

*Mission and*  
*Guiding Principles*  
*For*  
**PENNSYLVANIA'S  
CHILD DEPENDENCY SYSTEM**



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## Introduction

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With approximately 20,000 children in Pennsylvania's foster care system, the need to examine and enhance our child dependency system is paramount. To do so, collaboration between the courts and the child welfare agencies is essential. This point was highlighted in the 2004 Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care Report to Congress stating,

*“Although child welfare agencies and the courts share responsibility for improving outcomes for children in foster care, institutional barriers and long-established practices often discourage them from collaborating. Effective collaboration requires that both entities change the way they think about their respective roles, responsibilities, and priorities and engage in a new way of doing business together. Jurisdictions in which courts and agencies have been able make this shift have yielded better results for children.” (Pew, 2004)*

The initiative set forth herein combines the efforts of professionals from both the child welfare service and legal system in attaining the overarching goals of **child safety, well-being and permanency**. All involved in this work, from child welfare professionals to attorneys to commissioners and judges, are united in this common goal of helping children and families. To support and guide these efforts, this document was created by the Pennsylvania Children's Roundtable Initiative.

The document identifies a new mission for Pennsylvania's child dependency system and sets forth guiding principles that will lead to accomplishing that mission under the name:

FAMILIES 4 CHILDREN



**“Families 4 Children”** stands for the collection of Pennsylvania individuals and organizations who have agreed to communicate and cooperate in pursuing the common purpose of finding or creating safe, permanent homes for every dependent child in Pennsylvania as quickly and practically as possible. This common purpose should be achieved through application of the Mission Statement and Guiding Principles set forth below, which are symbolized in its logo and summarized in its name.

## CHILDREN'S ROUNDTABLE INITIATIVE

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The Children's Roundtable Initiative, supported by the Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC) within the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC) and established by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in 2006, formally adopted the Mission Statement & Guiding Principles on May 29, 2009. The Children's Roundtable embodies a collaborative, cross-system statewide infrastructure that allows for effective administration and communication via a three-tiered system.

The first tier of the infrastructure is comprised of local **Children's Roundtables**. These exist in each judicial district and are convened by a judge. Members include supervisory and dependency judges, children and youth professionals, county solicitors, child and parent advocates, academic experts, and anyone interested in making a positive contribution to the functioning of the dependency system within counties.

The intermediate level (tier 2) of the infrastructure is comprised of **Leadership Roundtables**. There are eight Leadership Roundtables dividing Pennsylvania's sixty judicial districts into groups based on size. The number of judicial districts per Leadership Roundtable varies slightly to keep like-size judicial districts together, with a minimum of five (5) judicial districts per roundtable.

These Leadership Roundtables are comprised of three members from each local Children's Roundtable including a Dependency Judge, the Children & Youth Administrator, and one additional Children's Roundtable member. Leadership Roundtables provide a forum for members to identify, discuss, and share concerns and solutions.

Issues are identified during Leadership Roundtable meetings and common themes are brought to the highest roundtable level the **State Roundtable**. The State Roundtable (tier 3) is comprised of at least two members from each Leadership Roundtable and others with specific expertise in child dependency matters. In addition to facilitating intrastate communication, the State Roundtable sets priorities related to child dependency court improvement efforts and is involved in the national dependency reform movement to keep Pennsylvania apprised of evolving trends and best practices.

As recommended in the 2004 Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care Report, the Children's Roundtable Initiative encourages strong communication and collaboration on behalf of children. The State Roundtable first met in June of 2007.

Through a collaborative discussion process at that meeting, a consensus was reached that a paradigm shift must occur regarding the way we presently work with children and families in Pennsylvania. The State Roundtable adopted a philosophical framework of respect by empowering families to identify their strengths and make their own decisions regarding the future of their children. It was further agreed that practice supported by the initiative henceforth would be strength-based and family-centered, engaging families in a manner that would guide them in developing their own collaborative solutions. That paradigm shift is described in this document.

