for concerns of physical abuse of S.C., there were concerns of isolation

and restriction of food for S.C., and the parents had indicated they were no longer willing to work with CHBS. At the time of removal, S.C. was seven years old, H.C. was one year old,[1] and C.L. was four months old. An emergency hearing was held on April 22, 2024, at which Mr. Lawson waived his rights to a hearing and custody. All three children remained in DHS custody.

The state filed a petition on April 26, 2024, seeking adjudication of C.L. as deprived as to Mr. Lawson and termination of his parental rights, citing 10A O.S. § 1-4-904(B)(9) as the legal grounds for termination. That provision requires "[a] finding that the parent has abused or neglected any child or failed to protect any child from abuse or neglect that is heinous or shocking ...." On July 23, 2024, Mr. Lawson waived his rights to a jury trial, and the matter was set for a bench trial on October 28, 2024.

On that date, the bench trial began. Trial was then continued to a later date due to a combination of witness unavailability and scheduling constraints. Testimony resumed on November 19, 2024, and then continued on November 20, 2024, and December 4, 2024. C.L. was adjudicated deprived and Mr. Lawson's parental rights were terminated by order of the court on January 6, 2025, based on the grounds of heinous and shocking abuse and neglect and failure to protect from heinous and shocking abuse. Mr. Lawson appeals.[2]

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[1] H.C. was removed from the home roughly three weeks before her second birthday. A variety of witnesses refer to H.C. as being two years old around the time of removal.

[2] Ms. Sadler's parental rights were terminated as to all three children: S.C., H.C., and C.L. She has also appealed that decision. See Sup. Ct. Case No. 122,811. Ms. Sadler's appeal, which was made a companion to Mr. Lawson's, will be addressed by a separate opinion.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

In termination of parental rights cases, the state must show by clear and convincing evidence that the child's best interest is served by the termination of parental rights. *In the Matter of C.G.*, 1981 OK 131, ¶17, 637 P.2d 66, 70-71. Our case law provides that clear and convincing evidence is the measure or degree of proof which will produce in the mind of the trier of fact a firm belief or conviction as to the truth of the allegation sought to be established. *In the Matter of the Adoption of L.D.S.*, 2006 OK 80, ¶11, 155 P.3d 1, 4 (quoting *In re C.G.*, 1981 OK 131, ¶17 n. 12, 637 P.2d 66, 71 n. 12). This standard of proof "balances the parents' fundamental freedom from family disruption with the state's duty to protect children within its borders." *In the Matter of Adoption of L.D.S.*, 2006 OK 80, ¶11, 155 P.3d 1, 4 (quoting *In re C.G.*, 1981 OK 131, ¶17, 637 P.2d at 70).

Although the burden of proof is by a preponderance of the evidence when a court adjudicates children are deprived and the appellate court shall affirm the trial court's findings if supported by competent evidence, *Matter of L.M.A.*, 2020 OK 63, ¶¶37-38, 466 P.3d 559, 569, a different burden applies at the termination of parental rights phase of trial. Our review on appeal must find the presence of clear and convincing evidence to support the factfinder's decision as to termination of those rights. *In the Matter of S.B.C.*, 2002 OK 83, ¶7, 64 P.3d 1080, 1082. We must canvass the record to determine whether the evidence is such that a factfinder could reasonably form a firm belief or conviction that the grounds for termination were proven. *Id.* ¶6, 64 P.3d at 1081. Further, in passing

upon a claim that the procedure used in a proceeding to terminate parental rights resulted in a denial of procedural due process, we review the issue *de novo*. *In re A.M.*, 2000 OK 82, ¶ 6, 13 P.3d 484, 486–87.

