

NOTICE
Decision filed 05/07/26. The text of this decision may be changed or corrected prior to the filing of a Petition for Rehearing or the disposition of the same.

2026 IL App (5th) 250997-U
NOS. 5-25-0997, 5-25-0998, 5-25-0999

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).

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IN THE

APPELLATE COURT OF ILLINOIS

FIFTH DISTRICT

<i>In re</i> SOREN W., RANGER W., and HARLEY W.,))	Appeal from the
Minors)	Circuit Court of
)	Clark County.
(The People of the State of Illinois,)	
)	
Petitioner-Appellee,)	
)	
v.)	Nos. 23-JA-2, 23-JA-3, 23-JA-5
)	
Alexis B.,)	Honorable
)	Tracy W. Resch,
Respondent-Appellant).)	Judge, presiding.

PRESIDING JUSTICE CATES delivered the judgment of the court.
Justices McHaney and Vaughan concurred in the judgment.

ORDER

¶ 1 *Held:* We affirm the circuit court’s orders terminating the respondent’s parental rights where the evidence supports the circuit court’s findings.

¶ 2 The respondent, Alexis B. (Mother), appeals orders of the circuit court of Clark County terminating her parental rights to three of her children.¹ She challenges both the circuit court’s finding that she is an unfit parent and its finding that termination of her parental rights is in the

¹Mother filed separate appeals in each child’s case. This court ordered the three appeals consolidated under the case number assigned to the oldest child’s case, No. 5-25-0997.

best interest of the children, arguing that these findings are against the manifest weight of the evidence. We affirm.

¶ 3

I. BACKGROUND

¶ 4 Mother and her paramour, Daniel W. (Father), are the biological parents of four children—Soren W. (a girl born in May 2020), Ranger W. (a boy born in July 2021), Harley W. (a girl born in June 2023), and Wylder W. (a boy born in November 2024).² When the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) first became involved, Mother lived in Illinois with Soren and Ranger, while Father lived primarily in Iowa and spent weekends in Illinois with Mother and the children. An intact case was opened in the latter half of 2022. Soren and Ranger were taken into protective custody on February 28, 2023, primarily due to the condition of Mother’s residence. According to the dispositional report later filed with the court, a mandated reporter who visited the residence that day observed garbage, old food, and dirty diapers littering the floor throughout the residence and medication bottles lying around where the children (both toddlers) could access them. The bedroom floor was completely covered with clothing, the bathroom smelled of urine, and the residence lacked running water. Reportedly, the children were dirty, and their hair was matted with syrup.

¶ 5 On March 2, 2023, the State filed petitions for adjudication of wardship and motions for temporary custody in the following two cases: No. 23-JA-2 involving Soren and No. 23-JA-3 involving Ranger. Because the pleadings in these cases and in the subsequent case opened involving Harley (No. 23-JA-5) are, for the most part, identical, we will refer to the pleadings in No. 23-JA-2 unless otherwise noted, and we will discuss the cases collectively where possible.

²Father has separately appealed the circuit court’s ruling and is not a party to this appeal. Although cases were opened involving all four children, Wylder’s case is not before us. We will discuss matters related to Father and Wylder only as they pertain to the issues before us in this appeal.

¶ 6 In the petitions for adjudication of wardship, the State alleged that Soren and Ranger were neglected pursuant to sections 2-3 and 2-4 of the Juvenile Court Act of 1987 (Juvenile Court Act) (705 ILCS 405/2-3, 2-4 (West 2022)) due to being in an environment injurious to their welfare. The petitions alleged that the children's home environment was unhealthy and unsafe and that Mother's mental health prevented her from properly caring for them. The circuit court held a shelter care hearing the same day the petitions were filed, March 2, 2023, after which it entered temporary custody orders placing the children in the temporary custody of DCFS.

¶ 7 In June 2023, Mother gave birth to Harley, her third child with Father. Harley was taken into protective custody upon her discharge from the hospital. The State filed a petition for adjudication of wardship and a motion for temporary custody on June 27, 2023. The petition alleged that Harley was neglected pursuant to sections 2-3 and 2-4 of the Juvenile Court Act (705 ILCS 405/2-3, 2-4 (West 2022)) due to an environment injurious to her welfare in that (1) her home environment was unhealthy and unsafe, (2) Mother's mental health prevented her from properly caring for Harley, and (3) Harley's siblings were in DCFS care. After a shelter care hearing that same day, the circuit court entered an order placing Harley in the temporary custody of DCFS.

¶ 8 After multiple continuances, the circuit court held an adjudicatory hearing in all three cases on August 24, 2023, and entered adjudicatory orders on August 29, 2023. The circuit court found that the children were neglected due to an environment injurious to their welfare and that the neglect was inflicted by Mother.

¶ 9 On October 5, 2023, the matter proceeded to a dispositional hearing. On October 16, 2023, the circuit court entered a dispositional order in Soren's case finding that both parents were unfit and unable to care for her and making Soren a ward of the court. The following day, the circuit

court entered dispositional orders containing these same findings and making Ranger and Harley wards of the court.

¶ 10 The first permanency hearing in these cases took place on April 4, 2024. The circuit court entered permanency orders on April 12, 2024, finding that both parents failed to make either reasonable efforts or reasonable and substantial progress toward the return of the children. The circuit court set a goal of return home within 12 months.

¶ 11 DCFS filed a permanency report on September 26, 2024, recommending that the goal of return home within 12 months be maintained. However, due to the length of time the children had been in care, DCFS requested a short review period and recommended that the next permanency hearing be set within 60 days.

¶ 12 After holding a permanency hearing on October 3, 2024, the circuit court made a docket entry containing its written findings. The circuit court found that Mother failed to make either reasonable efforts or reasonable and substantial progress toward the return of the children and that Father made reasonable efforts toward that goal but did not make reasonable and substantial progress. The circuit court maintained the goal of return home within 12 months and set the next permanency review hearing for December 5, 2024.

¶ 13 The next permanency hearing was held on December 5, 2024, and the circuit court entered permanency orders on December 20, 2024. The circuit court found that Mother again failed to make either reasonable efforts or reasonable and substantial progress toward the return of the children and that Father made reasonable efforts but failed to make reasonable and substantial progress. The goal was changed to substitute care pending determination of termination of parental rights.

¶ 14 On June 4, 2025, the State filed motions to terminate parental rights, alleging that both parents were unfit on the following two grounds: (1) failure to maintain a reasonable degree of interest, concern, or responsibility for the children’s welfare (750 ILCS 50/1(D)(b) (West 2024)); and (2) failure to make reasonable progress toward the return of the children during any nine-month period following adjudication of neglect (750 ILCS 50/1(D)(m)(ii) (West 2024)). The petitions identified the nine-month period between February 7, 2024, and November 7, 2024, for purposes of the latter allegation.

