

Greetings, Friends,

This year marks a very special occasion as we celebrate the 20th anniversary of dependency court reform, originally championed by Chief Justice Max Baer, to better protect and care for dependent children across Pennsylvania. Chief Justice Baer envisioned an initiative aimed at dismantling long-standing institutional barriers and fostering crucial collaboration, administration, and communication between the courts and child welfare agencies. To implement these changes, the Children's Roundtable Initiative was established by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in 2006, with the first Leadership Roundtables convening that same year. This pivotal year also marked the official launch of the Office of Children and Families in the Courts to support the Children's Roundtable Initiative.

We have come a long way over the past two decades. In 2006, there were over 21,000 children in our out-of-home care, with only 20% placed with kin. Currently there are approximately 11,000 children placed outside of their homes, and kinship care placements have risen to 44%.

Over these past twenty years, we have collectively tackled many critical issues approved by the State Roundtable, including mental health, trauma, father engagement, incarcerated parents, substance abuse, psychotropic medication, visitation, autism, congregate care, legal representation, transitional youth, and kinship care, to mention a few. We've created extensive legal educational opportunities and resources. We've implemented collaborative system reform strategies, like the Permanency Practice Initiative and the Family Engagement Initiative. Additionally, we've introduced numerous trauma-responsive strategies, including courthouse canines and calming spaces within courthouses and child welfare agencies.

We have accomplished all these remarkable enhancements through a strong and committed administrative partnership among child welfare, legal professionals, state partners, and many others. We collaborated on these efforts because we know, as our 2026 Summit theme highlights, we are collectively **"BETTER TOGETHER."**

Throughout this year's Summit, you will be reminded of what we can accomplish when we work together towards our mission priorities of Protecting Children, Promoting Child Well-Being, Promoting Strong Families, and Providing Timely Permanency! County team successes will be highlighted, and we'll celebrate those achievements. Keynote speakers and panels will provide us with new information and new skills that are certain to guide us into our next 20 years!

As I look forward, I do so with great anticipation and confidence, knowing that the dedicated professionals in our child welfare and legal communities possess the skills, tenacity, and creativity necessary to address any future challenges. The Summit provides a crucial opportunity to step away from our other responsibilities and focus entirely on our successes, challenges, and solutions. May it inspire new goals and strengthen our connections!

New at this year's Summit, we will also be presenting the inaugural recipients of the Chief Justice Max Baer Youth Scholarships! With nominations received from across our Commonwealth, this year's selection team had its work cut out for them. We will be honoring the seven scholarship awardees for their outstanding achievements to date and presenting them with their scholarships.

Therefore, I am honored to welcome you to the 2026 Chief Justice Max Baer Children's Summit. I want to thank everyone who contributed to this event. Specifically, I would like to thank our Summit Planning Committee Chairpersons and my friends, President Judge John Spataro of Crawford County, and Thomas Patterson, Director of Human Services for Potter County. I would also like to

thank the entire Summit Planning Team, our Office of Children and Families in the Courts, and our AOPC staff. Without you, the Summit would not be possible.

Finally, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to every single attendee. Each of you plays a vital role, and your hard work, dedication, and passion are the foundation of our continued success. I am confident that the new knowledge, insights, and skills gained from the Summit will enhance our collective work of helping Pennsylvania's most vulnerable children and families. Here's to celebrating the past, embracing the present, and building a future that's even brighter together!

I look forward to seeing you at the summit.

Thanks,

Kevin M. Dougherty, Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice