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Press Releases

New Principles Aim to Help Abused and Neglected Children

HARRISBURG — The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania today released a mission statement and set of guiding principles aimed at improving the lives of abused and neglected children whose care is entrusted to the child dependency system under the supervision of the courts.

The mission statement and guiding principles, titled "Families 4 Children," establishes four priorities for judges and others who make decisions affecting the lives of abused or neglected children:

- Protecting Children
- Promoting Strong Families
- Promoting Child Well-Being
- Providing Timely Permanency

Supreme Court Justice Max Baer said it is hoped that the Families 4 Children mission statement and guiding principles 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.

"Dependent children," as they are known in the court system, are often times 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. Child welfare professionals generally agree that many children spend unnecessarily long periods in temporary care which can include multiple placements and that expedited permanency is far better for children. A permanent placement can be reunification with parents in a stabilized setting, adoption or some other court-approved arrangement.

"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 Justice Baer. "We must do all we can to ensure safe, nurturing and permanent homes for every dependent child, as quickly as possible."

The Pennsylvania Supreme Court in 2006 launched an initiative to reduce the length of time dependent children spend in temporary care. To implement the initiative, the court created the Office of Children and Families in the Courts within the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts. Justice Baer, the former administrative judge of Allegheny County Family Court, provides oversight to the Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC).

The Families 4 Children mission statement and guiding 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 experts, with the support of the OCFC. The Pennsylvania Children's Roundtable was formed in 2006 to help carry out the Supreme Court's goal of improving the child dependency system.

"We are changing the way Pennsylvania's child dependency system does business by removing institutional barriers and long-established practices that once discouraged child welfare agencies and the courts from collaborating," said Baer. "This will lead to better outcomes for our children and a brighter future for our communities."

The Pennsylvania Children's Roundtable officially adopted the Families 4 Children mission statement and guiding principles at its annual meeting in Harrisburg on May 28-29. "The statement and principles underscore the expectation that every child deserves a family and that 'growing up' in stranger care or institutional placement is no longer acceptable," said Lehigh Common Pleas Court Judge Brian Johnson, who chaired the roundtable committee that drafted the mission statement and principles. (A list of roundtable committee members is attached).

Sandy Moore, OCFC Administrator, said, "Everything we know about child development and well-being tells us that having a safe, stable family is critical. Without loving family connections, children struggle and positive outcomes are jeopardized. Knowing this, we have a collective obligation to do better for our children."

In addition to a statewide children's roundtable, OCFC has organized regional and local children's roundtables in each judicial district. The local roundtables, lead by a judge and child welfare director includes supervisory and dependency judges, children and youth professionals, county solicitors, child and parent advocates, academic experts and others interested in the well-being of children.

For more information on Pennsylvania's overall Dependency Court Improvement Project, please contact the OCFC at 717-295-2000, ext. 4255.

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Editor's note: OCFC is funded with federal grants under a program called the Court Improvement Project, which is run by the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It is responsible for facilitating "best practices" in the handling of dependency cases and assuring that judges are given necessary time and resources to reach the best decision, with a minimum of delay, for each child.

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