ANALYSIS

Mr. Lawson first argues that the trial court erred in allowing this case to proceed to trial without him being provided with remedial services, specifically an Individualized Service Plan (ISP). Mr. Lawson contends that reasonable efforts were not made to prevent removal of C.L. and that, at the very least, the state should have provided services that he could have participated in to demonstrate he corrected the conditions which led to his son being placed in DHS custody. Specifically, he cites 10A O.S. § 1-1-102(B)(5), which provides that the state should "make reasonable efforts to prevent or eliminate the need for removal of a child from the home and make reasonable efforts to return the child to the home *unless otherwise prescribed by the Oklahoma Children's Code.*" *Id.* (emphasis supplied). While this is a laudable, general goal of the Code, the Code otherwise provides as follows:

> At any time prior to or following the adjudicatory hearing the court, on its own motion or upon the motion of a party, may find that reasonable efforts to prevent the removal of a child from home or to reunify the child and family are not required if the court determines, based upon a preponderance of the evidence, that ... [t]he parent or legal guardian of the child has ... subjected any child to aggravated circumstances including, but not limited to, heinous and shocking abuse or heinous and shocking neglect ....

10A O.S. § 1-4-809(A). Moreover, the Oklahoma Administrative Code, 340:75-6-44(b), states that when the "district attorney files a petition or motion to terminate parental rights based on heinous and shocking abuse or neglect or the

court makes a finding that reasonable efforts are not required to reunify the child and family, efforts immediately begin to secure an alternative permanent home for the child." *See also Matter of V.J.R.*, 2024 OK 66, ¶ 10 n.5, 556 P.3d 1010, 1016.

In this case, the state sought termination of Mr. Lawson' s rights based on heinous and shocking abuse or neglect, and the trial court found clear and convincing evidence of heinous and shocking abuse and neglect after a bench trial. Thus, neither reasonable efforts to prevent removal of the children from the home nor an ISP were required. We reject this proposition of error.

We note, however, that throughout the proceedings in the present case the court did not check the box stating that reasonable efforts to reunite the children were not required pursuant to § 1-4-809. Instead, the court checked the box reasonable efforts had been made to prevent the removal of the child from the home and that those efforts had failed. Specifically, the court found that CHBS had been in the home. ROA 1. The court's emergency custody hearing order, entered April 19, 2024, states that there had been multiple disclosures from the oldest child in regards to being confined to her room, being choked by her mother, not having access to food, and that she had been observed with rope burns on her neck. ROA 14. The order notes that the family had had services with CHBS since February 2024, that the family was no longer willing to work with CHBS, and that court intervention was necessary. ROA 5, 14.

The court's failure to check the § 1-4-809 box that reasonable efforts were not required in this case is not reversible error in this case. *See In the Matter of*

M.R., 2024 OK 28, ¶ 36 ("Although the trial court did not check the [section 1-4-809 box], it is clear from the order that the conditions creating the deprived status were sexual abuse that was shocking and heinous and under § 1-4-809 reasonable efforts to prevent removal of the children from the home or reunification was not required."). We also note that while neither reasonable efforts nor an ISP were required, the record reflects that DHS recommended voluntary services to Mr. Lawson, such as parenting classes through Sunbeam Family Services.[3]

Tanya Peters, a permanency planning employee of DHS, testified that Mr. Lawson was also referred for individual counseling but had not yet started the counseling. Tr. (Oct. 31, 2024), 159. Counsel for Mr. Lawson inquired about Mr. Lawson's delay in starting individual counseling and asked Ms. Peters if it was because without an ISP ordered, DHS could not provide a voucher to pay for the service. *Id.* Ms. Peters responded that Mr. Lawson was having trouble getting started with individual counseling at a particular location but that he had also been given some other alternatives to look into. *Id.* Counsel responded by trying to confirm that the other alternatives recommended to Mr. Lawson were also alternatives that he would have to pay for. *Id.* at 160. Ms. Peters responded that she believed he had been referred to no cost alternatives. *Id.* Further, Ms. Peters later testified that if Mr. Lawson had been given an ISP, the services that DHS would have wanted him to work were the same services that she had already

[3] The record reflects that Mr. Lawson attended eighteen out of twenty-four classes from August 18, 2024, to November 13, 2024.

asked him to work voluntarily. Thus, we find that even though reasonable efforts or an ISP were not required in the present case, Mr. Lawson was nonetheless offered services by the state and opted to participate in family services but not in individual counseling.

