

NOTICE

This Order was filed under Supreme Court Rule 23 and is not precedent except in the limited circumstances allowed under Rule 23(e)(1).

2026 IL App (4th) 260528-U
NOS. 4-26-0528, 4-26-0529 cons.

IN THE APPELLATE COURT
OF ILLINOIS

FOURTH DISTRICT

FILED
September 30, 2026
Carla Bender
4th District Appellate
Court, IL

<i>In re</i> Va. J. and Vi. J., Minors	)	Appeal from the
	)	Circuit Court of
(The People of the State of Illinois,	)	Sangamon County
Petitioner-Appellee,	)	Nos. 22JA266
v.	)	22JA267
Jeffrey J.,	)	
Respondent-Appellant).	)	Honorable
	)	Sierra Senior-Moore,
	)	Judge Presiding.

JUSTICE VANCIL delivered the judgment of the court.
Justices Lannerd and DeArmond concurred in the judgment.

ORDER

¶ 1 *Held:* The appellate court affirmed the termination of respondent’s parental rights, concluding the trial court’s fitness and best-interests determinations were not against the manifest weight of the evidence.

¶ 2 In October 2024, the State filed petitions to terminate the parental rights of respondent, Jeffrey J., as to his minor children, Va. J. (born in June 2021) and Vi. J. (born in September 2018). In May 2026, the trial court entered an order terminating respondent’s parental rights. We note the minors’ mother signed consents to adoption and acknowledged the relinquishment of her parental rights to the minors. She is not a party to this appeal.

¶ 3 In this consolidated appeal, respondent argues the trial court’s findings that he was unfit and that termination of his parental rights was in the minors’ best interests were against the manifest weight of the evidence. We affirm.

¶ 4

I. BACKGROUND

¶ 5 In December 2022, the State filed petitions for adjudication of wardship of Va. J. and Vi. J., alleging they were neglected and abused under section 2-3(1)(a) and (b), of the Juvenile Court Act of 1987 (Juvenile Court Act) (705 ILCS 405/2-3(1)(a), (b) (West 2022)). Specifically, the petitions asserted Va. J. and Vi. J. were not receiving the proper care and supervision necessary for their well-being, and their environment was injurious to their welfare due to domestic violence between respondent and the minors' mother, unsanitary conditions in their home, and respondent's substance abuse.

¶ 6 On March 22, 2023, the minors were adjudicated neglected. The trial court found, based upon a stipulation by the mother, the minors' environment was injurious in that the conditions in their home were unsanitary and posed a hazard to them. The court placed custody and guardianship of the minors with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) pending further proceedings.

¶ 7 In April 2023, the trial court entered a dispositional order finding respondent was unfit. The court made the minors wards of the court, placed them in the custody and guardianship of DCFS, and ordered respondent to participate in services, including counseling, domestic violence services, and parenting classes.

¶ 8 In October 2024, the State filed petitions to terminate respondent's parental rights to the minors. The petitions alleged respondent was unfit because he failed to (1) maintain a reasonable degree of interest, concern, or responsibility as to the minors' welfare (750 ILCS 50/1(D)(b) (West 2024)); (2) protect the minors from conditions within their environment injurious to their welfare (*id.* § 1(D)(g)); (3) make reasonable efforts to correct the conditions which were the basis for the removal of the minors within the nine-month period following the

adjudication of neglect of March 22, 2023, through December 22, 2023 (*id.* § 1(D)(m)(i)); (4) make reasonable progress toward the return of the minors during the same nine-month period of March 22, 2023, through December 22, 2023 (*id.* § 1(d)(m)(ii)); (5) make reasonable efforts to correct the conditions which were the basis for the removal of the minors within the nine-month period following the adjudication of neglect of December 22, 2023, through September 22, 2024 (*id.* § 1(D)(m)(i)); and (6) make reasonable progress toward the return of the minors during the same nine-month period of December 22, 2023, through September 22, 2024 (*id.* § 1(d)(m)(ii)).

¶ 9 A. Fitness Hearing

¶ 10 The trial court held a fitness hearing in May 2026. The court took judicial notice of, *inter alia*, the previous orders of adjudication and disposition and a surrender of parental rights signed by the minors' mother in January 2025. The following evidence was adduced.

