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15 Counties Join Courts Initiative to Improve lives of Dependent Children

HARRISBURG — As part of a statewide initiative to improve the lives of dependent children, the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania will hold three training sessions featuring Kevin Campbell — a nationally known youth permanency expert and creator of Family Finding, a strategy aimed at finding lost or forgotten individuals willing to provide lifelong support for abused and neglected children.

State Supreme Court Justice Max Baer, a former administrative judge of family court in Allegheny County who is guiding these efforts on behalf of the Supreme Court, said the training is part of the court's Permanency Practice Initiative.

"With enhanced judicial oversight and strength-based, family-led practices, our overriding goals are safely to keep children in their homes, return others to their homes, and when staying or returning home is not possible, quickly to find the best alternative permanent home for every child," Justice Baer said.

More than 300 judges, state, county and private sector children and youth professionals from 15 counties, volunteering to be part of the initiative's first phase, will be attending training sessions scheduled for:

- Sept. 3; at the Cranberry Twp. Highland Golf Course, 5601 Freshcorn Rd, Cranberry
- Sept. 4; at the Administrative Center, 3rd Floor, 28 East Market St., York
- Sept. 5; at the OIM Southeast Training Ctr., 123 Boro Line Rd, King of Prussia.

The training sessions will run from 9am to 4pm. Your coverage is invited.

The initiative focuses on three practice areas: Family Finding, Family Group Decision Making and Family Development Credentialing.

Family Finding provides professionals with the tools they need to help find relatives and others committed to a child achieving permanency for every child faster and more efficiently.

Pennsylvania Family Group Decision-Making process is designed to join the wider family group, including relatives, friends, community members, and others, in collectively making decisions to resolve an identified family concern.

Family Development Credentialing is designed to be an interagency training for staff from all public, private and non-profit service systems. The program teaches the skills to help front line workers become more effective in assisting individuals and families in taking care of themselves and becoming self-sufficient.

Additional expected outcomes of the initiative are to:

- Reduce the number of children adjudicated as dependents and in court-ordered placement
- Reduce the time children spend in the foster care system
- Reduce the number of children who re-enter care
- Reduce the dependency court caseload
- Reduce the cost of children in care
- Reduce the need for residential and institutional placements, and
- Increase child placement stability.

The 15 counties (see attached) in the first phase of this initiative will be enhancing child services and practices, including the implementation of Family Finding, and three-month reviews for every child in the foster care system. Typically court review hearings are held every six months.

In addition, if the counties are not already doing so, they will be actively entering all dependency cases into the state's computerized Common Pleas Case Management System Dependency Module, designed to track more than 30 performance measures recommended by the National Council for Juvenile and Family Court, the National Center for State Courts and the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law. The detailed computerized tracking of dependency cases promises to provide vital statistics for the court's efforts to help children and families.

Other counties will be joining this initiative in 2009, with an expectation that all counties in Pennsylvania will move to this type of Permanency Practice.

The Supreme Court's efforts are led by Sandy Moore, Administrator of the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts' Office of Children & Families in the Court (OCFC), in close partnership with the state Department of Public Welfare's Office of Children, Youth & Families. Additional support and guidance for the initiative is provided by The Pennsylvania Family Group Decision Making Leadership Team, the Statewide Adoption Permanency Network, the Community Action Association of Pennsylvania, and the University of Pittsburgh's School of Social Work and Child Welfare Training Program.

The OCFC, created in October 2006 by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, is funded with federal grants from the Court Improvement Project run by the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

In addition to the Permanency Practice Initiative a series of rules changes designed to speed the appellate process for children living in unstable or impermanent homes has been proposed earlier this month by the Appellate Court Procedural Rules Committee of the Supreme Court.

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Editors Note: State Supreme Court Justice Max Baer and Sandy Moore, Administrator of the Office of Children & Families in the Courts, will be attending the training session on Sept. 3, and will be available for comment by phone on all three training-session days.

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