To terminate parental rights, the state must prove: (1) the children have been adjudicated deprived, (2) at least one ground for termination listed in § 1-4-904(B), and (3) that termination is in the child's best interests. 10A. O.S. § 1-4-904. In the present case, Mr. Lawson does not dispute the finding that the children were adjudicated deprived. He does, however, contend that the evidence was insufficient to terminate his rights pursuant under § 1-4-904(B)(9) and that termination was not in C.L.'s best interests.

We will first address the evidence as it relates to § 1-4-904(B)(9). Under that section, termination of parental rights is proper based on "a finding that the parent has abused or neglected any child or failed to protect any child from abuse or neglect that is heinous or shocking ...." *Id.* The term "'[h]einous and shocking abuse' includes but is not limited to aggravated physical abuse that results in serious bodily, mental, or emotional injury." 10A O.S. § 1-1-105(35). Serious bodily injury is further defined, as relevant to his case, as "chronic abuse including, but not limited to, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, or sexual exploitation which is repeated or continuing." *Id.* at §35(h). Further, the term "heinous and shocking neglect" includes, but is not limited to:

> a. chronic neglect that includes, but is not limited to, a persistent pattern of family functioning in which the caregiver has not met or sustained the basic needs of a child which results in harm to the child,

b. neglect that has resulted in a diagnosis of the child as a failure to thrive,
c. an act or failure to act by a parent that results in the death or near death of a child or sibling, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, or presents an imminent risk of serious harm to a child, or
d. any other similar aggravating circumstance ....

Id. at § 1-1-105(36).

On appeal, Mr. Lawson generally denies that he abused or neglected S.C. or the other children in the home and that he was unaware of any abuse or neglect taking place in the home. However, we find that at trial the state presented a plethora of evidence from which the trial court as the trier of fact could have reasonably formed a firm belief or conviction of Mr. Lawson's heinous and shocking abuse and neglect of the children.

First, S.C. herself testified about the abuse she experienced while living in the Sadler/Lawson home. She testified that Mr. Lawson "whooped" her with a belt and kicked her in stomach multiple times. Tr. (Oct. 30, 2024), 153. She also testified that her mom had grabbed her around the neck and choked her. *Id.* at 151. She even demonstrated the choking for the court. *Id.* Lori Blumenthal, the CASA advocate assigned to this case, noted that S.C. testified consistently about the physical abuse she experienced at a forensic interview in April, a forensic interview in November, and again during trial. Tr. (Dec. 4, 2024), 85. When asked how she felt about living with Ms. Sadler and Mr. Lawson, S.C. replied "bad" because they treated her like "trash." *Id.* at 106. Dr. Mary Stockett, a pediatrician at Children's Hospital in Oklahoma City who specializes in child abuse, testified that she performed an examination on S.C. on January 18, 2024, and found an

abrasion on her thigh, her chest, and her jawline. Tr. (Oct. 28, 2024), 47-49. She also noted that there was hyperpigmentation on S.C.'s thigh just above her knee and also on the back of her thigh, which indicated to her that there had been injuries. *Id.* at 48.

Debra Sigman, S.C.'s therapist, reported concern for S.C. due to the physical assaults she was experiencing at home. *Id.* at 76. Grace Winter, a school counselor at S.C.'s school, Positive Tomorrows, testified that S.C. reported to her that her mom hit her with a jump rope and that Mr. Lawson kicked her in the stomach. Tr. (Oct. 30, 2024), 25. Ms. Winter reported seeing the rope burns on S.C.'s face and noted that S.C. reported that these incidents were the result of her getting in trouble. *Id.* Kelli Clark, the principal at Positive Tomorrows, testified that S.C. would "show me marks that she had either on her chin or her chest. I saw what looked like fingerprint bruises underneath her arm." *Id.* at 86. Additionally, S.C.'s teacher at Positive Tomorrows, Amanda Martinez, testified that S.C. made concerning statements to her about Mr. Lawson kicking her in the stomach and her mother beating her up. Tr. (Oct. 31, 2024), 14. Ms. Martinez also testified that S.C. told her: "I don't feel safe at home." *Id.* Scarlett reported physical abuse from her parents to Ms. Martinez "[m]ultiple times a week." *Id.* at 15.