¶ 11 Carlis Thomas testified she was the child welfare specialist with DCFS and assigned as the caseworker for Va. J. and Vi. J. from November 2023 through August 2024. According to Thomas, the case was being transitioned to her from another caseworker, but she reviewed the file, including past service plans and notes from the previous caseworker. Thomas testified the minors were removed from their parents due to neglect and domestic violence, and a service plan had been put in place, requiring respondent to find suitable housing and income and participate in parenting education, mental health services, and domestic violence services. Thomas identified the service plan, which was dated November 2023, and it was admitted into evidence without objection.

¶ 12 In discussing respondent's compliance with the service plan, Thomas explained that when she took over the case in November 2023, respondent had completed the housing portion of the service plan, in that he had an apartment, and he was rated satisfactory on substance abuse

because no services were recommended after he provided a negative drug test. Respondent was also rated satisfactory as to domestic violence services and visits with the minors, though he had to be admonished about bringing necessary items to the visits.

¶ 13 However, by November 2023, respondent was rated unsatisfactory on cooperation, housing and income, mental health, and parenting. As to these conclusions, Thomas explained as follows. Respondent was not communicating with her on a regular basis. Despite reaching out to respondent by phone and going to his home, she had trouble reaching him, as respondent would not respond, took days before replying, and failed to answer his door. While respondent had obtained an apartment and was receiving disability income of approximately \$900 per month, respondent was reported as “misusing his money” and failing to buy the minors necessary items for visits, such as diapers. Accordingly, respondent was placed on a budget. Respondent also failed to engage in mental health services, as he did not attend scheduled mental health appointments. For example, Thomas explained, an appointment with a psychotherapist had been scheduled for respondent, which would have helped determine the support he needed, but he never attended it. Thomas noted she had repeatedly confirmed the appointment with respondent, and on the date of the appointment, she went to his apartment to provide transportation, but respondent refused to answer the door or come out of his apartment, later claiming to be sick. Although a subsequent psychotherapy appointment was scheduled, respondent failed to attend it. Further, respondent had been unsuccessfully discharged from parenting services at The Parent Place because the provider reported he was not comprehending the lessons and did not understand what was needed of him. Thomas acknowledged respondent was willing to engage in parenting services, but he was nevertheless deemed unsatisfactory due to the provider’s determination respondent was unable to absorb the material he was being taught, even after one-on-one sessions. Thomas could not recall

whether the provider's determination occurred before or after respondent had made it through the entirety of the course.

¶ 14 A subsequent service plan prepared by Thomas and dated May 2024 was admitted into evidence. In discussing respondent's compliance with the service plan, Thomas testified respondent was rated satisfactory on substance abuse, visits, and habilitation. However, respondent continued to rate unsatisfactory on cooperation, mental health, income, parenting, and domestic violence services. Thomas explained respondent was still failing to communicate with her on a regular basis and failed to meet with her when she requested, claiming to be sick. While respondent was managing his money better, he was still required to abide by a strict budget. Additionally, respondent still had not engaged with mental health services and continued to miss appointments. Respondent was also unsuccessfully discharged from domestic violence services after missing classes, though Thomas did not know how many classes respondent missed. Thomas explained that, although respondent was willing to participate in parenting education with The Parent Place again, he still was not engaged in classes because the provider refused to reaccept him on the basis he could not comprehend the importance of learning how to nurture the minors and was more concerned with playing video games with the minors than learning how to nurture or interact with them. Thomas acknowledged she could not recall whether alternative parenting classes were offered to respondent.

¶ 15 Thomas testified respondent also stopped visiting the minors from February 2024 through June 2024, at which time Thomas filed her last permanency report before she departed from the case. She could not explain why respondent, despite ceasing his visits, was rated satisfactory as to visitation. She believed, but could not recall with certainty, that respondent reengaged with visits in June 2024. According to Thomas, respondent's visits stopped because he

claimed to be sick and having seizures, though Thomas was unable to verify whether respondent was in fact sick. Further, rather than calling Thomas or any of his providers ahead of time to inform them he would not attend a service because he was sick, respondent would simply not attend. Thomas noted she was never provided a reason as to why respondent was receiving disability income.