¶ 15 The matter came for a previously scheduled permanency hearing the following day. The circuit court entered orders on June 11, 2025, maintaining a goal of substitute care pending determination of termination of parental rights and again finding that Mother failed to make either reasonable efforts or reasonable and substantial progress and that Father made reasonable efforts but did not make reasonable and substantial progress.

¶ 16 The hearing on the State’s motions to terminate parental rights began on August 28, 2025. The State’s first witness was Jenna Kraus, a DCFS caseworker assigned to the family when Soren and Ranger entered care. Kraus testified that Soren and Ranger entered care in February 2023 and Harley entered care in June 2023. She noted that the parties’ fourth child, Wylder, was also in care, with a case that opened in November 2024. The reason the children entered care was environmental neglect. Kraus explained that DCFS received a report that the home where they lived was “very dirty” with trash and dirty diapers all over the home and poisonous products left within reach of the children. In addition, the children were dirty and had not been bathed.

¶ 17 Kraus next testified concerning the service plans in place during the pertinent nine-month period. Mother was required to engage in parenting education; utilize the skills she learned during her visits with the children; work with a housing advocate; attend all her obstetrician appointments;

maintain income to support the children; keep her home clean and free of safety hazards; engage in domestic violence services; engage in mental health counseling and follow any recommendations; engage in psychiatric treatment, including taking her prescribed medication; and engage in habilitation services. Kraus explained that habilitation services involved meeting with a worker from Addus³ to help parents find community resources and learn skills such as budgeting.

¶ 18 Kraus testified that Mother cooperated with the Addus worker on habilitation services, but she did not cooperate with the housing advocate, and she did not complete parenting.⁴ In addition, Mother did not attend all of her obstetrician appointments. In particular, Kraus noted that Mother “missed her induction date” and gave birth to Wylder in Iowa “knowing that he had several or could have several complications with his kidney.” Kraus noted that Mother became employed only in “the past few months” before the hearing, thus failing to comply with the requirement that she maintain an income to support the children.

¶ 19 Kraus stated that Mother did not maintain safe housing. She explained that, during the relevant time period, Mother lived with friends in a recreational vehicle (RV) that was in worse condition than the home she lived in when the children were taken into care.

¶ 20 Kraus noted that Mother eventually completed domestic violence services, but she was not sure whether Mother completed this service before the end of the relevant nine-month period.

³Addus is also the agency that provided supervision for Mother and Father’s visits with the children.

⁴We note that following Kraus’s testimony, the Addus worker testified that she provided one-on-one parenting classes to Mother and that Mother participated in these classes. Although it is not entirely clear on the record before us, it does not appear that Mother was referred to any other parenting classes. According to a May 2025 permanency report, Mother was eventually referred for a parenting capacity assessment, which she did not complete prior to the hearing. The same report indicates that Mother took a few parenting classes offered through a facility called Choices but does not specify whether Mother was required to engage in that service. The goal had been changed at that point, and the record does not contain a service plan applicable to this time period.

Kraus testified that Mother completed the required psychiatric evaluation and attended all psychiatric appointments during the nine-month period. However, she did not complete mental health services. Kraus explained that Mother was discharged unsuccessfully from counseling twice, and she did not reengage until approximately October or November of 2024.

¶ 21 Kraus testified that Mother and Father were in a relationship for most of the nine-month period at issue, but they separated for a time. Mother obtained an order of protection against Father in approximately March of 2024 based on allegations that he was physically abusive. Mother also alleged that Father cheated on her and lied to her. However, Father admitted to violating the order of protection, and Kraus was aware that he attended obstetrician appointments with Mother while the order was in place. Mother was also hospitalized twice for psychiatric treatment, which she attributed to domestic violence by Father.

¶ 22 Kraus testified that both parents remained in contact with her throughout the life of the case. Sometimes they were cooperative, but other times they were not. She stated that at times, they made threats and sent harassing text messages and emails, thus making it unsafe to visit their home to assess its safety. Asked for examples of these threats, Kraus testified that Mother told her that she and her supervisor deserved to be dead. Mother also told Kraus that she remembered people's phone numbers, addresses, and license plates. In addition, Mother threatened to "blast the Addus worker on social media" if she did not "change her attitude" toward Mother. She noted that the threats she described took place after the nine-month period elapsed.

¶ 23 On cross-examination, Kraus clarified her testimony concerning Mother's engagement with domestic violence services, explaining that as of late September 2024, Mother had not yet begun the program. She reiterated her previous testimony that Mother reengaged with counseling in September or October of 2024. After refreshing her memory, however, Kraus testified that

Mother completed an assessment with David McIntyre at Life Links on July 25, 2024, and began counseling in August 2024.

¶ 24 Kraus further testified that Mother consistently visited with the children during the relevant nine-month period. With regard to Mother's failure to maintain an income, Kraus noted that Mother indicated she was having trouble finding a job because Father burned all of her belongings. This conversation occurred shortly after the parties separated, in approximately April or May of 2024.

¶ 25 In response to questioning by the guardian *ad litem* (GAL), Kraus testified that Mother did not make reasonable progress toward the goal of providing the children with a safe living environment between February 7, 2024, and November 7, 2024. When asked to elaborate, Kraus first noted that there were issues involving domestic violence and an order of protection. After noting that Father lived in Iowa half the time and that Mother also moved out of the home for a while, she stated, "It just—it wasn't consistent and safe for—for children." Regarding the condition of the home itself, Kraus testified that it had improved, but it was still cluttered. She further testified that she made multiple visits to the home, some of which were announced in advance while others were not. The home was often safe for children when she announced her visits in advance, but with the unannounced visits, "there were times that it still wasn't always safe."

¶ 26 The circuit court questioned Kraus about the order of protection entered against Father in March 2024. She testified that Mother told her she obtained an order of protection because Father hit her. Kraus subsequently learned that the order of protection was "dropped" in October 2024 "due to discrepant testimony." She testified that although it was difficult to figure out which of Mother's allegations against Father were true and which were not, she believed that some abuse

occurred because Mother was admitted to Sarah Bush Lincoln Hospital for psychiatric treatment twice, in October 2023 and May 2024. On cross-examination by Father's attorney, however, Kraus identified respondent Father's Exhibit A as a May 2024 discharge record from Sarah Bush Lincoln Hospital and noted that Father was not mentioned anywhere in the record. The exhibit was later entered into evidence without objection.

¶ 27 The State's next witness was Kristan Williams, the Addus worker who supervised visitation with the children. Williams was assigned to supervise visits in this case when it opened in 2023. She testified that visits were always supervised. Initially, visits took place twice per week at a church in the community. However, visits were subsequently moved to a DCFS office after Father "got verbally abusive [toward Williams] during one of the visits." Asked to elaborate, Williams explained that Father became agitated when she asked him to change Harley's diaper. Williams did not recall when this incident occurred. Williams further testified that although Mother and Father initially visited the children together, they visited separately after the order of protection was entered. At the time of the hearing, each parent had a two-hour visit with the children once a month.

