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## Press Releases

### 'Families 4 Children' Priorities Include Protection and Promoting Well-Being

**Linda Metz**

Washington County Judge Mark E. Mascara believes that state courts have taken a major step toward helping improve the lives of abused and neglected children.

On Monday, the state Supreme Court released a mission statement and set of guiding principles to be used by all those who deal with dependent children, including judges, caseworkers and providers.

Entitled "Families 4 Children," the statement establishes four priorities: protecting children, promoting strong families, promoting child well-being and providing timely permanency.

The state and principles were crafted by the Pennsylvania Children's Roundtable Initiative, a group of state and local child welfare professionals, attorneys, county commissioners, judges and national expert, with the support of the Office of Children and Families in the Court.

Mascara, who serves as dependency judge in the county, was among those to sit on the roundtable and have input into the production of the materials that will play an important part in efforts to reduce the amount of time that dependent children spend in temporary placements such as foster care and expedite their return to permanent homes.

Mascara and Washington County have long served as a model for other counties throughout the state regarding dependency cases.

"It's a very difficult problem," said Mascara, who added that while the new guidelines won't solve the intricate problems connected with child dependency, "it's a huge step in the right direction."

Dependent children, as they are known in the court system, are often removed from their homes under court order as a result of abuse or neglect and are placed by child welfare agencies in temporary foster homes, group homes or institutions.

And child welfare professionals generally agree that many children spend unnecessarily long periods in temporary care, which can include multiple placements, when expedited permanency is far better.

"With approximately 20,000 children in Pennsylvania's foster care system at any given time, the need to examine and enhance our child dependency system is paramount," said Supreme Court Justice Max Baer. "We must do all we can to ensure safe, nurturing and permanent homes for every dependent child as quickly as possible."

Baer went on to point out that the state is changing the way that its child dependency system does business by removing institutional barriers and long established practices that once discouraged collaboration between child welfare agencies and courts.

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