¶ 16 Additionally, Thomas testified that, while substance abuse services had not been recommended, there were concerns respondent's failure to communicate regularly and his missing visits were due to intoxication from alcohol use. Thomas noted a worker had reported respondent attended a domestic violence class while intoxicated. Thomas acknowledged, however, she had no definitive proof respondent was abusing alcohol.

¶ 17 According to Thomas, respondent began making visits again by the time she left the case in August 2024, but she could not recall if the visits recommenced in June or August. She testified that regardless, during her time on the case, respondent's visits never progressed to being unsupervised, and there was never a time when DCFS was close to returning the minors to respondent because respondent "still had a lot of recommendations that he hadn't completed."

¶ 18 Sydney Hoehn testified she was the child welfare specialist assigned to the minors' case from August 2024 through January 2026. In August 2024, she discussed with respondent that he still needed to complete domestic violence, mental health, and parenting services and had to participate in a psychological exam. She submitted a permanency report in September 2024. Hoehn reported that at that time, respondent was not participating in any mental health services and had been unsuccessfully discharged from domestic violence services for missing appointments. Respondent also was not engaged in parenting services, having told Hoehn "he had completed it prior." However, Hoehn reached out to The Parent Place and determined respondent had not

completed parenting classes, as he had been unsuccessfully discharged. Hoehn acknowledged, however, she never received a discharge report from The Parenting Place. She noted she made a new referral in December 2024 for parenting services with The Parent Place, and although the provider accepted him back into the program, respondent never engaged. She could not recall if respondent was unsuccessfully discharged after failing to appear on several occasions.

¶ 19 Hoehn testified that between September 2024 and January 2025, respondent attended domestic violence services only “on occasion.” Respondent also participated in a mental health assessment, and he was recommended to follow up with psychiatric treatment and adult outpatient services for counseling. Although appointments to complete these recommendations were made, respondent “never followed through” with them. Hoehn noted respondent was offered bus tokens and rides from case aides to attend those appointments, but respondent never engaged.

¶ 20 Hoehn explained that in January 2025, respondent had signed directed consents to the adoption of the minors by Tatrina W., which terminated his parental rights to the minors. However, respondent’s parental rights were reinstated in February 2026 and the minors were moved because that individual did not have an income and reported she could no longer care for the minors, in part, “because she was being harassed by the parents.” Although respondent’s parental rights had been reinstated because the adoption failed to move forward, Hoehn affirmed there was never a time when she was assigned to the case where the minors were close to being returned to respondents. Additionally, none of respondent’s visits ever progressed to being unsupervised because he never completed domestic violence and mental health services. Hoehn opined she did not know the basis upon which respondent was receiving disability income.

¶ 21 Timothy Jolly testified he was the DCFS caseworker assigned to the minors’ case in January 2026, though he could not recall when he first contacted respondent. According to Jolly,

after respondent's parental rights were reinstated following the unsuccessful placement of the minors, respondent did not engage with any services. Jolly explained, although he referred respondent for domestic violence and parenting services on April 15, 2026, respondent had not started them. He acknowledged no referrals for services were made in the interim between respondent's parental rights being restored and April 2026, but he explained DCFS did not typically set up new services for parents when the goal, as in this case, was substitute care pending termination of parental rights. Jolly also explained he offered respondent a 4 p.m. visit with the minors in April 2026, which was the first opportunity respondent had to see the minors in some time. However, respondent failed to meet, later claiming that he was asleep. Jolly testified that as of the time of the fitness hearing, respondent was not considered to be successful with any of his services.

¶ 22 Respondent testified that as of November 2023, he was engaged in domestic violence counseling. Also at that time, respondent believed he successfully completed parenting classes but had since learned he had not and was "starting over." Respondent affirmed that throughout the case, he tried to cooperate with his caseworkers and was engaging in the services recommended to him. He explained he had been visiting the minors and acknowledged he "sometimes" failed to appear for visits, but "they just like stopped it." Additionally, he had a mental health evaluation at Memorial Behavioral Health Center and, per the provider's recommendation, saw a therapist across the street from the facility. When asked if he obtained a psychological examination, he responded, "They had talked to me, and I explained everything as well." He was also attending domestic violence services.

¶ 23 According to respondent, for approximately four years over the life of the case, he resided in an apartment complex providing supportive living for adults with disabilities. Children

were permitted to live there, but it was “a quiet place,” and while children were permitted to visit in the morning, “everything is like shut down” around 10 or 11 a.m. Respondent testified he was planning to move into a house that was appropriate for the minors. He explained his income was from Social Security disability benefits, which he had received since he was seven years old because he had seizures.