¶ 28 Williams testified that when Soren and Ranger first came into care, "[t]hey were pretty much nonverbal." Soren was between 2½ and 3 years old at the time, and Ranger was between 1½ and 2 years old. Williams stated that the children "just ran wild." They threw food and rode on any object they could find, and it took two people to get the children into their car seats. Williams testified, however, that by the time of the hearing, their behavior had changed dramatically. She stated that they were generally well-behaved children, and they even buckled themselves into their car seats.

¶ 29 Asked if the parents cooperated with her, Williams stated that Father was more cooperative than Mother. She testified that Mother became “very agitated” any time Williams said anything Mother did not like hearing. For example, Mother canceled a scheduled visit with the children the morning before the visit. When she explained that she canceled the visit because her dog was sick and needed emergency veterinary care, Williams pointed out that Mother canceled the visit before the dog got sick. In response, Mother said she did not want to visit the children that day because her teeth hurt. When Williams asked Mother about a court appearance scheduled the same day involving a traffic ticket, Mother became angry and sent an email to DCFS claiming to feel unsafe around Williams.

¶ 30 Williams described other concerning incidents involving Mother. She stated that at one point, Mother befriended a couple and stayed in an RV parked on their driveway. While the friendship lasted, Mother called the couple “Mom” and “Dad,” and she got upset when DCFS would not allow them to participate in visits with the children with her. She later had a falling-out with the couple, after which she said they were “horrible people” and that she would never want them near her children. A similar scenario played out with another couple Mother befriended after her falling-out with the first couple.

¶ 31 In addition to supervising visits with the children, Williams provided parenting training. She explained that she sometimes met with Mother and Father one-on-one, but she also addressed parenting skills during their visits with the children. Asked if Mother and Father implemented the skills they learned, she replied, “Briefly. For a few visits, they will.” She noted, for example, that she explained to them that it would be better to have the children sit down for a meal at lunchtime rather than allowing them to snack throughout their visits. Mother and Father followed this advice

for a few sessions and then reverted to their old habits. In addition, any time the children misbehaved during visits, neither parent disciplined them by imposing a time-out.

¶ 32 Asked if Mother and Father demonstrated “concern or attachment with the children,” Williams replied, “No, I—I—I do not see that.” She stated that they occasionally hugged the children, but most of the time, they just watched the children play during visits rather than engaging.

¶ 33 On cross-examination, Williams testified that Mother brought snacks for the children to visits and set them out on the table for the children. However, Williams was concerned that Mother allowed the children to snack throughout their two-hour visit rather than serving them lunch because the children were still hungry when they returned to daycare after their visits. She noted that the visits were from 10 a.m. to noon.

¶ 34 In response to questioning by the GAL, Williams testified that she supervised most of the visits with the children and estimated that she had observed more than 100 visits between Mother and the children. She reiterated her previous testimony that both parents typically just watched the children play during visits. She further testified that neither parent asked the children many questions during the visits, but she noted that Mother sometimes commented on a picture one of the children was drawing or coloring. Finally, Williams testified that neither parent asked her how Soren was doing in school or how the children were doing in their foster homes. She noted, however, that Mother sometimes inquired about the children’s medical appointments.

¶ 35 The State’s final witness was Tina Sebok, a housing advocate with Webster Cantrell Youth Advocacy. She explained that her job as a housing advocate was to help clients find “adequate and safe housing.” Her services involved helping clients find affordable housing if they chose to move or helping them find resources to make their current home safe if they chose to remain, including

contacting the landlord to make sure necessary repairs were made. Other services included helping clients with budgeting and housekeeping.

¶ 36 Mother was referred to Sebok by DCFS in September 2022 while an intact case was open. At that time, Mother lived with Soren and Ranger in a rented two-bedroom trailer, and Father was home with Mother and the children every other weekend. Mother lived in the same trailer at the time of the hearing.

¶ 37 Sebok described her concerns with the condition of the residence before the children entered care. She explained that there was garbage throughout the home, with stacks of animal feces and dirty diapers. She further testified that “with the overflowing garbage were nests and other insects.” Sebok testified that she and the DCFS caseworker assigned to the family during the intact phase helped Mother clean the trailer a few times. Each time, the residence remained clean “for a week or—or so, but that it would unfortunately revert back.”

¶ 38 Sebok made a hotline report to DCFS regarding the condition of the home in February 2023. At that time, the shower was inaccessible due to items that were “piled up” in the bathroom, the washing machine was broken, and pill bottles were left on the floor within reach of the children. In addition, something was stuck in Soren’s hair and Mother said that she would shave Soren’s head to deal with the problem. The children were taken into protective custody after Sebok made the report.

¶ 39 Sebok testified that she visited the home approximately once every two weeks, both before and after the children entered care. Some of her visits were announced in advance, while others were unannounced. Mother did not consistently cooperate with these visits. Sometimes, she overslept or was not home when Sebok arrived. Other times, there were scheduling conflicts or emergencies. In addition, Mother lived elsewhere for a time.

¶ 40 Sebok next testified about the condition of the residence after the children entered care. She stated that sometimes the home was organized and clothes were put away, “but for the most part the trash was still overflowing. There was still animal feces present. And it was still very much the same.” She testified that the longest period of time the condition of the home was not concerning or unsafe for children was approximately three weeks. When specifically asked if the condition of the home improved, got worse, or remained the same between February and November of 2024, Sebok replied, “I would say it probably stayed about the same.”

¶ 41 Asked to describe the conditions that led her to conclude the home was unsafe for the children, Sebok testified, “There was a crockpot full of maggots.” She also observed ants and gnats inside the home and trash stacked high on the porch. However, she could not recall whether she made these specific observations before or after the children entered care.

¶ 42 Sebok noted that Mother’s ability to find different housing was limited by her low income. In addition, Mother was ineligible for public housing due to a prior eviction from public housing.

¶ 43 On cross-examination, Sebok testified that the last time she saw the inside of Mother’s residence was approximately two months before the hearing. She further testified that some of her visits were “preempted” by Mother’s scheduled visits with the children, which was common if the visits with the children were rescheduled.

¶ 44 Upon questioning by the GAL, Sebok noted that she was on medical leave for a portion of the relevant nine-month period, specifically, September to November of 2024. Sebok was not sure how many times she visited Mother’s residence between February 7, 2024, and the beginning of her medical leave. However, she testified that she visited roughly once every two weeks. She agreed with the GAL that this amounted to approximately 12 to 14 visits in total during the relevant

time period. Sebok testified that the residence met minimal safety standards on only three of those occasions.

¶ 45 After Sebok returned to work late in November 2024, she again attempted to visit the residence every other week. She estimated, however, that she was only able to visit approximately once a month for a total of five visits between November 2024 and the date of the hearing. She testified that during all five of those visits, the home was in the same unsanitary condition it was in when the children entered care.