S.C. also testified about the chronic neglect she experienced in the home of Mr. Lawson and Ms. Sadler. The evidence shows that S.C. was confined to her room, was denied food or had her access to food severely restricted, and was denied proper clothing and hygiene by Ms. Sadler and Mr. Lawson. Additionally,

the parents failed to keep the home in a habitable state for the two minor children. The parents did not practice safe sleep practices, did not provide the children with clothes or ensure proper hygiene, and C.L.'s eczema was severe and largely untreated until removal. Ultimately, the state presented a litany of evidence that there was chronic neglect and a persistent pattern of family functioning in which these parents have not met or sustained the basic needs of their children which resulted in harm to the children.

Several witnesses testified about the children's poor hygiene and lack of proper clothing. Ms. Frisby stated that at removal, S.C.'s clothes were not clean and she had an odor about her. Tr. (October 28, 2024), 38. She added that S.C. had on shoes but no socks. *Id.* Ms. Nighbor, S.C.'s foster mom, testified that when S.C. first came into their care the first thing she noticed about S.C. was that she was visibly dirty and smelled. Tr. (Oct. 29, 2024), 41. Additionally, S.C.'s school, Positive Tomorrows, is a school for children who are homeless or meet a certain criteria of housing instability. Three Positive Tomorrow's employees, Ms. Winter, Ms. Martinez, and Ms. Reed, the classroom assistant, testified that S.C.'s hygiene stood out amongst the other students at school. Teachers and counselors consistently noted that she wore clothes that were not children's clothes, that she would repeatedly wear the same outfits day in and day out, and that her clothes were dirty. Ms. Reed testified that, "I recall very vividly an incident where she had worn the same clothes on Thursday and Friday and then she came back to school on Monday in those same clothes. And she had a sore on her knee ... And I remember when I went to get her pants, because she had

worn the same clothes for what I assume would be four days, I had to actually peel the leggings that she had off her sore, and it caused it to open again because they had been on her for so long." Tr. (Oct. 29, 2024), 153.

S.C. herself testified that she only had two or three outfits that she would wear. Tr. (Oct. 30, 2024), 125. She added that she would wear the same clothes to school over and over, which made her very upset. *Id.* at 126. She also testified that at one point her mother told her that she would only wash her own and Mr. Lawson's clothes. *Id.* at 125. Ms. Reed testified that clothes were offered to S.C., but they were told by the parents that they could not give her any clothing and that the school employees were not allowed to send anything home with her. Tr. (Oct. 29, 2024), 143. Ms. Reed reported that S.C. was allergic to cotton so she could not wear socks. *Id.* However, other school employees testified that Ms. Sadler reported to the school that S.C. had athlete's foot at varying times and that is why S.C. could not wear socks. However, as Ms. Merriweather, the family's case manager at Positive Tomorrows, noted in her testimony, there was no proper documentation given to the school to support a diagnosis of athlete's foot. Tr. (Oct. 30, 2024), 77. Regardless, S.C. would come to school during the wintertime not wearing socks. The shoes that she would wear even during winter were see-through mesh. Tr. (Oct. 29, 2024), 148-149. Ms. Clark also testified about an incident where there was a cold snap and S.C. was one of several children who did not have socks. Tr. (Oct. 30, 2024), 84. After S.C. received the socks and wore them home, Ms. Clark received a text from Ms. Sadler stating that S.C. was not allowed to wear socks. *Id.*

Additionally, several witnesses testified regarding two separate incidents where S.C.'s head was shaved by her parents. However, their explanations for the head-shaving incidents vary. Various witnesses testified S.C.'s head was shaved as a punishment for allowing other people touching her hair, because S.C. had alopecia, that S.C. had cut her own hair in such a way it had to shaved, or because S.C. got a sticky substance in it that could not be removed. Regardless of the cause, the head-shaving experiences were reportedly traumatic and embarrassing for S.C. The classroom assistant, Ms. Reed, reported that S.C. was so self-conscious about her hair that she would wrap a blanket around it in the summer. The school was concerned about the blanket due to the heat, so they offered her a hat. However, the school was informed by the parents that S.C. could not wear the hat because of her reported alopecia. Tr. (Oct. 29, 2024), 145-46. Ms. Peters, the permanency planning worker for DHS who was involved in this case, testified that she reviewed S.C.'s medical records which did not show that S.C. had ever been diagnosed with or treated for alopecia. Tr. (Oct. 31, 2024), 145. Ms. Clark testified that after the first head-shaving incident S.C. lost her spark and did not get it back until she went into DHS custody with foster mom. Tr. (Oct. 30, 2024), 89.

