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2026 IL App (5th) 260469-U

NOS. 5-26-0469, 5-26-0470, 5-26-0471, 5-26-0472, 5-26-0473 cons.

IN THE  
APPELLATE COURT OF ILLINOIS  
FIFTH DISTRICT

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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|-----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>In re</i> LILLY W., LOVE W., LOCHAN W., LION W., and ) | Appeal from the          |
| LEGEND W., Minors )                                       | Circuit Court of         |
| )                                                         | Saline County.           |
| (The People of the State of Illinois, )                   |                          |
| )                                                         |                          |
| Petitioner-Appellee, )                                    | Nos. 25-JA-28, 25-JA-29, |
| )                                                         | 25-JA-30, 25-JA-31,      |
| v. )                                                      | 25-JA-32                 |
| )                                                         |                          |
| Christopher W. and Brooke W., )                           | Honorable                |
| )                                                         | Amanda Byassee Gott,     |
| Respondents-Appellants). )                                | Judge, presiding.        |

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JUSTICE VAUGHAN delivered the judgment of the court.  
Justices McHaney and Hackett concurred in the judgment.

**ORDER**

¶ 1 *Held:* The circuit court's adjudicatory and dispositional orders finding that the minors were neglected and that it was in their best interests to be made wards of the court were not against the manifest weight of the evidence. Therefore, the judgment of the circuit court is affirmed.

¶ 2 The respondents, Christopher W. (Father) and Brooke W. (Mother), appeal from the Saline County circuit court's April 28, 2026, adjudicatory and dispositional orders relating to the five minors, Lilly W., Love W., Lochan W., Lion W., and Legend W. For the reasons explained below, we affirm.

¶ 3

## I. BACKGROUND

¶ 4 On December 15, 2025, the State filed petitions for adjudication of wardship regarding the five minors, identifying Mother and Father as their parents. The State alleged that the minors were neglected by reason of an environment injurious to their welfare due to the following: (1) Father had a history of mental health concerns, including paranoia and delusions, that impacted his ability to care for the minors; (2) approximately two months earlier, one of the minors reported that Mother attempted to commit suicide in the minors' presence; (3) the same minor also reported that a man broke into their home each night, used gas to keep them asleep, hit them on their heads with a hammer, and stole things from their home; and (4) the parents failed to comply with intact family services. The circuit court entered a protective order on December 16, 2025, instructing the parents to comply with intact services—including undergoing psychological evaluations—and cooperate with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS).

¶ 5 On February 13, 2026, the State filed a petition alleging that the parents had violated the protective order. The State alleged that both parents refused to complete mental health evaluations and engage in any recommended treatment, and refused to complete integrated assessments. The State further asserted that psychological evaluation services recommended that Father be placed on a psychiatric hold and receive a psychiatric evaluation due to a “dangerousness that needs more immediate attention than a psychological evaluation can provide.” The State asked the circuit court to enter a temporary custody order granting DCFS temporary custody and guardianship over the minors.

¶ 6

### A. Temporary Custody Hearing

¶ 7 The circuit court held a temporary custody hearing on February 17, 2026. Both parents appeared *pro se*. DCFS intact caseworker Brittaney Ellenburg testified on behalf of the State. She

explained that she was assigned to the parents' case approximately five weeks earlier and interacted with Father in person and Mother over the phone. She confirmed the State's allegations that Father was recommended a psychiatric hold and that neither parent completed the required mental health evaluations.

¶ 8 Ellenburg could not contact Mother to have her take an integrated assessment, but she was able to get Father to "minimally" complete a parent questionnaire that she was then able to use for an integrated assessment. Ellenburg added that she had him fill out the questionnaire because every time she tried asking him questions for the assessment, he would turn to talking about the conspiracy that he believed was happening against his family.

¶ 9 Ellenburg further testified that from her communications with Mother, Father, and the minors, she was aware that the parents believed the family was being targeted by a conspiracy in which an organized crime ring was breaking into the home at night and beating the parents and children. The minors told her that they were being beaten at night, and when she asked them how they knew this, they answered that Father told them. Father indicated to Ellenburg that he believed the conspiracy was organized by Whipper Johnson, who Ellenburg said was the sheriff of Saline County.

¶ 10 Ellenburg further testified that over the past five weeks, Father's behavior relating to his belief in this conspiracy was escalating, and she was concerned for the minors' safety based on the parents' current mental health. She further believed it was a matter of immediate and urgent necessity that the minors be placed in the care of DCFS.