## LOGO & NAME

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### Description of Logo

This logo depicts the picture and words that we believe a child would create from blocks and crayons if that child were asked to show what he or she really wanted from the Pennsylvania child dependency system:

To grow up in a safe, nurturing, and permanent family.

This logo is child and family-friendly, representing a new philosophy and approach to child dependency in Pennsylvania which builds on the strengths of the family as a foundation for protecting children.

The adult figures represent all families and the child figure represents all children.

The blue circle contains the Mission Statement set forth below.

### Description of Name

The name “Families 4 Children” summarizes the ultimate goal of this initiative and the Pennsylvania child dependency system:

To ensure that every child grows up in a safe, nurturing, and permanent family.

The name also stands for the “family” of Pennsylvanians who are “for” children and are communicating and cooperating with each other to achieve that goal.

## **MISSION STATEMENT & GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

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The ultimate goal of “Families 4 Children” is to ensure that every child grows up in a safe, nurturing, and permanent family. This goal will be accomplished through the following four mission priorities: protecting children; promoting strong families; promoting child well-being, and providing timely permanency.

Embedding these mission priorities into all aspects of the child dependency system will lead to better outcomes for our children and a brighter future for our communities.

These principles represent the fundamental beliefs that should guide the overall operation of the child dependency system in Pennsylvania and be reflected in the delivery of all services to children and families within that system. These beliefs should also guide court and policy decisions at all levels within the system and the relationships among all participants in the system. Doing so should increase child safety and well-being while reducing the number of dependent children in Pennsylvania and/or the length of time that any particular child remains dependent.

To accomplish this mission and redefine, refocus, and redirect the goals, actions, and operation of the child dependency system in Pennsylvania, the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, through its Office of Children & Families in the Courts and the Children’s Roundtable Initiative, presents the following Mission Statement and Guiding Principles.



## **MISSION STATEMENT**

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***“Protect Children;  
Promote Strong Families;  
Promote Child Well-Being;  
Provide Timely Permanency”***

### **Protect Children**

All children have the right to be protected from physical neglect and abuse, including sexual victimization, and from emotional neglect and abuse.

### **Promote Strong Families**

All children have the right to live in a strong family that provides a safe, nurturing, and healthy environment in which to be reared, as families are the primary source of the protection and nurturing of children.

### **Promote Child Well-Being**

All children have the right: to be happy, thriving, self-actualized, educated, healthy, and content; to have the opportunity to reach their full potential as individuals capable of healthy relationships and productive lives; and to have a fair chance in life with opportunities for healthy, balanced, and well-rounded development.

### **Provide Timely Permanency**

All children have the right to live in a permanent family and to timely permanency decisions, as these are critical to the health and welfare of dependent children.



## **PROTECT CHILDREN**

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### **OUR BELIEF:**

All children have the right to be protected from physical neglect and abuse, including sexual victimization, and from emotional neglect and abuse.

### **GUIDING PRINCIPLES:**

Pennsylvania's child dependency system shall protect children who:

- Are without proper parental care or control, subsistence, without education as required by law, or other control necessary for that child's physical health, mental health, emotional health, or moral development;
- Have been placed for adoption in violation of law;
- Have been abandoned by their parents, guardian or other custodian;
- Are without a parent, guardian, or legal custodian;
- Are habitually and without justification truant from school;
- Have committed an act of habitual disobedience of the reasonable and lawful commands of their parent, guardian, or other custodian and are ungovernable and found to be in need of care, treatment, or supervision;
- Are both under the age of ten years and have committed a delinquent act;
- Were formerly under the jurisdiction of the court or on informal adjustment who commit an ungovernable act;
- Are born to a parent whose parental rights regarding another child have been involuntary terminated within three years immediately preceding their date of birth and the conduct of the parent poses a risk to their health, safety, or welfare.



