



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

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Pennsylvania’s dependency system celebrates 10-year milestone

HARRISBURG — Ten years ago, Pennsylvania’s State Children’s Roundtable (SRT) launched a coalition of judges, court staff and child advocates that would dramatically change the lives of Pennsylvania’s dependent children and save taxpayer dollars.

“The work we do each and every day promotes the SRT’s vision for protecting children, promoting strong families, promoting child well-being and providing timely permanency,” said Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Max Baer who has championed dependency reform in Pennsylvania. “Our focus is to minimize the length of time that dependent children must spend under court supervision, reunite families, accelerate adoptions and create connections.”

When the State Roundtable began, dependency court was essentially a “blank slate” with little communication between counties or child welfare agencies and courts – and no judicial education specific to dependency court.

At that time **21,395** children were in out-of-home care – and the majority of these children were teenagers. Half of these teens were placed in congregate care (institutional placements) and many of the remaining children were placed in traditional foster care, or stranger care.

“The newest judges were typically assigned to dependency court, where some of the most difficult cases were heard and decisions were made that would impact the future of a child,” stated Sandra Moore, Director of the Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC), which was an outgrowth of the SRT efforts. “These judges didn’t have access to resources or even procedural rules.”

Fast-forward 10 years, and the number of children in court-supervised care has dropped nearly 20 percent, with more children placed in kinship care (family and friends) and less in congregate care, which is better for children. The reductions have had the additional benefit of saving millions of taxpayer dollars.

Additionally, judicial turnover in dependency court has dropped significantly and now occurs most often as a result of judicial retirements rather than a desire to leave this area of practice.

“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,” Moore said.

Current SRT priorities include 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.

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.”

Hear more from Justice Baer in [a short video](#) message.

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Editor’s Note:

Since 2006, the Office of Children and Families in the Courts, along with the Department of Human Services and other partners, has reduced the number of dependent and delinquent children in temporary foster care homes by more than 7,000, or 33 percent. Placing these children into a permanent family setting greatly improves their chances to succeed and significantly reduces the cost of institutional care, saving an estimated \$117 million annually.