

Section 12 – Reasonable Efforts Overview

“There must be a unified commitment across the child welfare system to strengthening families through prevention, reasonable efforts to prevent removal and finalize the permanency plan, and providing the services that will become available through the Family First Prevention and Services Act and other sources. These efforts harbor great potential to keep families safely together and help avoid the outlier tragedies that have for too long driven how we serve children and families.”

- ***Jerry Milner & David Kelly, US Children’s Bureau***

“Reasonable efforts” is the law, not merely “best practice.” It is likely the most frequently made determination by juvenile court judges and hearing officers in dependency proceedings. It refers to the activities child welfare agencies are expected to provide a family prior to removing a child from his home. Once a child is removed from his home, and the court has identified a permanency goal for the child, the child welfare agency is then required to make “reasonable efforts” to finalize that plan. As the neutral reviewer of dependency cases, the court is required to make a finding regarding whether or not the agency met the “reasonable efforts” requirement. These findings are required at the commencement of the dependency proceedings and at all permanency review hearings.

This section provides eight resources aimed at helping judicial officers better understand and apply “reasonable efforts.” What they are. When they are required. Why they are needed and the impact if a court is unable to find they occurred.

- I. This publication provides an overview of child welfare family engagement strategies that are core to providing reasonable efforts. While written for social service professionals, the bulletin can provide judges with basic information regarding some of the reasonable efforts child welfare agencies can make to find and engage families. (See, *Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020*).
- II. What constitutes reasonable efforts? When are reasonable efforts findings required to be made by the court? This fact sheet discussing laws child welfare agencies are required to follow regarding Reasonable Efforts. (See, *Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020*).
- III. This article, written by retired Judge Leonard Edwards, provides reasonable efforts tools that judges can use to ensure children remain in their home of origin or reunify with safety, if removed. (See, *Edwards, L., 2018*)
- IV. How can judges and attorneys leverage making reasonable efforts findings as part of child welfare prevention efforts and fulfilling legal mandates? (See, *Milner, J., & Kelly, D., 2020*)

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- V. A helpful, one-hour webinar specific for judges outlining the basics and importance of examining reasonable efforts, including special issues presented in a pandemic. (See, *National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 2020*).
- VI. The Pennsylvania State Roundtable Dependent Children of Incarcerated Parents Workgroup provides recommendations about the engagement of incarcerated parents in case planning, coordination and delivery of services, visitation, and hearing participation (all Reasonable Efforts). It also provides an educational video for judges and lawyers, a rights and responsibilities tool for incarcerated parents, and many additional resources. (See, *Office of Children & Families in the Courts: Dependent Children of Incarcerated Parents, n.d.*)
- VII. The Pennsylvania State Roundtable Father Engagement Workgroup created three benchcards, reports, and resources to help judges, attorneys and child welfare professionals successfully engage fathers. (See, *Office of Children & Families in the Courts: Father Engagement, n.d.*)
- VIII. What should a judge know about connections and reasonable efforts, judicial findings, service provisions, and visitation? How might Kinship Care be a key reasonable efforts strategy? (See, *Wentz, R. M., Beck, K. L., 2012*)