*In protecting children, the system shall also:*

- Recognize and address the trauma a child experiences as a result of abuse and neglect.
- Recognize and address the trauma a child experiences as a result of placement.
- Ensure that “reasonable services” are provided to parents or other caregivers prior to removal, if possible.
- When placement is required to ensure child safety, first and foremost, make all reasonable steps to immediately locate a safe, kinship care option, preferably within the child’s community.
- Utilize shelter and congregate care facilities only when the child’s immediate physical and emotional needs require such care.
- Ensure that the voice of the child is heard at each stage of the process.
- Regard child safety, well-being, and timely permanency as the shared responsibility of those within the system and the community.

## **PROMOTE STRONG FAMILIES**

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### **OUR BELIEF:**

All children have the right to live in a strong family that provides a safe, nurturing, and healthy environment in which to be reared, as families are the primary source for the protection and nurturing of children.

### **GUIDING PRINCIPLES:**

Pennsylvania's child dependency system shall:

- Recognize that a family is the primary source for the nurturing and protection of a child and has the primary responsibility to meet a child's needs for permanency, safety, and well-being.
- Encourage families to utilize all available resources to meet that responsibility.
- Define "family" broadly to include parents, relatives, those not related by blood but who have a close and meaningful relationship with the child.
- Recognize that a child should be maintained with his or her parents whenever possible and, if not, then with other family members.
- Recognize that the family is significant to all aspects of the child's development.
- Recognize that families are capable of change and, with support, most can safely care for their children.
- Engage families respectfully.
- Recognize that each family is both unique and diverse and provide services tailored to its unique and diverse strengths and needs by respecting its economic, ethnic, class, cultural and religious beliefs, values, practices, and traditions.



- Inspire hope, growth, and change in each family by identifying its strengths.
- Engage custodial and non-custodial parents as well as kin in the care of their children.
- Engage non-participating parents effectively.
- Include family members in the ongoing care of their children, even when those children are temporarily placed outside of the family home.
- Support families by stressing the importance of formal education for the child.
- Educate families in parenting and life skills.
- Ensure that a child in placement maintains safe family connections.
- Find and engage absent parents, siblings, and other relatives to keep children connected to their birth families.
- Value extended family members as permanent resources for children.

## ***PROMOTE CHILD WELL-BEING***

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### **OUR BELIEF:**

All children have the right: to be happy, thriving, self-actualized, educated, healthy and content; to have the opportunity to reach their full potential as individuals capable of healthy relationships and productive lives; and to have a fair chance in life with opportunities for healthy, balanced, and well-rounded development.

### **GUIDING PRINCIPLES:**

Pennsylvania's child dependency system shall:

- Recognize and promote the physical, emotional, social, and educational well-being of each child.
- Inspire hope, growth, and change in each child by identifying his or her strengths.
- Recognize that each child is unique and provide services tailored to his or her unique strengths and needs.
- Provide opportunities for each child to develop individual talents and skills.
- Provide opportunities for each child to build self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Empower every child to develop a sense of individual responsibility and accountability for their actions.
- Identify and engage an adult with whom a child can develop a reliable, sustaining, and meaningful life connection.
- Ensure that siblings are placed together unless there is a compelling reason not to provide such placement.

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- Implement a visitation schedule including siblings, parents, and kin that meets the developmental needs of each child, understanding frequent, quality visitation as being key to successful family reunification.
  - Seek and strengthen informal and formal community resources for children and families.
  - Ensure that early assessment is made of each child's cognitive development and, where possible, include family members in any recommended treatment.
  - Encourage a child's interaction with peers in order to foster healthy social development.
  - Strengthen an older child's ability to live independently as he or she transitions into adulthood by providing supportive services such as education, life skills training, prevention services, and employment and housing education.

## ***PROVIDE TIMELY PERMANENCY***

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### **OUR BELIEF:**

All children have the right to live in a permanent family and to timely permanency decisions, as these are critical to the health and welfare of dependent children.