¶ 11 The guardian *ad litem* (GAL) called Father to testify. The GAL asked him about the statements Ellenburg had made about an alleged conspiracy that Father discussed with her. Father stated that "[m]ultiple people" were breaking into his home, including Whipper Johnson and

various police officers and their associates.<sup>1</sup> He further stated that these break-ins occurred “[s]ometimes nightly, sometimes multiple times a day,” going back to 2016 or 2017, and that these men would beat him with blunt weapons. He claimed to have seen impact marks on his body from the beatings. Father was not certain whether they were also beating the minors, but he was worried that they were, and had asked the minors if they had been hurt, because “the same situation” could be happening to them as well.

¶ 12 Father further believed that these men were hacking his phone and preventing him from contacting service providers as instructed by DCFS. He stated that when he and Mother tried sending texts to Ellenburg, they did not go through, which he believed was caused by law enforcement interference. Father believed that he was being threatened by the conspiracy ring on social media and on various websites, and this led him and his family to flee to Canada and seek refugee status in the past.

¶ 13 When asked why they returned to Illinois, Father stated that Canadian refugee services told them to go back and report the conspiracy to the FBI. Father also testified that he was an inventor, and his ideas were being stolen. He said that he reported everything to the FBI and was told that no one would believe or help him, and he would only end up “looking crazy.” He further stated that he did not want to go to the health services provider that DCFS chose for his mental health evaluation because they would be biased against him because they were friends with the conspiracy ring.

¶ 14 Father denied being a danger to his children, ever being diagnosed with any mental health disorders, or ever being prescribed medication for a mental health condition. However, he did

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<sup>1</sup>Father provided the names of seven other men and Johnson, and alleged that they and the other members of the conspiracy were all police officers or friends of police officers.

acknowledge that he had had one psychiatric hospitalization in the past. Father also stated that he and Mother had taken the minors out of school and were homeschooling them.

¶ 15 Next, Mother testified that she agreed with everything Father had stated. Upon questioning by the GAL, she described various other acts she believed were being done by the conspiracy ring. She also testified that she never felt that Father was a danger to the minors, or that he was delusional.

¶ 16 After hearing argument, the circuit court found that the parents had not complied with DCFS's recommended services. The court was concerned that the parents' mental health prevented them from understanding what was required of them and cooperating with DCFS. The court further found that the parents did not believe there were any issues with their mental health, despite the concerning statements the court heard during their testimony. The court concluded that there was probable cause to believe that the minors were neglected due to the mental health of their parents. The court added that the parents moved around quite a bit, and since the minors were no longer in school, there was a risk of losing track of them. Thus, the court ruled that there was an immediate and urgent necessity for the minors to come into the temporary custody of DCFS because of the parents' failure to comply with services. The court entered a temporary custody order on the same day.

¶ 17 DCFS filed a service plan for the parents dated March 9, 2026. Mother and Father were each required to complete psychological and psychiatric evaluations, undergo a mental health assessment, and attend weekly supervised visitation. On March 30, 2026, Mother's newly-retained counsel filed a motion to vacate and/or set aside the temporary custody order, stating that Mother was not represented by counsel at the temporary custody hearing and she was incorrectly determined to have refused to complete a mental health evaluation and integrated assessment.

¶ 18 On April 14, 2026, DCFS filed a dispositional report with the circuit court. DCFS wrote that Mother completed a mental health evaluation in February of 2026 and was referred to counseling. Despite being provided information about how to do so, neither parent had completed the intake assessment required for a psychiatric evaluation. Both parents were scheduled for psychological assessments within the next two months. Father did not complete a mental health assessment, but was assigned a therapist and scheduled to begin counseling services. The caseworker who completed the report noted that Father continued to display signs of delusional thinking, both in communications with the caseworker and in public social media posts. The caseworker further noted that Mother appeared to be dependent on Father and his input in the case, which impacted her cooperation with DCFS.

