

PA Supreme Court Sponsors Family Group Decision-Making Conference
Court's Initiative is Improving Lives of Dependent Children

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In a keynote speech at the 2012 Pennsylvania Family Group Decision-Making (FGDM) Conference, Supreme Court Justice **Max Baer** told 300 judges, county commissioners, attorneys and child welfare professionals that the traditional dispute resolution system that works in other areas of the law is not an effective methodology to solve the complex problems facing dependent children who find themselves before the court.

"We must abandon the idea of the traditional court process where judges seek to determine what is best for a child during a relatively brief court proceeding. Instead, we must allow families, who know, love and are invested in children, to make the decisions as to how to raise these children," Justice Baer said. "You do that through family finding and family group decision-making."

Justice Baer challenged conference attendees to examine and expand their use of these practices.

"Old ways that produced old outcomes don't work, and it is harmful to children to continue doing what we know doesn't work...we know family groups work. Our challenge is to move this practice from 10 to 20 percent of families we see to 100 percent of families active in the child welfare system."

In addition to Justice Baer, conference attendees heard compelling testimony from parents, children and trial court judges as well as child welfare and juvenile justice professionals, regarding the effectiveness of family group decision-making. As one father panelist explained, "We had years of counseling and fighting in court. It wasn't until our judge 'strongly encouraged' us to have a family group decision-making meeting, that we stopped fighting." Another panelist, a mother on parole, stated, "FGDM saved my family," and turning to representatives from her county added, "I love you guys!"

Pennsylvania's family group decision-making process is designed to join the wider family unit, including relatives, friends, community members and others, in collectively making decisions to provide lifelong support for abused and neglected children. It empowers parents by providing them with a safe, supportive process to plan for their family's future. It involves communities and gives them a real voice in the protection of children.

The practice, which is available to varying degrees in most of Pennsylvania's 67 counties, takes significant up-front time, but in the end saves time and money.

"More importantly, it provides children with more capable families and stronger support systems," Justice Baer said.

Family Group Decision-Making is part of the statewide initiative to improve the lives of dependent children. "With enhanced judicial oversight and strength-based, family-led practices, our overriding goals are to safely keep children in their homes, safely return others to their homes, and when staying or returning home is not possible, we want to quickly find the best alternative permanent home for every child," said Sandy Moore, the Administrator of Pennsylvania's Office of Children and Families in the Courts.

Since 2006, this office, along with the Department of Public Welfare's Office of Children, Youth and Families and other partners have 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 in state monies as well as additional federal and local dollars.

Additional conference speakers included Department of Public Welfare Secretary, Gary Alexander; Office of Children, Youth and Families Deputy Secretary Beverly Mackereth; Dr. Felicia Haywood, Director of Student Affairs, Penn State Harrisburg and nationally certified/licensed counselor and Dauphin County Commissioner, George P. Hartwick III.

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