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[Materials & Resources](#)

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Supreme Court Starts Initiative to Help Kids in Foster Care

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As Kevin Campbell travels around the country, he learns about the worst child abuse cases.

When Campbell, one of the nation’s leading experts on strategies to build support systems for kids in foster care, came to Pennsylvania recently, the fate of Danieal Kelly was on his mind.

Kids like Danieal, the 14-year-old girl with cerebral palsy who starved to death in her mother’s West Philadelphia home in 2006, are kept safe when they’re not isolated from a community that cares about them, Campbell said in an interview during a break in a training session sponsored by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. He has led trainings in the western, central and eastern parts of the state.

“The more people care about that kid and are looking in on that kid, the safer they are,” Campbell said.

Campbell’s audience Sept. 5 was made up of social workers, judges and other child welfare officials from 15 counties who will be the first to implement the Supreme Court’s permanency practice initiative that aims to keep children safe and stable by involving their extended family networks in planning their care.

The initiative aims to reduce the number of children in foster care and reduce the cost of keeping children in care.

Supreme Court Justice Max Baer is leading the statewide effort to improve outcomes in the commonwealth’s dependency courts for abused and neglected children. Chester and Montgomery counties, as well as 13 others, are the first counties to join the permanency practice full force. Other counties, including Philadelphia, are also undertaking a revolution in shifting the power from judges and caseworkers to families to decide the future of children in foster care. The state Department of Public Welfare’s Office of Children, Youth and Families is partnering with the court on the initiative.

Sandy Moore, the administrator of the Supreme Court’s Office of Children and Families in the Courts, said some of the practices to promote stability in the lives of kids were identified last year during the statewide children’s roundtable of children’s welfare stakeholders.

The children’s roundtable dialogue led to the Supreme Court’s permanency practice initiatives: reaching out to a wide network of family members to participate in family group decision-making and training social workers from the public sector and the private sector to help families be more self-sufficient, Moore said.

Almost a decade ago, Campbell began developing the strategy of family finding, which helps social workers find relatives and other loved ones who will commit to supporting children in foster care. Family finding feeds into family group decision-making. Family members hold a conference with a mediator to plan the best care for a child. The plan is subject to the approval of the child’s caseworker and the family court judge.

Campbell argues that people need to know where they come from and children in foster care are traumatized and isolated when they are separated from all of their relatives and their roots.

“Family finding finds the families, finds a larger net,” Moore said. “Family group decision-making allows everyone who cares about a child to come together and to create a plan for how they’re going to help protect a child and care for a child. It’s a very powerful process. It’s a process that really allows people closest to a child, who understand that child best, to come up with a plan that is then reviewed.”

Philadelphia Common Pleas Court Judge Daniel Anders ordered the first court-involved family group decision-making conference in the First Judicial District.

Anders directed a family to hold a conference after a contentious hearing in a case involving a single mother with five children. After the family convened and agreed upon what services should be in place for the children, the family came back into court 10 days later with smiles on their faces, Anders said. The conference empowered the family and focused on the strengths of the family, the judge added.

Families are more vested in the plans they create than the plans social workers create, and families are able to come up with the safest placement plans because families know things about their relatives that they might not share with unfamiliar social workers, 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 initiative also asks the courts to enter their dependency cases into the state’s dependency case management system.

Most of Pennsylvania’s counties have already started family group decision-making, but Campbell’s family finding model will make their family decision-making conferences more successful, Moore said.

Supreme Court Starts Initiative to Help Kids in Foster Care – Office of Children & Families in the Courts

Philadelphia Common Pleas Judge Kevin Dougherty, administrative judge of the family division, said he is working with Philadelphia Department of Human Services Commissioner Anne Marie Ambrose on family group decision-making.

The beauty of the “paradigm shift” to family decision-making is family members can be defined to include extended family, close friends, neighbors or anyone with a desire to maintain a family unit, Dougherty said.

“I believe if Philadelphia can implement this practice it will have national recognition,” Dougherty said. “It will have a ripple effect so children across the country can have permanency.”

Laurie O’Connor, director of the Montgomery County Office of Children & Youth, said the practice of maintaining connections between children and their communities assures “the rights of our children and families are best represented when there needs to be intervention by the court.”

Keith Hayes, director of Chester County Department of Children, Youth & Families, said there is some resistance to implementing these practices because “it puts decision making back on the families, not in the hands of professionals, not in the hands of a large bureaucratic system.”

But he said recent developments in the human services field have shattered the myth that caseworkers have all the expertise and families don’t.

“We are determined in Chester County to change the way we do the business in the next few years. We’re adamant,” Hayes said.

Campbell, who has consulted with child welfare systems in 48 states as well as other countries’ systems, has heard all too often the social services myth that children in foster care don’t have family.

But Campbell has learned that while three to eight relatives might be identified in a child welfare record, there might be 100 to 300 living relatives who could provide stability in that child’s life.

During a family finding project Campbell conducted in Cook County, Ill., Campbell said he worked with some of the “loneliest kids” &mdash teenagers who had been in care on average for 14 years, and some who had tried to commit suicide. These were the kids Campbell feared the most for if family finding failed to work for them.

“Who came here to disappoint a disappointed child, who wants to abandon an abandoned child?” he asked.

But when family finding was conducted for these teenagers, the relationships first identified by a social worker endured, grew and evolved without the support of a social worker, Campbell said.

The “loneliest kids” said family finding should be done for every child in foster care, Campbell said.

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