¶ 19 DCFS also attached the results of an integrated assessment completed by Ellenburg in February of 2026, as referenced in her testimony at the temporary custody hearing. The report stated that Mother believed her family was involved with DCFS because her husband was a “whistleblower and has had intellectual property stolen.” She further believed that “organized criminals \*\*\* affiliated with law enforcement” were attacking her family. Father was reported to struggle with staying on topic when answering questions for the assessment, “due to constantly wanting to discuss the alleged organized crime ring” targeting his family. Father was given a written questionnaire to fill out, which he did “minimally.” In his answers, he wrote that he created Bitcoin and AI learning, and he went by the alias “Satoshi Nakamoto.” He claimed that the government stole his ideas and believed he was involved with DCFS because he was a “whistleblower.” Neither parent reported having any mental health conditions. After speaking with the minors, Ellenburg wrote that it was “apparent that [Father] has been able to push his paranoia onto the children and the children believe everything they are told.”

¶ 20

B. Hearing on Petition for Adjudication of Wardship

¶ 21 The circuit court held a combined adjudicatory and dispositional hearing on the State's petition for wardship, as well as a hearing on Mother's counsel's motion to vacate, on April 28, 2026. Mother appeared with counsel, and Father appeared *pro se*.

¶ 22 Samantha Whitmire testified on behalf of the State, explaining that she was a DCFS employee who was assigned to the investigation of a report made to the DCFS hotline in October of 2025. According to the report, one of the minors had defaced school property and was stating that he believed himself to be Jesus. He had also told school professionals that there were people breaking into his home and assaulting Father, and there were individuals hacking into electronics in the home. His school expressed concerns for the minor, as well as for the safety of the other students, because Father was posting on Facebook about the alleged break-ins and hackers.

¶ 23 Whitmire spoke with the minor at home, outside of the presence of adults, and he told her that he believed people were breaking into his home and assaulting Father, himself, and his siblings. Whitmire further testified that during her visit to the home, one of the minors stated that they had witnessed Mother attempt to harm herself and potentially commit suicide. The minors also reported various injuries they believed they had received from the people breaking into their home. Some of them said that this was brought to their attention by Father, while others believed that they became aware of their injuries themselves.

¶ 24 Whitmire also spoke with Father and Mother that day. Father indicated an awareness that the investigation was happening because of what was happening in his home, and he seemed happy that this would be looked into. He repeated the details of the alleged conspiracy. Mother denied that she would ever commit suicide in front of her family, despite telling Whitmire about an incident where she seemed ready to jump from a moving car with the family present. Mother also

said she believed there were odd things happening in the house, including break-ins, vandalism, and Father's email being hacked, but she could not explain why this was happening.

¶ 25 The State also called Brittaney Ellenburg, the DCFS caseworker. She stated that she had been assigned to the family's case for approximately two months. She had minimal contact with Mother; after requesting to speak with her "over and over," Ellenburg had one phone call with her. Ellenburg attempted to send Mother and Father to the Egyptian Health Department (Egyptian) for their mental health evaluations, but neither went. They told her that they did not trust this provider because they believed the people there would be biased against them. Both parents were also sent to complete a psychological evaluation, but the evaluator denied them both because she believed they needed medication and further testing that she, as a psychologist, could not provide. She recommended psychiatric evaluations for both parents.

¶ 26 Ellenburg instructed the parents to give her the name of a provider they intended to use for a mental health evaluation instead of Egyptian, but they did not do so until after both had completed what they claimed were mental health evaluations with general practitioners. Ellenburg explained that this did not satisfy DCFS requirements that a mental health evaluation be completed by a mental health professional, and that DCFS contact the provider in advance to provide information about why the evaluation was being requested.

¶ 27 Ellenburg further testified that neither parent was satisfactory in participating in an integrated assessment. The answers that they did provide raised concerns about their mental well-being, again because of their belief that they were being targeted and attacked by people. They also would not answer basic questions about their family background, and changed their answers between their written questionnaires and verbal interviews. Ellenburg stated that, as a social worker, she was concerned about the parents' ability to care for the minors.

¶ 28 On cross-examination by Mother's counsel, Ellenburg was asked whether she was aware that Mother had completed a mental health assessment by a licensed professional counselor on February 15, 2026. Ellenburg stated that she was only aware that Mother had tried to have an assessment done by a general practitioner.

¶ 29 The State's final witness was DCFS supervisor Tiffanie Sisk, who testified that she had been the supervisor for the case since March 18, 2026. After they refused to go to Egyptian, DCFS referred Mother and Father to another provider for their mental health assessments. They had appointments scheduled, but had yet to complete their assessments. Both parents were also sent to a provider to undergo psychiatric evaluation. Only Mother went, and the report that DCFS received indicated that she had not provided enough information about her symptoms to require psychiatric testing. Both parents were then re-referred for psychological evaluations. At the time of the hearing, neither parent had engaged in any kind of mental health treatment. Sisk believed that it was in the minors' best interests that they be made wards of the State.