¶ 24 Respondent acknowledged that earlier in the case, he wanted to give up his parental rights to the minors and have a particular individual adopt them, so he executed paperwork reflecting that. However, after that individual was unable to adopt the minors and his parental rights were reinstated, he sought to maintain his rights to the minors. To that end, he noted that he had been willing to engage in services from the time Jolly recommended him for services the month prior to the fitness hearing. Respondent testified it had been approximately three months since he had last seen the minors. He conceded he missed an offer to visit the minors but noted he asked for a make-up visit, and Jolly had not reached out to schedule one.

¶ 25 The trial court found respondent was unfit pursuant to five grounds alleged in the petition to terminate respondent’s parental rights. Specifically, the court found respondent failed to (1) make reasonable efforts to correct the conditions that brought the minors into care during the period of March 22, 2023, through December 22, 2023, (2) make reasonable progress toward the return of the minors to his care during the period of March 22, 2023, through December 22, 2023, (3) make reasonable efforts to correct the conditions that brought the minors into care during the period of December 22, 2023, and September 22, 2024, (4) make reasonable progress toward the return of the minors to his care during the period of December 22, 2023, and September 22, 2024, and (5) maintain a reasonable degree of interest, concern, or responsibility for the minors’ welfare. The court noted the witnesses’ testimony established that while respondent initially

participated in some services, he did not complete them because he failed to consistently attend them or did not comprehend what he was being taught. The court noted Thomas's testimony established respondent also failed to successfully communicate with his caseworkers and did not complete any mental health treatment, despite being offered transportation options. The court also emphasized respondent failed to engage in a psychological evaluation, which would have helped to identify the necessary supports respondent needed.

¶ 26

B. Best-Interests Hearing

¶ 27 Following its fitness ruling, the trial court immediately proceeded with a best-interests hearing. The court took judicial notice of the evidence offered at the fitness hearing.

¶ 28 Jolly testified the minors were placed in a traditional foster home from February 2023 through July 2024, at which time they were moved to a relative's home. After placement with that relative fell through, the minors were returned to their initial foster home in January 2026, where they remain currently. Jolly testified the minors were "doing great" and "excelling" with their foster parents, and the foster parents were meeting all the minors' needs. The minors were attending school and seeing doctors. They were enjoying the foster home, "always having a good time," and attached to their foster family. (They referred to their foster parents as "mom" and "dad" and considered another child also in the home to be their brother. The foster parents stated they were willing to adopt the minors. According to Jolly, the foster parents also showed an attachment to the minors. He explained that, for example, during his visits with the family, the foster parents, even while talking with him, would still interact with the minors. Jolly testified he had no concerns about the foster parents' ability to take care of the minors. He explained the foster parents were not open to the minors having a relationship with respondent while the adoption proceedings were ongoing, but once the adoption was finalized, they were willing to discuss allowing respondent to

interact with the minors.

¶ 29 Jolly opined it was in the minors' best interests for respondent's parental rights to be terminated. He explained respondent had "completed no services at all," despite the case being open since 2022, and emphasized he had been unsuccessfully discharged from multiple services. He did not believe allowing respondent more time would resolve any of the issues regarding completing services, as even prior to respondent executing paperwork surrendering his parental rights, the case had been open for several years, and respondent had failed to complete services at that time.

¶ 30 Respondent testified there was an attachment between the minors and him, and the minors recognized him as "their dad" because he "took care of them." He knew their birthdays and was trying to get them back into his care. When he visited the minors, they called him "dad." Respondent noted Jolly had never observed him visit with the minors because respondent missed the visit that had been scheduled, as he "was going through like a lot of stuff." However, respondent agreed that had the visit occurred, Jolly would have observed a bond between him and the minors. He planned to move into a two-bedroom home by June 2026 and had "a payee through Helping Hands" that would help him provide for the minors. Respondent affirmed that if the trial court did not terminate his parental rights, he was willing to continue engaging in services. While he acknowledged the State's position was that he had had sufficient time to complete services, he noted he was "starting over" but continuing to engage in services.