¶ 46 Sebok testified that nearly every time she visited the residence, Mother was the only parent present. However, she did have some contact with Father via text messaging. The GAL asked what Sebok addressed with Father in those text messages. In response, she testified that they discussed budgeting and income information as well as contacting Orkin to address “a bug situation.” When asked if that contact with Orkin ever occurred, Sebok replied, “No, we unfortunately, due to the budgets that we were provided with, they did deny any funding requests.” She did not know whether Mother or Father followed up with Orkin independently. She was not asked to elaborate on what type of funding requests were involved or the cost of Orkin’s services.

¶ 47 The State asked the circuit court to take judicial notice of the service plans and permanency orders on file. After asking the State to clarify the number of service plans that had been filed in each child’s case, the circuit court stated, “The Court will take judicial notice of the reports and the Service Plans on file in these cases.” Mother did not object.⁵ All parties indicated they had no further evidence to present, and the hearing was continued for oral arguments.

⁵We note that, although Mother does not challenge this ruling on appeal, we decline to consider the permanency reports as they contain hearsay statements that are not admissible during the fitness stage of termination proceedings. See *In re M.D.*, 2022 IL App (4th) 210288, ¶¶ 81-82.

¶ 48 The fitness hearing resumed on September 9, 2025, with oral argument. The State began its argument by observing, “This is a case that began with concerns about the cleanliness and safety of the home, often among the more readily correctable conditions.” The State argued, however, that more than two years later, “these same conditions persist.” The State next reviewed the requirements of the service plans, and argued that Mother was rated as unsatisfactory for numerous services on the service plans filed in April and September of 2024. The State emphasized that neither parent had made enough progress to have unsupervised visits with the children and noted that the circuit court found that they failed to make reasonable and substantial progress toward the return of the children in permanency orders entered in April and December of 2024.

¶ 49 In her argument, Mother first highlighted the evidence that she participated in the parenting education offered to her through Addus. She further noted that she completed domestic violence services, although she acknowledged that there was “some ambiguity” as to whether she completed this requirement before the end of the nine-month period.

¶ 50 Mother addressed visitation supervisor Williams’s testimony regarding her practice of putting out food for the children to snack on throughout visits. Although Williams gave this as an example of Mother failing to put into practice the parenting skills she learned, Mother argued that it “doesn’t seem like that’s something too major of the deal.” In addressing the fact that she had not yet progressed to unsupervised visits with the children, Mother argued that there was nothing in the record to indicate what DCFS required her to do before it would allow unsupervised visits. She highlighted information in a November 26, 2024, permanency report indicating that her parenting skills were improving and testimony that Mother consistently attended visits and brought everything the children needed.

¶ 51 Turning to the issue of housing, Mother urged the court to consider her “financial barriers.” She highlighted Sebok’s testimony about efforts to alleviate a problem with insects and the fact that Mother was denied assistance to pay Orkin’s services.

¶ 52 The GAL emphasized evidence of Mother’s hostility toward DCFS. He argued that Mother’s rejection and contradiction of the help she was offered toward the goal of reunification “is a major factor” in failing to maintain a reasonable degree of interest, concern, or responsibility for the children’s welfare.

¶ 53 In ruling from the bench, the circuit court first addressed the condition of Mother’s residence. The circuit court noted that when the children came into care, the residence was “extraordinarily filthy, unsanitary, unhealthy, and unsafe,” and further noted that housing advocate Sebok “observed the same kind of conditions” at most of her visits to the residence during the nine-month period at issue. The circuit court found that this failure to rectify the conditions in the home constituted both a failure to make reasonable progress and a failure to maintain a reasonable degree of interest, concern, or responsibility for the welfare of the children.

¶ 54 The circuit court noted that both parties completed some of their service plan requirements. The circuit court stated, however, that “the glaring fact remains” that the instability and disorder in their lives was “completely inconsistent with the needs of the children.”

¶ 55 The circuit court further found that both parents were hostile toward their service providers and, on occasion, obstructed their work. In addition, the circuit court noted that the parties provided “inconsistent” information. For example, Mother obtained an order of protection against Father, but it was later dismissed at her request when she recanted her testimony in support of the order of protection.

¶ 56 The circuit court concluded by finding both parents unfit on both of the grounds asserted by the State. On September 12, 2025, the circuit court entered a written “Finding of Parental Unfitness” in each of the three cases. In the written findings, the circuit court stated that the allegations of the motions to terminate parental rights were true and that Mother and Father were unfit for the reasons asserted therein.

¶ 57 DCFS filed a best interest report on November 10, 2025. The report indicated that Soren and Ranger were placed together in the same licensed foster home since they were taken into care in February 2023. Both children were healthy and well-adjusted in their home and appeared to have formed a bond with their foster mother. The report noted that Harley was placed in a foster home with her younger brother, Wylder. She, too, was healthy and well-adjusted and shared a bond with her foster parents. DCFS recommended that terminating the parental rights of Mother and Father would be in the best interest of the three children.

¶ 58 On November 19, 2025, the circuit court held a hearing on the best interests of the children. Kraus again testified for the State. We note that she reiterated much of the testimony she gave at the fitness hearing. We will discuss only those portions of her testimony that differed from her previous testimony.

¶ 59 Kraus testified that the case was assigned to a different caseworker in September 2025 due to “serious threats and safety issues.” She noted that on one occasion, Mother said she would “be willing to do 25 to life for her children.” On another occasion, Mother sent Kraus an email saying that she knew Kraus’s children.

¶ 60 Asked if she had any concerns about Mother and Father’s ability to care for the children, Kraus replied, “My biggest concern would be [Mother’s] mental health stability. She’s unable to regulate her emotions.” Kraus was also concerned due to allegations of domestic violence, the

instability in the parties' relationship, and the fact that Mother was unable to provide for the children when Father was not in the picture. Kraus testified that Father was charged with driving under the influence while the case was pending and that Mother was recently charged with possession of a firearm without a firearm owner identification (FOID) card after she threatened a delivery driver with a gun.

¶ 61 Kraus testified that all three children were placed in licensed foster homes with unrelated individuals. Soren and Ranger lived together with their foster mother, Caitlin L., and Harley lived with her foster parents, Andy and Robyn D. Kraus visited the children in their foster homes monthly. She testified that in both homes, the children had their own bedrooms and “[p]lenty of toys.” The children were up to date with medical appointments and were “very well cared for” by their foster parents. Based on Kraus’s observations, the children were bonded with their foster parents. Kraus had no concerns with the children’s current placements.

¶ 62 Kraus believed that removing the children from their current placements would be traumatic. She explained that Harley had been in care her entire life while Soren and Ranger had been in care for roughly half of their lives. All three children were happy and thriving in their current placements. Kraus noted that Soren was in counseling “to address some of her childhood trauma.” She opined that it would be in the best interest of all three children to terminate parental rights, thus providing them with stability.

¶ 63 On cross-examination, Kraus testified that Mother and Father were in couples therapy to address the instability in their relationship. However, she did not know how much progress they had made. She further testified that Mother completed domestic violence services.