Alyssa Curtis, H.C. and C.L.'s foster mom, testified that when H.C. first came to their home she was "very dirty," "smelled," and had "matted hair." Tr. (Oct. 29, 2024), 6. The only clothing she arrived with was the romper she was wearing. *Id.* Ms. Curtis also testified that H.C. was terrified of the bath and that H.C. appeared to not know what it felt like to be in the water. H.C. would become

hysterical every time she would take a bath and these issues persisted for roughly seven months after removal. *Id.* at 7. Ms. Curtis also testified that when she or her husband would brush H.C.'s teeth, H.C.'s would bleed profusely. *Id.* at 8. The foster parents noticed that H.C., at two years old, had rotting teeth and fake teeth. Ms. Curtis testified that she inquired about the state of H.C.'s teeth from Ms. Sadler, who told foster parents that H.C. needed fake teeth because S.C. chipped one of H.C.'s teeth and the fact that H.C. was still being bottle fed with formula. *Id.* However, Ms. Curtis then testified that she went to the same dentist the biological parents had used and inquired if he had replaced a chipped tooth. The dentist told her that he would not have replaced a chipped tooth with a fake tooth. The dentist added that there were only two causes for the state of H.C.'s teeth: being bottle fed and nutritional deficiency while she was in the womb. *Id.* at 8-9. Ms. Curtis testified that H.C. has no protection for her teeth because she has no enamel and that as a result, every tooth that comes in is already rotted from the root up. *Id.* As a result, every tooth that will come in in the future will need a cavity, a cap, or will have to be pulled.

Ms. Curtis testified about the state of C.L.'s skin when he came into her care, stating: "His skin, I will never forget the condition of his skin. The best way I can describe it was alligator skin, the touch of it, the look of it. It was so bad that I was terrified to hold him for the first day or two." Tr. (Oct. 29, 2024), 13. She also recalled him having a flatter head, so at first, they were not sure if it was a bad case of cradle cap or eczema. She testified, "every time that we would lay him down on anything, he was just constantly rubbing the back of his head

against it to the point where it would bleed, and we had to replace so many sheets with that because of how bad it was bleeding." *Id.* at 13-14. C.L. has permanent scarring from the state of his eczema at the time of removal. *Id.* at 15. Ms. Curtis then noted that the only items that C.L. came with at removal were Aquaphor and a diaper bag. *Id.* at 14. She also added that C.L. has eczema flare ups after visits with Ms. Sadler and Mr. Lawson. *Id.* at 26. Ms. Frisby also testified about the state of C.L's eczema at removal, noting that it appeared that there were burns on his skin. Tr. (Oct. 28, 2024), 28.

Regarding the state of the home, Ms. Frisby testified that when CHBS was in the home, it reported that court intervention and removal were necessary because the home was so cluttered and unclean. Tr. (Oct. 28, 2024), 99-100. She noted that "there was trash on the floor. There was clutter everywhere. There was nowhere for like tummy time if needed. There was nowhere for—I mean, H.C. was having to step over things when she was walking around the apartment." *Id.* at 25. Ms. Bray with CHBS testified that the sanitation in the apartment was deeply concerning and that there were always roaches crawling all over the walls and the furniture. Tr. (Oct. 31, 2024), 63. She specified that the uncleanliness in the home was "extreme." *Id.* at 80.

Several witnesses also testified regarding the state of S.C.'s bedroom. S.C. had previously been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. S.C. testified that she colored on the walls in her room because she was bored as a result of not being able to leave her room for hours on end and not being given anything to do. Tr. (Oct. 30, 2024), 122. Mr. Lawson and Ms. Sadler claimed S.C.

was destructive and ruined the walls and other furniture items.[4] As a result, multiple witnesses testified that the only thing in S.C.'s room was a mattress, a dresser with no drawers, and a nightstand with no drawers. None of the witnesses were able to recall seeing toys of any kind in S.C.'s room.