¶ 30 Mother's counsel then called Mother to testify. Mother stated that she completed a mental health assessment on February 5, 2026, with her primary care provider, via telehealth. She informed the doctor that DCFS requested the assessment because of concerns about her ability to be a caregiver. Mother further stated that she completed a record release form and had her doctor's office send a copy of the assessment to DCFS. She contended that Ellenburg never told her the assessment was insufficient.

¶ 31 Despite never being made aware of the fact that her assessment was deficient, Mother underwent another telehealth mental health assessment on February 15, 2026, conducted by a licensed counselor. Mother gave the evaluator the same information regarding DCFS's request. Mother testified that the assessment results stated that she should continue therapy to manage

stress, although the evaluator did not make any therapy referrals for her. Mother said she was working on having the records released to DCFS, and she told Ellenburg about this assessment in court, before the temporary custody hearing on February 17, 2026.

¶ 32 Mother further testified that she completed a third mental health assessment, upon DCFS's referral.<sup>2</sup> She told the provider that DCFS requested that she also complete a psychiatric evaluation. The provider told her she did not need any additional services and would not be scheduled for a psychiatric evaluation, because she did not meet the diagnostic criteria for a mental health or substance abuse disorder.

¶ 33 Mother also stated that she had started weekly therapy appointments three weeks ago, and executed a release of information so that the provider could inform DCFS. Mother was not made aware that the provider she was using for therapy was not approved by DCFS. Mother believed that there was no immediate or urgent necessity for the minors to be removed from the home at present, and that she was capable of resuming custody over the minors. She asserted that she wanted the minors back and was willing to complete any required services to do so.

¶ 34 On cross-examination, Mother was asked about the stress she reported experiencing during her February 15 mental health assessment. Mother acknowledged that she reported to the evaluator that the source of her stress came from the ongoing vandalism to her home, including the sheriff allegedly breaking down the doors to the house without a warrant. Mother confirmed that she believed this vandalism was happening, saying she knew that windows had been broken, that the sheriff broke her doors, and that she had security camera footage of someone stealing a different security camera in the home. She added that a neighbor told her there had been a man taking photos outside her home. Mother believed she was keeping the minors safe from all of these threats.

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<sup>2</sup>It is unclear from the testimony, but this appears to be the referral mentioned in Sisk's testimony.

¶ 35 Mother was also asked about the time that she and Father sought asylum in Canada in 2018. She testified that they did so because they had told the FBI that local law enforcement was making threats over social media to hurt their children. Mother did not tell any of the service providers who evaluated her that she believed the Saline County sheriff was breaking into her home on a near-daily basis and beating up her husband and children, although she stated that she told them about threats and vandalism.

¶ 36 Mother also stated that she had never seen any intruders in the home, and she did not believe that the sheriff had ever broken into the home and attacked Father. When asked if she believed that during the temporary custody hearing, when she said she believed Father's testimony to that effect, she responded that she knew that was what he believed. She further denied that her opinion had ever changed, or that she thought Father was delusional. She also did not think that the minors believed they were being beaten up by law enforcement, or that Father had ever told them they were. However, she did believe that Father had invented various things, including "AI technologies, drone technologies, nuclear engine ideas, healthcare ideas," and Bitcoin. She further believed that Father was a whistleblower who tried to help the FBI solve crimes.

¶ 37 After hearing testimony, the circuit court denied Mother's motion to vacate or set aside the temporary custody order, stating that there was "ample evidence and testimony," both during the February 17 and present hearings, that justified the court's determination that probable cause existed for a finding that there was an immediate and urgent necessity for the minors to be taken into temporary care.

¶ 38 The court further found that it was "clear and \*\*\* uncontroverted that the parents basically haven't done any of the services to address any of the issues which brought the children into care." The court acknowledged that between the different mental health, psychological, and psychiatric

assessments discussed, DCFS's requirements may have caused Mother and Father some confusion, and the court gave them "a little bit of credit" for having to navigate unfamiliar systems. However, the court also noted that the parents were "extremely intelligent" and had advanced educational degrees, and could be expected to be able to follow the clear instructions from multiple agency workers.