¶ 31 The trial court found it was in the best interests of both minors to terminate respondent's parental rights. The court determined the minors had familial ties and a sense of love and attachment with the foster parents, whom they called "Mom" and "Dad." The minors positively interacted with them and considered the other child placed at the home to be their

brother. The court stated the foster parents had expressed an interest in adopting the minors and emphasized the foster parents were meeting all their needs, such as shelter and food, and providing for their physical safety and welfare.

¶ 32 Accordingly, the trial court terminated respondent's parental rights to the minors.

¶ 33 This appeal followed.

¶ 34 II. ANALYSIS

¶ 35 On appeal, respondent argues the trial court erred in finding him unfit and finding it was in the best interests of both minors for his parental rights to be terminated.

¶ 36 A. Unfitness Finding

¶ 37 Section 2-29(2) of the Juvenile Court Act (705 ILCS 405/2-29(2) (West 2024)) provides a two-step process to terminate parental rights. Under the first step, the State must prove by clear and convincing evidence that a parent is "unfit," as that term is defined in section 1(D) of the Adoption Act (750 ILCS 50/1(D) (West 2024)). *In re Donald A.G.*, 221 Ill. 2d 234, 244 (2006). A trial court's finding of unfitness will not be reversed unless it is against the manifest weight of the evidence. *In re Baby Boy*, 2025 IL App (4th) 241427, ¶ 63. A finding is against the manifest weight of the evidence where the opposite conclusion is clearly apparent. *Id.* We give deference to the court's findings of fact, as it was in the best position to observe the conduct and demeanor of the parties and witnesses. *Id.* One's parental rights may be terminated if even a single alleged ground for unfitness is supported by clear and convincing evidence. *Id.*

¶ 38 In this case, the trial court found respondent was unfit based upon his failure to (1) make reasonable efforts to correct the conditions that led to the removal of the minors during the nine-month periods following the adjudication of neglect specified in the petition to terminate his parental rights (750 ILCS 50/1(D)(m)(i) (West 2024)), (2) make reasonable progress toward

the return of the minors to him during the same nine-month periods (*id.* § 1(D)(m)(ii)), and (3) maintain a reasonable degree of interest, concern, or responsibility as to the minors' welfare (*id.* § 1(D)(b)).

¶ 39 Respondent argues the State did not present clear and convincing evidence to support the trial court's unfitness finding. He emphasizes the evidence showed he was rated satisfactory in several services over the course of the two identified nine-month periods, including substance abuse, domestic violence, visits, and habilitation. He suggests such evidence renders the court's finding he was unfit against the manifest weight of the evidence. This is particularly so, respondent argues, where (1) the State's evidence was largely premised upon hearsay in that no witness testified "as to actual knowledge of unfitness" relating to domestic violence, a deficiency in parenting skills, or mental health issues and (2) witnesses noted on several occasions that they could not recall or verify certain details about respondent's engagement in services, such as whether respondent had completed parenting classes before the provider discharged him for failing to absorb the material, when visitations resumed in the spring of 2024, and whether respondent's failure to attend services was in fact caused by sickness. He further argues the unfitness finding was improper where none of the required services were connected to the basis for the court's initial neglect finding, which was premised upon the minors' mother's stipulation the minors' environment was injurious to their welfare. These arguments are unconvincing.

¶ 40 Reasonable progress is assessed under an objective standard and exists when the progress being made by a parent to comply with the directives for the return of the minor is "sufficiently demonstrable and of such a quality that the court, in the *near future*, will be able to order the child returned to parental custody." (Emphasis in original.) *In re L.L.S.*, 218 Ill. App. 3d 444, 461 (1991). A parent fails to make reasonable progress toward the return of the minor when

the parent fails “to substantially fulfill his or her obligations under the service plan and correct the conditions that brought the child into care.” 750 ILCS 50/1(D)(m)(ii) (West 2024). “Importantly, there is ‘a significant difference between going through the motions, checking off the boxes, and mechanically doing what is asked of the parent and actually changing the circumstances that brought the children into care.’ ” *Baby Boy*, 2025 IL App (4th) 241427, ¶ 65 (quoting *In re Ta. T.*, 2021 IL App (4th) 200658, ¶ 56). A trial court may find a parent unfit if the court will be unable to return the minor home in the near future, despite ample time and opportunity for the parent’s compliance with the directives for the minor’s return. *Id.*