S.C. also detailed being isolated from her family and having limited access to food. Her teacher Ms. Martinez testified that S.C. reported that she was locked in her room on the weekends. Ms. Bray with CHBS testified that during the initial sessions with the family S.C. would be asked to remain the hallway by Mr. Lawson and Ms. Sadler. Tr. (Oct. 31, 2024), 44. They would ask her to turn and face away from the rest of the family who would be in the living room. These sessions would last roughly an hour and a half and S.C. would stand in the hallway by herself for the duration of the session. *Id.* at 44-45. Ms. Merriweather testified about a time when she picked up S.C. from school and took her to the hospital when Ms. Sadler was there for her pregnancy with C.L. Ms. Merriweather stated that she took S.C. to the hospital room and upon arrival, Mr. Lawson took her goody bag from her that she had from a school birthday party and made her sit in a chair and face the wall. Tr. (Oct. 29, 2024), 53. Ms. Merriweather testified that S.C. was grounded at that time because Mr. Lawson and Ms. Sadler were upset that another DHS report was made about them. *Id.* at 53.

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[4] There were no other witnesses who testified that S.C. exhibited destructive behavior. There was no evidence that S.C. destroyed books, toys, or other items at school or in her foster parents' home. The only witnesses who testified about her purported destructive behaviors were Mr. Lawson and Ms. Sadler.

Several witnesses who visited the Sadler/Lawson home testified that there was a chain around the fridge, that there was an alarm on S.C.'s door to alert the parents when she would exit her room, and there was a camera facing the fridge and kitchen area. The parents claim that these methods were in place because S.C. was gorging herself on unsafe foods such as raw meat and baby food. However, S.C. reported that she would get into the fridge or the freezer because she was hungry. Tr. (Oct 30, 2024), 133. S.C. reported being hungry to her teacher, Ms. Martinez. She also informed Ms. Martinez that she was not allowed to eat at home. Tr. (Oct. 31, 2024), 17. S.C. also reported that a lot of times she did not eat on the weekends and was locked in her room. *Id.*

H.C. was developmentally delayed at removal. Ms. Frisby testified that she did not have many words and she had just started solid food. Tr. (Oct. 28, 2024), 30. Ms. Curtis testified that H.C. also had severe food insecurity. She testified that whenever H.C. smelled food or when someone else had food and she did not, she would start throwing tantrums. Tr. (Oct. 29, 2024), 18. Her tantrums consisted of "biting herself, pulling her hair, taking all of her clothes off, pinching herself. At one point she ran her head into the wall because she was so mad." *Id.* Ms. Curtis noted that these tantrums can last for forty-five minutes or longer and that H.C. is relatively inconsolable during these fits. Ms. Curtis also added that H.C. would have similar fits at bedtime due to a perceived fear of her being alone. Ms. Curtis testified that it would take H.C. two to three hours to fall asleep when she first came to their home and that it was two to three hours of "just screaming." *Id.* at 19. She also noted that H.C. has a regression after visitation

with her biological parents and that it will then take her even longer to go to sleep. *Id.* at 19-20.

Despite the evidence presented at trial, Mr. Lawson contends that he was not physically abusive, and instead blames S.C.'s bruises and marks on bullying incidents at school and S.C. purportedly confusing him with a prior partner of Ms. Sadler, Gilberto Cancino, who was physically abusive towards Ms. Sadler. However, while S.C. reported being bullied, none of the witnesses aside from the parents corroborated this testimony. And S.C. explicitly identified the injuries she sustained from specific acts of the parents, not other children. S.C.'s testified consistently about the abuse she experienced, such as the choking and the kicking in the stomach, and consistently reported these incidents to various adults in her life. Additionally, when testifying, S.C. had no issues distinguishing between her biological father, Mr. Cancino, and Mr. Lawson. Thus, there is also no support for Mr. Lawson's testimony regarding S.C.'s purported confusion. S.C.'s reports of abuse she experienced in this case have remained consistent from when she first reported the abuse and neglect to school employees and caseworkers to trial.