### **GUIDING PRINCIPLES:**

Pennsylvania's child dependency system shall:

- Identify all possible practices and strategies that address the needs of a child and family and encourage solutions which do not require court intervention.
- Recognize that a child should be reunified with his or her parents whenever possible and, if not, then with other family members.
- Understand the need for urgency in service delivery and decision-making for those children who do require court intervention.
- Whenever possible, employ non-adversarial court processes including facilitation and mediation strategies as a means for resolving concerns.
- Employ family finding strategies in recognition of the potential trauma caused by family separation.
- Employ decision-making and planning strategies that are family driven.
- Employ family engagement strategies as a means of insuring strength-based family centered skills for professionals serving children and families.
- Employ non-adversarial, family-driven planning strategies at the initial stages of the dependency process and at any other stage at which a plan is being developed or updated.

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- Assure timely and thorough court hearings and expeditious decisions for each child.
  - Assure competent legal representation for children and parents before a shelter care hearing and throughout the legal process.
  - Ensure that the voices of parents or other caregivers are heard at each stage of the process.
  - Employ concurrent planning for permanency as each case commences and at every stage of the proceedings.
  - Minimize the length of time children must spend in foster care and other temporary living situations.
  - Timely accomplish permanency for every dependent child according to the law.
  - Terminate court intervention in the life of a child when that child is no longer dependent.
  - Identify, create, and implement additional systemic improvement practices.
  - Ensure that recruitment activities are fully pursued to identify the best adoptive family for those children who cannot return to their families.
  - Ensure close coordination with Orphans' Courts aimed at finalizing adoptions in a timely manner.
  - Recognize that permanent legal guardianship is a viable option when reunification or adoption is not possible.



## ***CHILD DEPENDENCY SYSTEMS OPERATIONS***

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### **OUR BELIEF:**

To accomplish the Mission Statement and implement the Guiding Principles above, the Pennsylvania child dependency system must improve in every facet and at every level, increase the resources dedicated to that system, and measure its progress toward these new goals.

### **GUIDING PRINCIPLES:**

Pennsylvania's child dependency system shall:

- Communicate and cooperate with others within the child dependency system working toward the common goal of providing each child with a safe, nurturing, and permanent family.
- Provide appropriate and effective prevention, intervention, and treatment programs and ensure that all decisions made and all services offered are designed to meet the unique needs of each child and family.
- Ensure strong and responsible leadership from all facets of the dependency system, beginning with our courts.
- Ensure competent, trained legal counsel for children and parents who qualify for court-appointed legal counsel.
- Ensure that children and parents are fully informed about their rights, the court process, and the function and duties of legal counsel who represent them.
- Utilize the Children's Roundtable Initiative as a mechanism for local and statewide communication, decision-making, and leadership.
- Create unified methods to measure practices and outcomes.
- Collect and manage data, then evaluate and plan for future needs.
- Establish and monitor accountability for all system participants.
- Employ highly trained, competent, and caring staff who are prepared to serve children and families in accordance with the Mission Statement and Guiding Principles set forth herein.

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- Treat all child dependency professionals with respect and dignity, establish clear expectations and standards for their performance, evaluate them regularly, and compensate them appropriately.
  - Assure that families receive priority in the delivery of human services including mental health treatment, drug and alcohol treatment, training and employment connections, housing services, child care services, and other needed services.
  - Educate community members and organizations to the within Mission Statement and Guiding Principles and the functioning of the child dependency system.
  - Encourage community members and organizations to participate in all aspects of the child dependency system, because local communities are our greatest resource in meeting the needs of families and children.
  - Develop and work within a strong and integrated network of service systems, since neither the child dependency system, nor any other system can alone address all the needs of children and families.
  - Support the educational needs of all dependent children and advocate on their behalf.
  - Continually increase the effectiveness of all services, programs, and processes.
  - Advocate for stable and sufficient funding to support all aspects of service delivery and account for the expenditure of all such funds.
  - Ensure that courts, child welfare agencies, permanent families, and all other participants in the child dependency system are provided with the necessary resources and capacity to implement these Guiding Principles and accomplish the mission to “protect children, promote strong families, promote child well-being, and provide timely permanency” in Pennsylvania.

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