¶ 64 The GAL questioned Kraus about Mother’s and Father’s visits with the children. Kraus observed “a small amount” of visits herself, and she reviewed the Addus worker’s reports

concerning the other visits. She testified that prior to the change in goal, when visits took place weekly, both parents attended visits consistently. They brought toys and snacks for the children. However, Mother “struggle[d] to parent all of the children together.” Kraus noted that sometimes, Soren wanted to visit with Father but did not want to see Mother.

¶ 65 In the visits she observed personally, Kraus did not see much bonding or affection between the parents and the children. However, she generally did not see any negative interactions either. She did not believe there would be any negative impact on the children if parental rights were terminated, even if it meant the children no longer had any contact with their biological parents.

¶ 66 The State’s next witness was Robyn D., Harley’s foster mother. Robyn testified that she and her husband, Andy, owned a three-bedroom house with a large yard. Their household consisted of Robyn, Andy, Harley, and Harley’s one-year-old brother, Wylder. Harley and Wylder were each placed with Robyn and Andy when they were a few days old. Harley called Robyn “Mama” or “Mommy,” and she called Andy “Da-da.”

¶ 67 Robyn testified that she and her husband provided Harley with food, clothing, and shelter, and took her to all her medical appointments. She stated that Harley did not yet attend school. Robyn’s mother provided daycare to Harley and Wylder in her home along with Robyn’s nephew and godson.

¶ 68 Robyn further testified that Harley made friends with children in the community, including the next-door neighbor’s child, the son of one of Robyn’s friends, and a girl in Harley’s gymnastics class. In addition, Harley formed attachments to Robyn’s extended family, including her parents, nephew, grandmother, and sister.

¶ 69 Robyn next testified that Harley never spoke about her biological parents. Sometimes, Harley cried at handoff because she did not want to attend visits. However, Robyn did not observe Harley acting out after visits with Mother and Father.

¶ 70 Finally, Robyn testified about Harley's relationship with her siblings. She explained that after visits with Mother and Father, Harley had sibling visits with Soren and Ranger. The two foster families arranged for the children to get together outside of their scheduled sibling visits as well. Robyn stated that she kept in touch with Soren and Ranger's foster mother, Caitlin, and she intended to continue that contact after parental rights were terminated. Robyn was aware that Father had additional older children. Asked if Harley ever talked about "her other siblings," Robyn replied, "Not really."

¶ 71 The State's final witness was Caitlin L., Soren and Ranger's foster mother. She testified that Soren and Ranger lived with her in a five-bedroom home she owned. The home had a fenced yard with a trampoline and a "play structure." Their household consisted solely of Caitlin, Soren, and Ranger. Both children always called Caitlin "Mom."

¶ 72 At the time of the hearing, Soren was five years and five months old, and Ranger was four years and three months old. When they were first placed with Caitlin, Soren was 33 months old, and Ranger was 20 months old. Caitlin testified about the children's condition when they arrived. Soren "was practically nonverbal" and was "very dirty" with stained clothing and bruises on her arm that looked like the result of being "grabbed hard." Ranger was very small for his age with grayish skin and sunken eyes. Caitlin noted that he wore 12-month-old clothing even though he was 20 months old. In addition, Ranger's head was shaved. The caseworker told Caitlin that Mother shaved his head because fly paper got stuck in his hair.

¶ 73 By the time of the hearing, Soren was in kindergarten and Ranger was in pre-K. Soren was placed in the highest-achieving kindergarten class, and Ranger was also doing well in school. Caitlin noted that both children were above peer level.

¶ 74 Caitlin provided Soren and Ranger with food, clothing, and shelter, and took them to all their medical appointments. Both children had friends in the community from school, daycare, church, and the neighborhood. They were involved in activities such as soccer, basketball, swimming, and gymnastics. The children also formed attachments to Caitlin's extended family. She testified that they saw her parents, who lived in California, "at least five times a year." The children called Caitlin's parents "Gam" and "Bop-Pop." In addition, the children spent time with Caitlin's brother and his wife and son. Caitlin noted that Ranger referred to her nephew as his best friend.

¶ 75 Caitlin was asked how the children had developed in her care. She testified that Soren went from being nonverbal "to being incredibly talkative." Soren was much more developed both socially and emotionally than she was when she first came into care. Caitlin noted that Soren went to therapy to address the adverse experiences she had early in life. Caitlin testified that when Ranger first came into care, he was diagnosed with failure-to-thrive syndrome, but by the time of the hearing, he was of average size for his age. Ranger's social and emotional development were likewise consistent with his age.

¶ 76 Asked if the children ever talked about their biological parents, Caitlin indicated that they mentioned Mother and Father "sporadically, but it's not consistently." She further testified, "There's been a significant drop off in questions within the last year and a half. And typically the questions only come immediately [following] a visit." Caitlin noted that after a recent visit, Soren asked why Mother's teeth were falling out and Ranger asked why Father does not play with him.

In addition, both children asked about the meanings of cuss words they heard Mother use during the visit.

¶ 77 Caitlin further testified that the children sometimes regressed behaviorally after visits with Mother and Father. For example, they sometimes hit and kicked each other, kicked a wall, or yelled at each other, and Ranger, who was otherwise fully potty trained, sometimes urinated or defecated in his clothing.

¶ 78 Regarding sibling relationships, Caitlin testified that Soren and Ranger were attached to each other. They sometimes spoke about their younger siblings, Harley and Wylder. Caitlin noted that the two foster mothers arranged for the four children to spend time together in addition to their DCFS-mandated sibling visits.

¶ 79 Caitlin believed that Soren and Ranger were attached to her and felt loved in her home. She explained that they were affectionate toward her and told her they loved her. In addition, the children asked about her when they were at school. She intended to adopt them.

¶ 80 At the request of the State, the circuit court took judicial notice of the best interest report and the permanency reports. Neither parent objected.

¶ 81 Kinsey Romack, a case manager and therapist at Life Links Counseling Center, testified on Mother's behalf. Romack began working with Mother in July 2025 after a referral from another Life Links therapist. She explained that there were two "sides" to Life Links, and she worked on the "community support" side. Mother's therapist referred her to Romack because he wanted to be sure Mother was getting all appropriate support.

¶ 82 Romack testified that she performed an assessment called an "IM CANS" when Mother was first referred to her. This assessment involves looking at a client's symptoms, needs, and strengths, and it leads to a diagnosis and treatment plan. Romack diagnosed Mother with post-

traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and developed a treatment plan that included goals for helping Mother regulate her emotions and “get done daily activities as well.”

¶ 83 Asked what she had observed over the months she worked with Mother, Romack testified that Mother reported being better able to regulate her emotions and being “able to get a lot more of her daily activities *** done as far as cleaning around the house.” Romack believed that Mother was better at regulating her emotions than she was when she began counseling her. She noted that Mother’s treatment plan included support to help her regulate her emotions. Specifically, Mother could reach out to Romack for help, and if Romack was unavailable, she could contact the “crisis team.” Romack further testified that Mother reported “looking forward to her sessions with her children.”