¶ 41 The trial court’s unfitness finding here was not against the manifest weight of the evidence. Initially, we reject respondent’s contentions that the State’s evidence was premised upon testimony from unreliable witnesses and hearsay. To the extent respondent argues the testimony of the State’s witnesses was not reliable because they admitted they could not recall certain details about respondent’s engagement with services, his contention amounts to a request for this court to reweigh their testimony and assess their credibility, which we will not do. Because the court, as the trier of fact, was in the best position to observe the conduct of the witnesses, it had “a degree of familiarity with the evidence that a reviewing court cannot possibly obtain.” *In re D.F.*, 201 Ill. 2d 476, 498-99 (2002). Thus, we “must not substitute [our] judgment for that of the trial court regarding the credibility of witnesses, the weight to be given to the evidence, or the inferences to be drawn.” *Id.* at 499. Accordingly, although Thomas, Hoehn, and Jolly at times admitted they could not recall certain details about respondent’s participation in services, the court was nevertheless free to find their testimony credible and rely upon it in making its unfitness determination.

¶ 42 Nor does respondent’s claim the State’s evidence constituted hearsay afford him

relief. “The principles of forfeiture apply to proceedings conducted pursuant to the Juvenile Court Act.” *In re H.D.*, 343 Ill. App. 3d 483, 489 (2003). An issue that was not objected to during trial or raised in a posttrial motion is forfeited on appeal. *In re J.C.*, 2024 IL App (4th) 240747, ¶ 29. Here, respondent raised no objection asserting any of the evidence contained in the service plans or the testimony of the State’s witnesses was inadmissible hearsay. Nor was this issue raised in a posttrial motion. Accordingly, we conclude respondent has forfeited any claim the trial court improperly relied upon hearsay evidence in making its unfitness finding. In any event, we note the service plans were admissible under section 2-18(4)(a) of the Juvenile Court Act (705 ILCS 405/2-18(4)(a) (West 2024)), which provides, in part, the following:

“Any writing, record, photograph or x-ray of any hospital or public or private agency *** made as a memorandum or record of any condition, act, transaction, occurrence or event relating to a minor in an abuse, neglect or dependency proceeding, shall be admissible in evidence as proof of that condition, act, transaction, occurrence or event, if the court finds that the document was made in the regular course of the business of the hospital or agency at the time of the act, transaction, occurrence or event, or within a reasonable time thereafter. *** All other circumstances of the making of the memorandum, record, photograph or x-ray, including lack of personal knowledge of the maker, may be proved to affect the weight to be accorded such evidence, but shall not affect its admissibility.”

As such, to the extent respondent claims the State’s witnesses lacked personal knowledge of the details reported in the service plans supporting the court’s unfitness finding, that lack of knowledge was a matter of weight rather than admissibility, such that respondent’s hearsay argument is unfounded. *In re Z.J.*, 2020 IL App (2d) 190824, ¶ 67.

¶ 43 Moreover, while respondent argues the service plans and goals were inappropriate because they were insufficiently connected to the basis for the children’s adjudication as neglected, namely, that their environment was injurious to their welfare because the conditions in their home were unsanitary, he did not participate in the administrative process for appealing or challenging them. See 89 Ill. Adm. Code § 337.70(a)(8) (2012) (stating families and children may appeal “the imposition of unnecessary services or conditions as part of a service plan”). As respondent took no step to challenge or appeal the recommended services, his attempt now to challenge the necessity of the services is forfeited. See *In re J.A.*, 2022 IL App (2d) 210545-U, ¶¶ 40-41 (concluding the respondent forfeited a challenge to the necessity of services where he failed to participate in the administrative process for appealing them).

¶ 44 Here, the evidence established the minors came into care in March 2023 on the basis their environment was injurious to their welfare. When the fitness hearing took place in May 2026, the minors had been in care for over three years. Thomas testified that by the time she took over the case in November 2023, respondent had not engaged in any mental health services, having failed to attend scheduled appointments, despite her repeatedly confirming the appointments with him and traveling to his apartment to provide transportation. Thomas also explained respondent failed to buy the minors items necessary for his visits with them and was reportedly “misusing his money,” such that he needed to be placed on a budget. Moreover, Thomas testified respondent was unsuccessfully discharged from parenting classes because the provider determined he was not comprehending the lessons, even after one-on-one sessions. She further explained respondent did not regularly communicate with her, as he would not respond to her communications for days and refused to answer his door when she came to his apartment. Accordingly, Thomas confirmed respondent was rated unsatisfactory as to cooperation, housing and income, mental health, and

parenting in the November 2023 service plan.