While S.C. and H.C. are not biologically Mr. Lawson's children, 10A O.S. § 1-4-904(B) provides that the court may terminate the rights of a parent to a child based on a finding that the parent as abused or neglected a child or a sibling of the child. As stated above, heinous and shocking abuse includes but is not limited to "aggravated physical abuse that results in serious bodily, mental, or emotional injury." 10A O.S. § 1-1-105(35). S.C. reported being kicked

multiple times by Mr. Lawson and being choked and being hit with a jump rope by her mother to various individuals. Neither parent intervened when the other was abusing S.C. Dr. Stockett's examination supported S.C.'s reports of injuries as did the testimony of various Positive Tomorrows employees. There was ample evidence that the chronic abuse S.C. experienced resulted in not only physical injuries but also mental and emotional injury. S.C. reported that her parents did not love her, that they treated her like trash and as if she was homeless. S.C.'s isolation and lack of access to food in her own home; her and her siblings' poor hygiene; H.C.'s severe dental issues, food insecurity, and trouble sleeping; and C.L.'s severe eczema that was described as "alligator skin" and was so severe it resulted in permanent scarring, all demonstrate chronic neglect that includes a persistent pattern of family functioning in which Mr. Lawson has not met or sustained the basic needs of a child which resulted in harm to the child. Additionally, while S.C. and H.C. were not biologically his children, Mr. Lawson's actions and, at times, failure to act, resulted in the serious physical and emotional harm for all three children. Thus, we find that the record reflects that the state presented clear and convincing evidence from which the trial court could have formed a firm belief or conviction that Mr. Lawson engaged in the heinous and shocking abuse and neglect of the children. Additionally, there was also sufficient evidence to show that Mr. Lawson failed to protect C.L. and the other children from the abuse and neglect they were experiencing.

Mr. Lawson's third and final proposition of error was that the state also failed to meet its burden of clear and convincing evidence to support termination

based on the best interest of the child. Upon review, we disagree and find that the court properly weighed the evidence presented and correctly concluded that the termination of Mr. Lawson's rights was in the best interests of the child.

The record reflects that Mr. Lawson was unable to take responsibility for his actions in this case and that despite receiving help from a variety of individuals through a variety of services, was unwilling to make the changes necessary to provide for the children in the home until it was too late. For example, various witnesses testified that they suggested the parents try snack packs, snack drawers, and a snack before bed to help with S.C.'s eating during the night. The parents responded that they had already tried those things, and they did not work. S.C. disputes that they tried to make an effort in that regard. Ms. Bray, the CHBS worker who worked with the family once a week in the home, testified that there was no improvement from Ms. Sadler and Mr. Lawson in regard to managing S.C.'s reported behaviors, specifically due to "resistance" from the family. Tr. (Oct. 31, 2024), 63.

Mr. Lawson explicitly testified that S.C. was lying to school officials and caseworkers about the abuse and neglect so she could get what she wanted. Tr. (Nov. 19, 2024), 225. He later added that he thought S.C.'s testimony was only twenty-five percent true, and when asked how he could explain the many other witnesses in this case who supported her testimony, he responded that there was "miscommunication." *Id.* at 261. Mr. Lawson was asked if he thought H.C. had absorbed what she had witnessed in the home regarding S.C. and their management of her behaviors and he replied that she did not. *Id.* at 216.

Ms. Peters, who is a permanency worker with DHS, explicitly recommended the termination of Mr. Lawson's parental rights. Tr. (Oct. 31, 2024), 141. She testified that because Ms. Sadler and Mr. Lawson continue to have a negative perception of S.C., they have not taken accountability or expressed regret for their actions. *Id.* She added that they blame everything that happened on S.C. herself and Mr. Cancino and that neither Mr. Lawson nor Ms. Sadler has demonstrated that they are able to meet the needs of C.L. and H.C. For example, Ms. Bray with CHBS testified that when she arrived in the home none of the three children had a bed or bassinet. The parents' mattress was in the living room and H.C. had a mat on the floor that she would sleep on. Tr. (Oct. 31, 2024), 34. The first module she instructed the parents on was safe sleep. However, despite the parents being instructed on safe sleep, it was not implemented. Ms. Bray described one incident weeks later where she asked to see where four-month-old C.L. was napping during a visit, and C.L. was sleeping in the middle of a queen-size bed wrapped in a comforter. *Id.* at 67. Further, while Mr. Lawson testified that he had scheduled a dermatologist appointment before C.L.'s removal, we note that C.L.'s skin was in a precarious condition at removal. So much so, that witnesses testified that it looked like alligator skin or severe burns. His skin was so irritated that when C.L. rubbed his head against the sheets it would bleed profusely, and the state of his skin at this time led to permanent scarring.

