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Press Releases

Statewide Foster Care Initiative Sees Results in Montco

Amaris Elliott-Engel, The Legal Intelligencer

Less than a year after the state Supreme Court started an initiative to reduce the number of children in foster care, Montgomery County has reduced the number of children being placed outside of their homes by 20 percent, Laurie O'Connor, director of the Montgomery County Office of Children & Youth, reported.

Montgomery County also has increased the number of children who have a permanent resolution to their dependency cases by returning children to their families or placing children with new families through adoption or permanent custodianship, O'Connor said.

The federal standard for "timely permanency" for children is one year, she said.

"Our outcomes or performance measures have been better this past year than they have ever been before," O'Connor said. O'Connor's office handled 1,058 investigations last year and a caseload involving 798 families in the fiscal year that ended June 30.

Montgomery County is one of 13 counties undertaking the second phase of the state Supreme Court's permanency practice initiative.

The drive to improve the outcome in dependency cases was started by Justice Max Baer, the liaison justice for family court issues, in partnership with the state Department of Public Welfare's Office of Children, Youth and Families. The initiative kicked off last September with trainings with a national expert on helping social workers find relatives and other loved ones who will commit to supporting children in foster care.

Fourteen other counties have committed to the first phase of the initiative, and still more counties like Philadelphia County across the state are implementing portions of the plan, said Sandy Moore, the administrator of the Supreme Court's Office of Children and Families in the Courts.

Moore said statewide data is not yet available on the efficacy of the initiative because counties joining in the dependency case improvement goals only started entering data into the state's dependency case management system late last year.

For counties to be officially part of the initiative, they must implement three practices: hold conferences with family members and a mediator to help families take over from social workers and judges in making plans for the best care of children subject to dependency proceedings; reach out to a wide network of family members to participate in the family group decision-making; and train social workers from the public sector and the private sector to help families be more self-sufficient, Moore said.

The initiative also asks county courts to conduct three-month reviews, instead of six-month reviews, for every child in foster care.

The biggest problem in the first months of the initiative were the counties that started off too fast and wanted to apply new practices to every child their office had contact with, Moore said. Moore said her office is encouraging counties to implement the practices for a smaller subset of cases in the beginning.

Ultimately, the dependency case campaign is seeking to show that additional judicial oversight through the three-month reviews makes a difference in reducing the time children spend in foster care and the number of children who enter foster care in the first place, Moore said.

"We are almost positive it will," she said.

Adams County President Judge John D. Kuhn said Adams County had already implemented family group decision-making conferences several years ago. Family group decision-making is now being used by the county's adult probation office, juvenile probation office and county prison, Kuhn said.

The county's dependency case stakeholders were interested in expanding the mechanisms that help families create their own solutions and solve their problems "without necessarily having to rely on the government to do that," said Kuhn of his county, which is another county participating in the second phase of the permanency practice initiative.

Doing three-month case reviews is very resource-intensive, Kuhn said. Yet the judge estimates the county is now doing three-month reviews in 90 to 95 percent of the county's dependency cases.

Having more frequent reviews by a judge pushes families to stay dedicated to the goals set for them, so they don't become lax and scramble at the last minute before a six-month review to show they have been working on the goals set for them by the court, Kuhn said.

"More frequent reviews keep everybody on the top of the case and hopefully shorten the time the court and the youth agency need to be involved in the family," Kuhn said.

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Kuhn conducted 284 dependency hearings in 2008. Adams County has 87 children in care, said Kathy McConaghay, administrator of the Adams County Children and Youth Services office.

When 12 employees from McConaghay’s office came back from an encore permanent practice initiative training held just two weeks ago, employees were already able to implement their training on how to find kin for children in foster care who hadn’t been previously known to case workers, McConaghay said.

O’Connor and McConaghay said the implementation of the initiative in their counties wouldn’t have happened without the increased involvement of a family court judge.

In Montgomery County, Common Pleas Judge Paul W. Tressler is spearheading the court’s involvement, O’Connor said. Tressler is on vacation and was not available to comment for this story, according to his chambers.

Funding for the initiative is entirely from federal grants from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, so Pennsylvania’s budget woes haven’t affected the continuance of the initiative, Moore said. Besides the annual trainings held on a regional basis, the initiative also is paying for computers and printers for the counties participating in the initiative so county officials can print orders in the courtroom for families appearing for three-month reviews, Moore said.

One of the three trainings held this year as part of the permanency practice initiative was in Luzerne County. The judicial scandal in Luzerne County started off with juvenile family court cases, not dependency family court cases, Moore noted, but “I was very pleased that Luzerne applied to be a phase-two county.”

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