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## Press Releases

### New Approach Tried in PA Family Courts

**Sam Kusic, Indiana Gazette**

Speaking from experience, Indiana County Judge Carol Hanna will tell you that family law has always been the table by the restaurant kitchen, sometimes overlooked and not the most alluring place to be.

But she’ll also tell you that family court handles some of the most important cases in the legal system, ones that involve decisions affecting the course of young lives.

So she’s glad to say Pennsylvania’s courts and the relevant social service agencies are overhauling their approach to juvenile dependency cases, cases in which a child is removed from a home and placed elsewhere because of abuse or neglect.

And Indiana County is participating. It and 12 other counties have been included in a second phase of training and reorganization being carried out under the Pennsylvania Permanency Practice Initiative, the name given to the effort.

The goal behind the initiative is simple — to reduce the length of time children removed from their homes because of abuse or neglect spend in foster care, group homes or institutions.

Court officials in charge of the initiative said they recognize that children do not do well when brought up in foster care and that the way dependency cases generally have been handled in the past just doesn’t work.

Sandra Moore, administrator of the state’s Office of Children & Families in the Courts, created specifically for the task at hand, said children who are run through the system are traumatized twice, first by the abuse and neglect they’ve suffered and then again by having been removed from their home and sent to live with strangers.

So with that in mind, she said the ultimate goal is to not only move children quickly out of the system, but into a loving, stable and permanent home.

In the past, when a child was ordered to be removed from a home, six months might go by before the court looked at the case again. And in the meantime, the social service officials working with the child’s family put the focus on determining all the things that were wrong with that family, which wasn’t necessarily effective.

In recent testimony before the state House children and youth committee, Moore explained it thusly:

“Here’s what that looks like in its simplest form: Tonight when you get home, spend the first five minutes of your evening telling your significant other what is wrong with them. Then (spend) the next five minutes giving them your very best thinking as to how they can fix everything that is wrong with them. And then sit back and see how the rest of your evening goes. This approach does not work within our own families and certainly doesn’t work with strangers. Yet it’s the approach taken in most traditional child dependency systems every day.

“A more productive approach includes the people impacted by the decision actually being involved in making the decisions,” she said.

Hanna, Indiana County’s family court judge, said the initiative is a “sea change” in thinking. Instead of trying to figure out what’s wrong with a family working its way through the system, the energy is now being placed on trying to figure out what’s right with a family, using that as base from which to build on.

The initiative involves several components.

The first is the creation of a three-tiered set of “round tables” that bring together judges, children and youth services officials, lawyers and experts to share ideas and discuss issues.

Through the roundtable discussions, the court system drafted a set of guiding principles, priorities for judges and others to keep in mind in making decisions related to child dependency cases. Hanna sat on the committee that wrote the principles.

Aside from that, the initiative includes:

Training for attorneys and social service workers on the front lines of these cases.

A process called “family finding,” in which a computer-assisted search is conducted to help locate distant family members who may be willing to step up and take in a child in need.

A practice called family group decision-making, in which all people with a role in a child’s life, maybe an aunt or a cousin, maybe a neighbor, or maybe someone in the community, are brought together to help develop a course of action.

A system to track dependency cases and outcomes. That, Moore said, will help the courts get a better handle on where cases stand.

## New Approach Tried in PA Family Courts – Office of Children & Families in the Courts

In addition, the state is stepping up the time for judicial review of cases, taking it from once every six months to once every three months, which will force judges to keep closer tabs on whether progress is being made in any given dependency case.

No small matter, because it essentially doubles their caseload.

In Indiana County, there are about 60 children in foster care, Hanna said.

The initiative is at the behest of Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Max Baer. When Baer ran for a seat on the bench, he had promised that if elected, he would set about making improvements to the family court system, something he has experience with.

Before his election, Baer was an administrative judge in Allegheny County family court.

"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," he said. "This will lead to better outcomes for our children and a brighter future for our communities."

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