Additionally, Ms. Frisby testified that at removal, the parents kept telling S.C. that removal was her fault and that her lies are how the family ended up in

that situation. Tr. (Oct. 28, 2024), 31. When Ms. Merriweather took S.C. to the hospital to be with her family, she reported that S.C. was forced to face the wall because Mr. Lawson and Ms. Sadler were upset that another DHS report was made about them. Tr. (Oct. 30, 2024), 53. Ms. Peters testified that when she met with the parents after removal, she inquired as to how DHS became involved with their family. She stated that the parents, Mr. Lawson and Ms. Sadler, told her DHS was involved because of S.C. and her lying. Tr. (Oct. 31, 2024), 101. Ms. Peters opined that the parents were unable to take responsibility for the actions that led to the removal of the children and that they told her "once the judge sees the videos, she'll understand." *Id.* at 138.

Ms. Blumenthal, the CASA worker, testified that she spoke with Mr. Lawson and Ms. Sadler before trial and they indicated that the entire case was a misunderstanding. Ms. Blumenthal had concerns about S.C. testifying and the trauma that is associated with a child of that age having to testify about the abuse they experienced. Ms. Blumenthal shared those concerns with the parents and Mr. Lawson merely told her that S.C. was not being truthful and that "they felt confident that this would be resolved." Tr. (Dec. 4, 2024), 79. Ms. Blumenthal also recommended that both parents' parental rights be terminated. *Id.* at 84.

Ms. Blumenthal further opined, "there are so many adults involved in [S.C.'s] life that have given us information that is counter to what the parents testified." *Id.* at 85. Additionally, she testified, "if they contend [S.C.] was not telling the truth, they will never be able to parent safely." *Id.* Further, she was asked, "if the concern is based primarily on what happened with [S.C.], why do

you have concerns that they could not appropriately parent [C.L.] and [H.C.]?" *Id.* at 90. She responded that the children had grown up observing the abuse in the home towards S.C. *Id.* She also noted that H.C. is already demonstrating some difficult behaviors with self-harm and tantrums. *Id.* Because the parents perceived S.C.'s behavior as difficult, it follows that another difficult child like H.C. and eventually potentially C.L. would elicit those same responses and, as a result, Ms. Blumenthal testified that C.L. and H.C. would not be safe. She clarified that they would only be safe if they were perfectly calm and compliant children, but children are not usually either of those things. *Id.* Finally, Ms. Blumenthal testified: "I've never seen a family have so much available to them during periods of difficulty with a child as this family. They had CHBS. They had Positive Tomorrows. They had a social worker. They had a therapist." *Id.* at 91. Thus, she confidently testified that the parents' rights should be terminated, especially in light of the fact that Mr. Lawson and Ms. Sadler had access to a number of resources and services and still were not able to make the changes and take the responsibility to parent safely. She stated that more services would not help these parents. *Id.*

Thus, based on Mr. Lawson's refusal to properly take responsibility for DHS's involvement in their family, the failure to implement recommendations from DHS and CHBS throughout the case, and the abuse and neglect that caused all three children to suffer physically, emotionally, and mentally, we agree with the trial court that termination was in C.L.'s best interests.

CONCLUSION

Upon review of the record and the applicable law in this case, we find that the state presented clear and convincing evidence of heinous and shocking abuse upon which the trial court could reasonably form a firm belief or conviction that grounds for termination were proven. Additionally, the state proved that termination was in C.L.'s best interests. Therefore, we affirm the court's order terminating Mr. Lawson's parental rights.

AFFIRMED.

WISEMAN, P.J., and FISCHER, J., concur.

October 23, 2025