¶ 39 The court also found it significant that Mother did not disclose to any of her evaluators the full extent of Father's beliefs, the fact that she—as per her testimony—believed her husband, that she and Father fled to Canada in 2018 based on those beliefs, and the results of her integrated assessment and the dispositional report. The court opined that had she been honest in her disclosures, a mental health professional would have made a diagnosis and referred her for treatment. The court was further concerned that Mother had testified at both hearings that she believed Father's irrational beliefs and chose to leave the minors in his care while she was at work, as well as remove them from school to be homeschooled, which only increased the time they spent under Father's supervision and guidance, all while Father demonstrated clear signs of mental health issues.

¶ 40 Thus, the court ruled that the State had shown by a preponderance of the evidence that the minors were neglected due to an injurious environment. The injurious environment was based on Mother and Father's psychological issues, paranoia, and delusions, which were also affecting the minors. The court added to that Mother's alleged suicide attempt. The court expressed concern for the minors' safety, which was further threatened by Mother's lack of effort to protect them from Father, including her "complete denial" of both his and her own mental health issues.

¶ 41 The court entered adjudicatory and dispositional orders on the same date, stating the findings and conclusions in its oral ruling. The court found that it was consistent with the health,

welfare, and safety of the minors that DCFS be granted guardianship, in that efforts at reunification had failed, and that Mother and Father were unfit to protect, train, educate, supervise, discipline, and have custody of the children due to their ongoing, unaddressed mental health issues. This appeal followed.

¶ 42

## II. ANALYSIS

¶ 43 As an initial note, the parents' brief on appeal fails to comply with Illinois Supreme Court Rule 341's requirements for appellate briefs. As the State points out, their statement of facts is argumentative and lacks citations to the record on appeal. Ill. S. Ct. R. 341(h)(6) (eff. Oct. 1, 2020). Their argument section also lacks citations to the record, and the case names they mention are not properly cited. Ill. S. Ct. R. 341(h)(7) (eff. Oct. 1, 2020).

¶ 44 Our supreme court rules "are not advisory suggestions, but rules to be followed." *Zale v. Moraine Valley Community College*, 2019 IL App (1st) 190197, ¶ 32. Furthermore, a reviewing court "is not a depository in which the burden of argument and research may be dumped." *Holzrichter v. Yorath*, 2013 IL App (1st) 110287, ¶ 80. We recognize that Mother and Father are *pro se* appellants. However, this does not relieve them of the burden of complying with the court's rules. *Id.* ¶ 78. When an appellant's brief does not follow these rules, we have the inherent authority to dismiss the appeal. *Id.* However, we also have discretion to consider the arguments on their merits in the interest of obtaining a just result, and we choose to do so here. See *Epstein v. Davis*, 2017 IL App (1st) 170605, ¶ 22. We additionally note that the State asks that we not strike the brief, as the issues raised by Mother and Father are sufficiently identifiable to allow for review on the merits.

¶ 45 The parents raise four issues on appeal. First, they challenge the sufficiency of the evidence for the circuit court's rulings. Second, they allege that *ex parte* communication occurred "before

each hearing or trial between Judge Gott and the State Attorney along with DCFS.” Third, they argue that Father’s social media posts were the main reason for the minors’ removal, and that the minors were removed as punishment for his exercise of his rights to religion and freedom of speech. To this point, the parents add that the judge had “relationships” with the sheriff and others that Father mentioned in his social media posts, and therefore should have recused herself. And fourth, they claim that the circuit court made contradictory findings regarding whether Mother could identify delusional beliefs at different points in her testimony. They further question how the circuit court could find that Father was “too delusional to care for children but not delusional enough” to be unable to represent himself in the underlying case.

¶ 46 A. Sufficiency of the Evidence

¶ 47 Mother and Father’s core argument on appeal is that there was “zero” evidence of abuse or neglect. They make very few specific statements either refuting any of the State’s evidence or pointing to evidence in their favor that the circuit court disregarded. They do contend that the minors were removed based on the parents’ “unspecified mental health issues,” which we note to say that the reason that neither parent received any diagnoses was their own refusal to cooperate with DCFS in obtaining any of the required evaluations from approved providers. Their own failure to comply with DCFS’s directives supports the circuit court’s rulings.

