



Justice **Max Baer** introduces the Office of Children and Families in the Courts at a 2006 press conference

Celebrating a decade of helping children

Although great strides have been taken – there is more to come

This summer, the State Children’s Roundtable (SRT), supported by the Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC), celebrates 10 years of helping to improve the lives of children in Pennsylvania through continuous growth and improvements to the dependency system.

In June Gov. Tom Wolf hosted a celebration to commemorate the SRT’s accomplishments. Supreme Court Justice **Max Baer** released a video message in conjunction with this

event, highlighting dependency reform over the past 10 years and noting what the future holds. (Visit www.ocfcpcourts.us to watch the video.)

A quick bit of history

The SRT held its first meeting in May 2006. The meeting ultimately led to the creation by the Supreme Court of the OCFC and the children’s roundtable structure.

At the time, 21,395 children were in out-of-home care. The majority of these children were teenagers, half of whom had been placed in congregate care (institutional placements). Many of the remaining children were in traditional foster care, or “stranger care.” Very few dads or paternal family members were involved in child welfare cases, and even fewer came to court hearings.

In counties with several judges, typical court practice was to assign the newest members of the bench to dependency court where some of the most difficult cases were heard and decisions were made that would impact the future of a child.

Ten years ago, these judges didn’t have access to resources or even procedural rules. Essentially, dependency court was a “blank slate.” Little communication between counties or child welfare agencies and courts – and no judicial education specific to dependency court existed.

Evolution of Children’s Roundtables and OCFC

Since the founding of the SRT and OCFC, so much has changed. The office now supports all 60 judicial districts – promoting the SRT’s vision for protecting children,

promoting strong families, promoting child well-being and providing timely permanency.

Pennsylvania uses a “tiered children’s roundtable model” to guide the flow of dependency practice and the collaboration among the courts, state agencies and other relevant stakeholders. The SRT sets priorities and oversees two other roundtable tiers known as the leadership and local roundtables.

“The roundtable structure is the foundation for moving our dependency system forward in a consistent, uniform and informed manner,” Justice Baer said. “It allows our courts to address critical issues related to child safety, well-being and permanency at a statewide and local level.”

Groundbreaking changes

Under the direction of the SRT, the OCFC has laid the groundwork for helping dependency judges by filling up the “blank slate” that languished prior to the OCFC’s creation.

Some of these accomplishments include:

- a mission and guiding principles
- a Permanency Practice Initiative, which has grown from 11 to 37 counties

- a *Juvenile Court Dependency Bench Book and Resource Companion*
- dependency court data collection in the Common Pleas Case Management System (CPCMS)
- Family Group Decision-Making and Family Finding
- extensive judicial education and resources for judges, legal professionals, parents, children and child welfare professionals
- a dedicated website to house all resource materials

10 years of innovation

The number of children in court-supervised care has dropped to approximately 15,000, with more children placed in kinship care and less in congregate care. Judicial turnover in dependency court has dropped significantly, most often as a result of judicial retirements rather than a desire to leave this area of court.

“We’ve seen a significant shift in how we manage child welfare cases, from placement options, dependency hearings, better education and standard best practices – including engaging youth and family finding,” said **Sandy Moore**, director of OCFC.

Still, the OCFC’s work is far from finished. Current SRT priorities include

studying the impact of trauma, drugs and alcohol, parental incarceration, school success/stability and caseworker turnover on children.

“Although the dependency system looks very different today than 10 years ago, we’re just getting started,” added Moore. “Thank you to everyone who has worked tirelessly to better serve children and families in foster care. We look forward to tackling more issues in the years to come.”

Justice Baer echoed this sentiment.

“The work ahead continues to be challenging, but not unsurmountable,” he said. “Going forward, we hope to eliminate congregate care and significantly move away from placing children in stranger care.

“There is no try – only do. Failure just isn’t an option. Gentle pressure, relentlessly applied, will move mountains. The child welfare community looks forward to the next decade of change.” **AOPC**

Justice **Kevin Dougherty** (right) joins **Kerith Strano-Taylor** (middle) and **Katherine Gomez** (left) at a 2012 workshop