¶ 45 Thomas testified respondent's progress fared little better by May 2024, as he continued to rate unsatisfactory on cooperation, mental health, income, and parenting. Thomas explained respondent still failed to meet and communicate with her on a regular basis, was still required to abide by a budget, continued to miss mental health appointments, and was not engaging in parenting classes because the provider refused to reaccept him. Thomas also noted respondent was rated unsatisfactory regarding domestic violence services because he was unsuccessfully discharged after missing classes. According to Thomas, while she was assigned to the case, respondent's visits with the minors never progressed to being unsupervised, and there was never a time when DCFS was close to returning the minors due to respondent's failure to complete services.

¶ 46 Similarly, Hoehn explained that by September 2024, respondent still had not engaged in any mental health services, despite appointments being made for him and transportation being offered to him. Additionally, he was still not regularly participating in domestic violence services. Moreover, although Hoehn explained the parenting services provider reaccepted respondent after she made a new referral, respondent never engaged with the provider. Like Thomas, Hoehn testified respondent's visits with the minors never progressed to being unsupervised, and she affirmed that at no point while she was assigned to the case was DCFS close to returning the minors to respondent.

¶ 47 In light of this evidence, it was not against the manifest weight of the evidence for the trial court to find respondent was unfit on the basis he failed to make reasonable progress toward the return of the minors to his care during the nine-month periods of March 22, 2023, through December 22, 2023, and December 22, 2023, through September 22, 2024.

¶ 48 As only a single ground is required to find respondent unfit, we need not evaluate the other grounds upon which the trial court found respondent unfit. *Baby Boy*, 2025 IL App (4th) 241427, ¶ 63.

¶ 49 B. Best-Interests Findings

¶ 50 Following a finding of unfitness, the State must prove by a preponderance of the evidence it is in the minor's best interests that parental rights be terminated. *In re D.T.*, 212 Ill. 2d 347, 366 (2004). At this stage, the "issue is no longer whether parental rights *can* be terminated; the issue is whether, in light of the child's needs, parental rights *should* be terminated." (Emphases in original.) *Id.* at 364. When determining a minor's best interest, the trial court must consider the following factors

"in the context of the child's age and developmental needs:

(a) the physical safety and welfare of the child, including food, shelter, health, and clothing;

(b) the development of the child's identity;

(c) the child's background and ties, including familial, cultural, and religious;

(d) the child's sense of attachments, including:

(i) where the child actually feels love, attachment, and a sense of being valued (as opposed to where adults believe the child should feel such love, attachment, and a sense of being valued);

(ii) the child's sense of security;

(iii) the child's sense of familiarity;

(iv) continuity of affection for the child;

- (v) the least disruptive placement alternative for the child;
- (e) the child's wishes and long-term goals, including the child's wishes regarding available permanency options and the child's wishes regarding maintaining connections with parents, siblings, and other relatives;
- (f) the child's community ties, including church, school, and friends;
- (g) the child's need for permanence which includes the child's need for stability and continuity of relationships with parent figures, siblings, and other relatives;
- (h) the uniqueness of every family and child;
- (i) the risks attendant to entering and being in substitute care; and
- (j) the preferences of the persons available to care for the child, including willingness to provide permanency to the child, either through subsidized guardianship or through adoption." 705 ILCS 405/1-3(4.05) (West 2024).

On review, the appellate court will not disturb a trial court's finding that termination is in the best interests of the minor unless it is against the manifest weight of the evidence, meaning the opposite conclusion is clearly apparent. *Baby Boy*, 2025 IL App (4th) 241427, ¶¶ 63, 74.

¶ 51 The trial court's best-interests findings were not against the manifest weight of the evidence. Here, the evidence established that by the time of the best-interests hearing, both Va. J. and Vi. J. had spent nearly two of their approximately three years in foster care with their current foster family. Jolly testified the minors were excelling with this foster family, who in turn provided for all of the minors' needs, including food, shelter, clothing, and safety. Further, the evidence

