

House Committee on Children and Youth
Testimony
Permanency Practice Initiative
Thursday, August 27,, 2009

Good Morning Committee Members,

I am Todd Hoover, Dependency and Orphans' Court Judge in Dauphin County.

Prior to coming to the bench, from the late 1970's through 1993, I represented juvenile delinquents, parents in Children & Youth proceedings, children, as *guardian ad litem*, and served on the statutorily created Children's Advisory Board.

Pennsylvania's Court Improvement Project (CIP) in Dependency has been one of the most exciting and successful initiatives I have seen during these last 8 years of my tenure in Dependency Court. I do say with some measure of confidence that there has never been such a confluence of efforts among the Department of Public Welfare, County Children and Youth Agencies, the courts, and county commissioners, as currently exists.

Prior to CIP, there was no single unified force which brought together the DPW, Children and Youth Agencies, the courts and commissioners, to address funding issues, the best practices, and meaningful data collection in a coordinated manner. The CIP program has endorsed Family Group Decision Making (FGDM), Family Finding, expedited court reviews (Three Month Reviews), and CPCMS (data collection), all of which have had a net result of decreasing foster care placements, reducing out-of-home placement, and safely returning children home.

I. **Family Group Decision Making:** Family Group Decision Making began growing in Pennsylvania on a county-by-county basis in 2003. Family Group Decision Making empowers families to create their own unique family plan that fits their specific needs. Under this approach, the Agency does not dictate what families must do, but rather, the families tailor their own plan, with the Agency's support. Family Group Decision Making has reduced the length of foster care placements in Children & Youth Agencies and in Juvenile Probation Offices. Shorter placements impact the needs-based budget for Children & Youth Agencies. We have seen that budget need decrease in Dauphin County over the last few years.

II. **Family Finding:** Family Finding is a practice that searches for family members as potential resources for children who are not familiar with all of their extended family. Without question, children need a connection with their family. Family Finding does not necessarily advocate the return of the children to the parents, but seeks suitable family care for the child or children, over care by a non-family member. As a result of this focused effort to find family members, more children are placed in kinship homes, rather than with non-family foster homes. (See Foster-Care Placement Decrease Exhibit)

III. **Three Month Reviews:** In order to be part of the Permanency Practice Initiative (PPI) Phase 1, counties were asked to conduct three month reviews in dependency cases, based upon the belief that with more court involvement and accountability, the service objectives would be met in an expedited manner. This was a significant change, as the regulations require only six month reviews. The reviews would serve as an important reminder to parents seeking reunification that their case would be before the judge within three months, and the judge would hold the parents accountable in reaching the goals set-forth in their family service plan. Additionally, the court would hold the Agency accountable to provide services in a prompt and efficient manner, and to monitor the parent's compliance with those services.

Many Phase I Counties could not conduct three month reviews in all of their cases. In Dauphin County, we targeted a specific set of families with children from 0 (zero) to 5 (five) years of age. Over a nine month period, and by changing only the factor of the three month reviews, the population of children in care between the ages of 0 and 5 decreased by 20%, despite an additional 39 children being placed in the Dauphin County Children & Youth Agency's care during the same period. (See Exhibit)

IV **CPCMS:** CPCMS is the first statewide data gathering system in county dependency proceedings. As a result of the implementation of CPCMS, in Dauphin County, we have been able to review delays from the time of termination of parental rights to adoptions. With the cooperation of the Dauphin County Children & Youth Agency, the County Commissioners and the Dauphin County Orphans' Court Administration, Dauphin County now exceeds the requirements of Federal timeliness guidelines governing adoptions.

To summarize, the Court Improvement Project has brought together the best practices, changes, and collective insights from different counties, trial courts and appellate courts, to expedite efficient permanency for children. There has been no better time to be a judge in dependency proceedings than in the last two years. The results produced so far are encouraging, and will only get better, as additional counties participate in the Phase II of the PPI.

Thank you for the privilege of sharing this information with all of you who are interested in strengthening the children and families in Pennsylvania.

Respectfully submitted,

Todd A. Hoover, Judge
Dauphin County Court of Common Pleas

August 24, 2009