¶ 84 On cross-examination by the State, Romack testified that she met with Mother for one hour a week. She acknowledged that she never visited Mother’s residence and that her only information about Mother’s ability to manage her daily affairs was what Mother told her. She further acknowledged that her only information concerning Mother’s ability to regulate her emotions came from the crisis team and from Mother herself. In response to the GAL’s question, Romack testified that Mother did not discuss her parenting difficulties during their sessions.

¶ 85 Mother testified on her own behalf. She identified “Respondent Mother’s Exhibit A,” a group of photographs of her and the children. It was admitted into evidence without objection. Mother identified and described the individual photographs in the exhibit, which showed her interacting with the children. One photograph showed Mother juggling to entertain Harley, and other photographs showed her playing with the children or sitting with them on the swings in the park. Mother testified that Soren and Ranger liked to play a game where she pretended to fall asleep and they pretended to be her pillow and blanket, while Harley liked to play on her own.

Soren also liked to style Mother's hair. Finally, Mother testified that she loved her children and wanted them to come home.

¶ 86 On cross-examination by the State, Mother testified that she lived in the same residence she lived in when the children were taken into care. Regarding her relationship with Father, Mother testified that he worked in Iowa during the week, but he came "home every weekend." She acknowledged that Father had a wife in Iowa. Father also had four older children, who ranged in age from 37 to 17 years. She testified that she met Father online approximately seven years earlier when she was 18 years old and he was 48 years old.

¶ 87 Mother testified that her extended family lived in Clay County, Illinois, including her biological father, her stepmother, and her father's family. She stated that she did not see them very often, explaining that she was the only adult child in her family and that her father and his wife were busy raising their children.

¶ 88 Mother acknowledged that Soren and Ranger had been in care for nearly three years and that prior to that, an intact case was open for approximately six to nine months. She further acknowledged that she was charged with a firearm offense while the case was pending. Mother denied threatening her DCFS caseworker, but she admitted, "I have not said some nice things."

¶ 89 On cross-examination by the GAL, Mother opined that termination of her parental rights would not be in the children's best interest. She believed that it was in their best interest to be placed together with "two loving parents" rather than "separated into two different homes away from [their] siblings and [their] mom and [their] dad." She noted that she had "done all [her] therapies" and stayed on her prescribed medications. Initially, Mother stated that the children were doing "great for being in foster care." She then testified, however, that she had concerns about Harley's nails not being properly trimmed and the foster parents failing to follow car seat safety

guidelines. She further testified that Soren and Ranger called her a “bad mommy” because Caitlin told them that is what she was.

¶ 90 Announcing its ruling from the bench, the circuit court first noted that it had considered all the best interest factors. The circuit court stated that Soren and Ranger had been placed together with their foster mother since they came into care in February 2023, Harley was placed with her foster parents since she was discharged from the hospital after her birth, and Harley’s younger brother was also placed with her. The circuit court found that all three children were thriving in the care of their foster parents, who provided them with a safe and nurturing environment. The circuit court further found that the children bonded with their foster parents and that it would be traumatic to remove them from their foster homes. The circuit court noted that Harley had been in the same foster home for her entire life, while Soren and Ranger had been in their foster home for half of their lives.

¶ 91 The circuit court found that the foster parents had support networks, while the biological parents did not. Moreover, the children were clean and healthy in their foster parents’ care, “in contrast to their condition when they arrived in foster care.” The circuit court stated that after being involved in a relationship for six or seven years, Mother and Father had failed to establish a stable and nurturing home environment where the children could thrive, “either individually or jointly.” The circuit court found that the chaotic and unstable relationship between the parties contributed to their inability to establish a stable and nurturing home.

¶ 92 Turning its attention to the conditions of Mother’s residence, the circuit court highlighted the evidence that during periodic unannounced inspections, DCFS workers encountered conditions similar to those that led to the children coming into care. The circuit court also found that both Mother and Father obstructed DCFS’s efforts and that there was no reason to believe that

unsupervised visits would be possible any time in the near future. The circuit court concluded by finding that termination of parental rights was in the best interest of the children.

¶ 93 On November 21, 2025, the circuit court entered orders terminating the parental rights of Mother and Father to all three children. Attached to the orders were factual findings from the best interest hearing. With respect to Mother’s threats to DCFS workers, the circuit court found that these threats “occurred in 2025—this is not old behavior; it is relatively recent.” The written findings otherwise essentially reiterated the findings the circuit court made during its oral pronouncement.⁶ Mother filed a timely notice of appeal on December 9, 2025.

¶ 94

II. ANALYSIS

¶ 95 On appeal, Mother argues that (1) the circuit court’s findings of unfitness on both asserted grounds were against the manifest weight of the evidence, and (2) the circuit court’s finding that termination of her parental rights was in the children’s best interest was likewise against the manifest weight of the evidence. We disagree.

¶ 96

A. Findings of Unfitness

¶ 97 Involuntary termination of parental rights involves a two-step process. First, the State must prove that the respondent parent is unfit by clear and convincing evidence. *In re Baby Boy*, 2025 IL App (4th) 241427, ¶ 62. If the circuit court finds a parent unfit, the proceedings progress to the second step, during which the State must prove by a preponderance of the evidence that termination of parental rights is in the children’s best interests. *In re Baby Boy*, 2025 IL App (4th) 241427, ¶ 73.

⁶We note that, although all three termination orders reference the written findings, they were not included in the record in Ranger’s case. However, the written findings themselves list all three case numbers. Moreover, aside from the detail concerning the timing of Mother’s threats to DCFS workers, the written findings merely reiterate the circuit court’s earlier oral findings.

¶ 98 We give great deference to the circuit court’s unfitness findings because that court had the opportunity to observe and evaluate the parties and their testimony. *In re Daphnie E.*, 368 Ill. App. 3d 1052, 1064 (2006). As such, we will reverse a finding of unfitness only if it is against the manifest weight of the evidence. *In re Baby Boy*, 2025 IL App (4th) 241427, ¶ 63. A decision is against the manifest weight of the evidence “if the opposite conclusion is apparent or when findings appear to be unreasonable, arbitrary, or not based on the evidence presented.” *In re Za. G.*, 2023 IL App (5th) 220793, ¶ 31.

¶ 99 Here, the State asserted two grounds for unfitness, alleging that Mother (1) failed to maintain a reasonable degree of interest, concern, or responsibility for the children’s welfare (750 ILCS 50/1(D)(b) (West 2024)); and (2) failed to make reasonable progress towards the return of the children to her custody during any nine-month period after adjudication of neglect, specifically the period between February 7, 2024, and November 7, 2024 (750 ILCS 50/1(D)(m)(ii) (West 2024)). Because a parent may be found unfit if the State proves any one of the statutory grounds for unfitness by clear and convincing evidence, we will affirm the circuit court’s decision if the evidence supports its finding as to either of these grounds. *In re Baby Boy*, 2025 IL App (4th) 241427, ¶¶ 63-64.