¶ 48 Under the Juvenile Court Act of 1987 (Act) (705 ILCS 405/1-1 *et seq.* (West 2024)), the paramount considering in a proceeding for adjudication of wardship is the best interest of the child or children. *In re Z.L.*, 2021 IL 126931, ¶ 58. The Act sets forth the two-step process the trial court must follow in determining whether minors should be removed from the custody of their parents and made wards of the court. *Id.* First, the court holds an adjudicatory hearing on the petition for adjudication of wardship. At this stage, the court considers only the question of whether the minors

are abused, neglected, or dependent, and not whether the parents were abusive or neglectful. *Id.*

¶ 59. If the court answers this question in the affirmative, the second step is the dispositional hearing, where the court determines “whether it is consistent with the health, safety, and best interests of the minor and the public that the minor be made a ward of the court.” *Id.* ¶ 60. At this stage, the court may consider the acts or omissions of the parents. *Id.*

¶ 49 Here, the circuit court found at the adjudicatory stage that the minors were neglected due to an environment injurious to their welfare. 705 ILCS 405/2-3(1)(b) (West 2024). “Neglect” and “injurious environment” do not have fixed meanings in this context, and “they draw their definitions from the circumstances of each case.” *In re Avery F.*, 2024 IL App (1st) 231089, ¶ 51. However, neglect generally involves the failure to exercise the care required under the circumstances, and includes both the willful and unintentional disregard of parental duty. *Id.* An injurious environment “is an amorphous concept that includes the breach of a parent’s duty to ensure a safe and nurturing shelter for his or her children.” *Id.* (citing *In re Arthur H.*, 212 Ill. 2d 441, 463 (2004)).

¶ 50 The State bears the burden of proving abuse or neglect by a preponderance of the evidence—meaning that the allegations are more probably true than not. *In re Z.L.*, 2021 IL 126931, ¶ 61. As previously stated, we will not disturb the circuit court’s finding of abuse or neglect unless it is against the manifest weight of the evidence. *Id.*

¶ 51 Here, the State presented testimony from three DCFS workers and various agency reports supporting its allegations that Mother and Father’s mental health impaired their abilities to care for the minors. Even without the successful completion of any of their evaluations, it was clear from the parents’ testimony that their mental health was impacting the safety and well-being of the minors. Father believed that members of law enforcement were conspiring against him,

breaking into his home, vandalizing and hacking into his possessions, and beating him and his children.

¶ 52 He also told the minors that they were being beaten, and that they had various injuries on their bodies from these alleged attacks. The evidence further showed that one of the minors might share Father's delusional beliefs, and more than one of them believed they had seen intruders in their home and had experienced the beatings.

¶ 53 While she indicated that she possibly did not believe everything Father had told her, Mother validated and defended Father's delusional thinking during her testimony. She was also noted to defer to and depend on Father's input when communicating with DCFS. Mother did not appear to appreciate the dangers of leaving the minors in Father's care while she was at work. Nor did she seem appropriately concerned by or even aware of the fact that both parents had untreated mental health issues that affected their abilities to carry out their parental duties. Both parents resisted even being evaluated for mental health issues, and refused to cooperate with DCFS. Furthermore, at least one minor believed that Mother had attempted suicide in the minors' presence.

¶ 54 Mother and Father also took the minors out of school to homeschool them, which the circuit court noted would increase the time they spent under Father's care and supervision, and would make them harder to keep track of in the future. This is particularly significant given that (1) this matter began with a report to DCFS made by the minors' school, and (2) the parents had taken the minors out of the country because of Father's delusional beliefs in the past.

¶ 55 Thus, for all of these reasons, the circuit court determined that the minors were in an injurious environment and were neglected based on their parents' mental health issues, and it was in the minors' best interests that they be removed from the parents' custody. We find that this

conclusion was not against the manifest weight of the evidence, which clearly established that the parents had failed to provide a safe and nurturing homelife for the minors.

¶ 56 B. *Ex Parte* Communications and Recusal

¶ 57 Regarding their second argument, Mother and Father do not reference any record of *ex parte* communications, or any point in the proceedings where they raised this issue. In their brief, the parents allege that there are *ex parte* communications that took place, which evince the “conspiracy” against them, including the court manufacturing evidence and using their children against them. These claims, in addition to being entirely unsupported, are bought for the first time on appeal, and therefore forfeited. *In re Marriage of Romano*, 2012 IL App (2d) 091339, ¶ 85.

¶ 58 Mother and Father also did not seek the judge’s recusal in the proceedings below. The record indicates that Father did ask the judge at the end of the adjudicatory and dispositional hearing how he could file a motion for recusal, because the judge was allegedly “Facebook friends” with Sheriff Johnson. The judge responded that she could not provide him with legal advice.<sup>3</sup> Father had also made a similar remark at the end of the temporary custody hearing, without any mention of recusal. At no point did Father provide any evidence of any sort of relationship between Judge Gott and Sheriff Johnson. It appears that no such motion was filed before this appeal. Furthermore, Mother and Father do not offer any evidence that Judge Gott’s presiding over the matter was in any way improper and warranted recusal.

¶ 59 C. Father’s Social Media Posts

¶ 60 Turning to Mother and Father’s third argument, the record on appeal shows that Father’s social media posts were brought up during the proceedings as additional indicators that he was

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<sup>3</sup>We note that Mother, at this point in the case, had legal representation. Mother’s counsel also did not pursue the judge’s recusal.

experiencing delusions. They were also a source of concern from the minors' school about the children's safety, and contributed to the DCFS hotline report. However, there is no support for the parents' contention on appeal that the minors were removed or adjudicated to be neglected because of Father's social media activity. Furthermore, the parents do not point to anywhere in the record that they believe supports their position.

¶ 61 As for their first amendment arguments, they raise these for the first time on appeal. There is one point in the transcript where Father asks Sisk on cross-examination whether she was aware that one of Mother's mental health evaluators allegedly said that DCFS was infringing on the parents' freedoms of religion and speech, but nowhere does the record show that Mother or Father actually made the argument that their first amendment rights were violated.

¶ 62 D. Court's Findings Regarding the Parents' Mental Health

¶ 63 In their fourth argument on appeal, the parents raise two brief points, neither of which include citations to the record or any other explanations of the specific court findings they challenge. Firstly, they contend that the circuit court made contradictory findings regarding whether Mother believed Father's statements about the alleged law enforcement conspiracy ring and Father's supposed inventions, or recognized them to be delusions. However, the hearing transcripts show that it was Mother who offered conflicting testimony on this issue.

¶ 64 At certain points in the proceedings, she said that she believed Father and did not think he was delusional. She also said she was keeping her children safe from the various threats of which Father spoke, and she indicated that there was a genuine danger that led the family to flee to Canada. At other times, Mother seemed to recognize that at least some of Father's beliefs were not based in reality. She admitted that she had never seen any intruders breaking into the home, and said she did not believe the sheriff had attacked Father. She also did not include several details of

Father's beliefs in what she told her mental health evaluators, which the circuit court considered to be a deliberate withholding of information that, had she shared it, would have raised the evaluators' concerns about her mental health.

¶ 65 By referencing the record on appeal, we do not make any finding as to Mother's credibility, much less her mental state. We are merely providing context for the court's findings, and correcting Mother and Father's mischaracterization of the record. The circuit court's finding of abuse or neglect will not be disturbed unless it is against the manifest weight of the evidence. *In re Z.L.*, 2021 IL 126931, ¶ 61. A finding is against the manifest weight of the evidence "only if the opposite conclusion is clearly evident [citation] or the determination is unreasonable, arbitrary, or not based on the evidence presented." *In re D.F.*, 201 Ill. 2d 476, 498 (2002).

¶ 66 Under this standard of review, we defer to the circuit court as the finder of fact, "because it is in the best position to observe the conduct and demeanor of the parties and the witnesses and has a degree of familiarity with the evidence that a reviewing court cannot possibly obtain." *Id.* at 498-99. Therefore, we will not substitute our judgment for that of the circuit court "regarding the credibility of witnesses, the weight to be given to the evidence, or the inferences to be drawn." *Id.* at 499.

¶ 67 Here, the circuit court concluded that Mother's denial of both parents' mental health issues and her entrusting Father with a significant portion of the minors' care and education endangered the minors' safety. We give deference to the circuit court's findings on these points, and further find that they were not against the manifest weight of the evidence.

¶ 68 Finally, Mother and Father ask how the circuit court could have determined that Father was not "too delusional" to represent himself in the proceedings, if the court believed that he was "too delusional" to care for his children. The parents do not offer more than a rhetorical question for

this assertion, and they do not cite to anywhere in the record where the court made any findings relating to Father's ability to represent himself. We also note that Father never raised any argument that he was denied a right to counsel, either in the proceedings below or on appeal. We therefore need not address this argument further.

¶ 69

### III. CONCLUSION

¶ 70 For the reasons stated, the circuit court did not err in its adjudicatory or dispositional rulings. The judgment of the circuit court is affirmed.

¶ 71 Affirmed.