¶ 100 Failure to maintain a reasonable degree of interest, concern, or responsibility for the children’s welfare and failure to make reasonable progress toward their return are distinct grounds for unfitness involving different standards, and the circuit court found that the same evidence supported findings of unfitness on both grounds. Mother does not distinguish between the grounds in her arguments on appeal. Under the facts and circumstances of this case, we agree with the circuit court that much of the pertinent evidence supports its findings of unfitness on both grounds.

¶ 101 In determining whether a parent maintained a reasonable degree of interest, concern, or responsibility for the welfare of the children, our “focus is on the parent’s reasonable efforts more so than the parent’s success.” *In re Za. G.*, 2023 IL App (5th) 220793, ¶ 36. Thus, we must consider any circumstances that made it difficult for the parent to demonstrate the requisite reasonable degree of interest, concern, or responsibility. *In re Za. G.*, 2023 IL App (5th) 220793, ¶ 36.

¶ 102 Significantly, however, a parent cannot avoid a finding of unfitness by showing *some* interest, concern, or responsibility; the question is whether the parent’s interest, concern, or responsibility is *reasonable*. *In re M.I.*, 2016 IL 120232, ¶ 30. In addition, because the statutory language is disjunctive, any one of the three elements may provide a basis for a finding of unfitness. *In re Za. G.*, 2023 IL App (5th) 220793, ¶ 36. That is, a parent may be found unfit for failing to maintain a reasonable degree of interest, a reasonable degree of concern, or a reasonable degree of responsibility. *In re Za. G.*, 2023 IL App (5th) 220793, ¶ 36.

¶ 103 Failure to comply with service plan requirements and/or inconsistent visitation are sufficient to support a finding of unfitness on this ground. *In re D.P.*, 2024 IL App (1st) 231530, ¶ 33 (citing *In re Nicholas C.*, 2017 IL App (1st) 162101, ¶ 24). Unlike failure to make reasonable progress toward the return of the children, failure to maintain a reasonable degree of interest, concern, or responsibility for the children’s welfare is not limited to a specific time period. *In re D.P.*, 2024 IL App (1st) 231530, ¶ 33; see 750 ILCS 50/1(D)(b) (West 2024).

¶ 104 In considering whether a parent made reasonable progress toward the return of the children, we measure the parent’s progress by an objective standard. *In re Daphnie E.*, 368 Ill. App. 3d at 1067. The benchmark for measuring reasonable progress is “compliance with the service plans and the court’s directives, in light of the condition which gave rise to the removal of the child, and in light of other conditions which later become known and which would prevent the court from

returning custody of the child to the parent.” *In re C.N.*, 196 Ill. 2d 181, 216-17 (2001). “At a minimum, reasonable progress requires measurable or demonstrable movement toward the goal of reunification.” *In re Daphnie E.*, 368 Ill. App. 3d at 1067. A parent has made reasonable progress toward the return of the children when the circuit 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).

¶ 105 Because the evidence supporting the two asserted grounds overlaps, we will first direct our attention to the State’s allegation and the circuit court’s finding that Mother failed to maintain a reasonable degree of interest, concern, or responsibility for the children’s welfare. Mother argues that this finding was against the manifest weight of the evidence because the circuit court “failed to meaningfully consider the services in which [Mother] participated and the improvements made to her residence.” We disagree.

¶ 106 There is no dispute that Mother engaged with the services to some degree. In addition, she consistently visited with the children, brought snacks and toys to visits, participated in psychiatric treatment, and completed domestic violence services despite her initial reluctance to engage. Although Mother was unsuccessfully discharged from mental health counseling twice, she eventually reengaged with this service. However, the circuit court consistently found in its permanency orders that Mother failed to make reasonable efforts or reasonable and substantial progress toward the return of the children, and the record provides ample support for these findings.

¶ 107 The service plans demonstrate that although Mother engaged in most services and was rated as satisfactory on some of them, she made unsatisfactory progress on other services. In a service plan dated February 2, 2024, filed on April 3, 2024, Mother was rated as satisfactory for

completing a psychiatric evaluation, completing a psychological evaluation, maintaining psychiatric treatment, keeping releases of information current, parenting education with Addus, demonstrating parenting skills during visits with the children, participating in habilitation services, meeting with her caseworker monthly, and maintaining recommended prenatal care. However, she was rated as unsatisfactory for engaging in counseling, maintaining a safe and sanitary home, maintaining an income to meet basic needs, and working with the housing advocate. The plan stated that Mother was discharged unsuccessfully from counseling on December 7, 2023, due to her failure to attend sessions after October 16, 2023.

¶ 108 Similarly, in a service plan dated August 12, 2024, filed on September 26, 2024, Mother was again rated as satisfactory for completing a psychiatric assessment and a psychological evaluation, participating in psychiatric treatment, keeping releases of information current, engaging in parenting education through Addus, participating in habilitation services, meeting with her caseworker, and keeping all medical appointments for prenatal care. However, she was rated as unsatisfactory for engaging in counseling, demonstrating age-appropriate parenting during her visits with the children, maintaining an income to meet basic needs, and engaging with the housing advocate.

¶ 109 Two new services were added for Mother in the August 2024 plan: participation in domestic violence victim services and compliance with the order of protection. As we discussed earlier, Kraus testified that Mother did not comply with the order of protection. She further testified that although Mother initially refused to engage in domestic violence services, she eventually completed this requirement.

¶ 110 The service plans also contain details concerning the condition of the residence during visits by the caseworker. A service plan dated August 10, 2023, discusses two such visits. The first

was an unannounced visit on May 17, 2023. At that time, the home was “very dirty,” with urine and feces on the floor, food and dirty dishes on the kitchen counter, and clutter on the couches and kitchen table. In addition, there was a substantial amount of trash and clutter along the sides of the trailer and on the steps leading to the entrance. When the caseworker returned on July 31, 2023, for a visit she announced in advance, however, the condition of the home improved to the point where it could be deemed appropriate. The February 2024 service plan described an unannounced visit to the residence on September 13, 2023. The caseworker observed clothing and shoes all over the floor and noted that the bathroom was filthy. The kitchen was cluttered but not as dirty as the bathroom. The August 2024 service plan indicates that Mother was rated as satisfactory for maintaining a safe and sanitary home in a July 2024 evaluation. It stated, “The condition of the home improved but [Mother] moved out of the home for 2 months of the reporting period.” This information was consistent with the hearing testimony that while Mother sometimes managed to clean her residence sufficiently to make it safe for the children, she repeatedly allowed it to revert to the condition it was in when the children came into care. Significantly, Sebok testified when she visited the residence after the nine-month period ended in November 2024, it once again was not sanitary or safe for the children.

¶ 111 The service plans and testimony likewise establish that while Mother’s parenting skills improved at times, she reverted to less appropriate parenting at other times. For example, the August 2023 service plan indicated that Mother was attentive and interacted with the children during visits, and she was rated as satisfactory for demonstrating parenting skills on the February 2024 service plan. However, in the August 2024 plan, Mother was rated as unsatisfactory on this task. The evaluation noted: “Addus worker continually reminds [Mother] to take the children to the bathroom and use time out when appropriate.” This is consistent with Williams’s testimony

that both parties tended to put into practice the parenting skills they learned for a few visits but then reverted to their old habits.

¶ 112 Another concern when the children came into care was Mother's mental health. Although the State did not present nearly as much evidence concerning this issue as it did concerning the condition of the residence, it is worth emphasizing that Mother was unsuccessfully discharged from counseling in December of 2023 after she stopped attending sessions two months earlier. She did not reengage in this service until July 25, 2024. This means Mother did not attend counseling for a significant period of time, thereby delaying any progress she might have made in addressing this important concern.

¶ 113 Despite Mother's sporadic successes and intermittent efforts, 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." *In re Ta. T.*, 2021 IL App (4th) 200658, ¶ 56. Although Mother managed at times to improve both her parenting skills and the condition of her home, she repeatedly reverted to her old habits and allowed the condition of the home to deteriorate so it did not remain sanitary and safe for the children. Significantly, Sebok testified that the residence did not meet minimal safety standards during any of the visits she made after November 2024 despite Mother's satisfactory rating for the condition of the home in July of 2024. It is clear from the judge's oral findings that the circuit court was concerned with the persistent issue regarding the unsanitary nature of the home. The circuit court found the home was "not a suitable place for visitation with the children, let alone residing there." Based upon the testimony of Tina Sebok and the evidence in the record, we agree.

¶ 114 In its ruling, the circuit court observed that there was no reasonable likelihood that DCFS would be able to allow even unsupervised visits in the near future due primarily to the condition

of the residence. Our review of the record supports this conclusion, and further, Mother's failure to adequately sustain the cleanliness of her home over time indicated there was also no reasonable likelihood that the circuit court could return the children to Mother's custody anytime soon. Mother had over two years to prove that she could maintain a clean and safe environment for the children, but failed in this endeavor.

¶ 115 In addition to the neglect of her living environment, Mother had obtained an order of protection in March 2024, and informed one of the workers that Father had "hit abused her." Despite this incident of domestic violence, Mother continued to allow Father to be with her, thus violating the order of protection. Ultimately, Mother asked that this order of protection be dismissed.

¶ 116 Further, the circuit court noted that Mother failed to appear for her scheduled induction date, and despite the knowledge that she may have complications during the birth, elected to deliver her child in Iowa. Consequently, this decision resulted in emergency delivery. The circuit court found this "highly irresponsible conduct" to be an example of Mother and Father's "persistent inability to work cooperatively and exercise responsible judgment in matters affecting the children."

¶ 117 The record also indicates that Mother was inconsistent in her parenting skills and often failed to engage with the children during her visitation with them. Visitation had to be further restricted due to instances where Mother interfered with the delivery of child services, as she became hostile toward DCFS staff and threatened them. We agree with the circuit court that the State met its burden of proving Mother unfit for failing to maintain a reasonable degree of interest, concern, or responsibility for the welfare of the children.

¶ 118 Overall, we find the State’s evidence sufficient to support the circuit court’s finding of unfitness as it related to Mother’s failure to maintain a reasonable degree of interest, concern, or responsibility for the welfare of the children. Because we have reached this conclusion, we need not address the circuit court’s ruling on Mother’s failure to make reasonable progress toward the return of the children during the nine-month period between February 7, 2024, and November 7, 2024.

¶ 119 **B. Best Interest Findings**

¶ 120 Once the circuit court finds a parent unfit, the focus shifts to the children. *In re Baby Boy*, 2025 IL App (4th) 241427, ¶ 73. During the best interest phase, the parent’s interest in maintaining a relationship with the children yields to the children’s “interest in a stable, loving home life.” *In re D.T.*, 212 Ill. 2d 347, 364 (2004).

¶ 121 In deciding whether termination of parental rights is in a child’s best interest, the circuit court must consider the following statutory factors: (1) the child’s physical safety and welfare; (2) the development of the child’s identity; (3) the child’s familial, cultural, and religious background and ties; (4) the child’s sense of attachment; (5) the child’s wishes; (6) the child’s community ties; (7) the need for permanence and stability and the continuity of the child’s relationships with parental figures, siblings, and other family members; (8) the uniqueness of each child and family; (9) the risks inherent in substitute care; and (10) the preferences of the individuals available to provide care. 705 ILCS 405/1-3(4.05) (West 2024). Although the circuit court must consider all applicable statutory factors, it is not required to refer to each individual factor in rendering its decision. *In re Tajannah O.*, 2014 IL App (1st) 133119, ¶ 19. The court may also consider the likelihood of the children being adopted. *In re Za. G.*, 2023 IL App (4th) 220793, ¶ 54.

¶ 122 As with the circuit court’s unfitness finding, we review its best interest finding to determine whether that finding is against the manifest weight of the evidence. *In re Baby Boy*, 2025 IL App (4th) 241427, ¶ 74. As stated previously, this occurs “if the opposite conclusion is apparent or when findings appear to be unreasonable, arbitrary, or not based on the evidence presented.” *In re Za. G.*, 2023 IL App (5th) 220793, ¶ 31.

¶ 123 In arguing that the circuit court’s best interest finding was against the manifest weight of the evidence, Mother highlights her own testimony that she loved and cared for her children, her testimony that it would benefit the children to live in a home “with both parents and all four siblings together,” and the photographs she entered into evidence showing positive interactions between her and the children during visits. We are not persuaded.

¶ 124 The primary flaw in Mother’s argument is that it overlooks the substantial evidence that supports the circuit court’s decision. The evidence showed that all three children shared a strong bond with their foster parents and their extended families. Although Mother presented evidence showing that the children appeared to enjoy their visits with her, other evidence showed that they did not have the same type of bond with her that they had with their foster families. In addition, even though the children were placed separately, their foster parents ensured that they continued to spend time together, thus preserving their sibling bond.

¶ 125 Moreover, overwhelming evidence established that the foster families provided for the children’s needs and gave them stability in a clean and safe environment, something Mother proved unable to do. This difference was illustrated by the stark contrast between Soren and Ranger’s physical and emotional condition when they came into care and their condition at the time of the best interest hearing.

¶ 126 Finally, Soren and Ranger had been in the care of their foster mother for nearly three years by the time the best interest hearing was held. As the circuit court observed, this was more than half of their young lives. Similarly, Harley’s foster home was the only home she had ever known. The children’s sense of attachment to their foster families and their need for the permanence their foster parents provided are significant factors to consider in determining their best interests. See 705 ILCS 405/1-3(4.05)(d), (g) (West 2024). We conclude that the evidence in the record provides ample support for the circuit court’s best interest finding.

¶ 127

III. CONCLUSION

¶ 128 For the foregoing reasons, we affirm the circuit court’s orders terminating parental rights.

¶ 129 Affirmed.