

## NEWS RELEASE

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### **New Office of Children and Families in the Courts Created by Supreme Court of Pennsylvania**

**HARRISBURG, October 19, 2006** — The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania today announced the creation of a new Office of Children and Families in the Courts, which initially will work with county family courts and child welfare officials to speed the placement into permanent homes of thousands of abused and neglected children. More than 20,000 such children throughout the state now live in foster care and other temporary residential settings.

Chief Justice of Pennsylvania Ralph J. Cappy said the goal of reuniting these children with their parents, placing them for adoption or placing them in other permanent homes is part of a broad commitment the Supreme Court has undertaken to make family courts more responsive to the needs of children and families.

"It is of utmost concern to me and to my colleagues on the Supreme Court to see that our family courts do everything possible to guide people through the troubles that have brought them into our legal system, and to set them on course toward better and more stable lives," Cappy said. "In each situation, the courts must act wisely and well. Nothing is more important than to restore stability to troubled families."

The principle goal of the Office of Children and Families in the Courts, which is a part of the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC), is to minimize the length of time that dependent children, who have been removed from their parents under court order because of abuse or neglect, must spend in foster care or in other temporary living situations. They are called "dependent" children because they literally are dependent on the courts and the child welfare system for their protection.

Too often, a dependent child spends years in foster care or in a group home or a residential institution. It is widely agreed among child welfare professionals that dependent children, already traumatized by neglect or abuse, should not be kept for unnecessarily long periods in foster care or other nonpermanent residences.

The new Office of Children and Families in the Courts, headed by Andrea Hoffman Jelin, was created to coordinate a statewide effort to better manage and accelerate the cases of dependent children.

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The office will work toward these goals:

- To have a permanent placement plan for each dependent child within one year.
- To provide more intensive training, in collaboration with the relatively new Judicial Education Department of the AOPC, for judges who handle cases of dependent children.
- To seek more active leadership by judges in working with the child welfare system to develop a team approach in dealing with dependency cases.
- To assure frequent court hearings for each dependent child.
- To assure that judges are given necessary time and resources to reach the best decision, with a minimum of delay, for each child.

An additional goal will be to establish a structure for family courts in all counties to share information with each other on "best practices" in the handling of dependency cases.

"The lives of these children are often filled with sadness and uncertainty," said Jelin. "Some of them may spend years living in limbo, away from their families and without permanent homes. Every child living in care needs a permanent home."

Chief Justice Cappy said that Justice Max Baer, a former administrative judge of family court in Allegheny County, will act on behalf of the Supreme Court in guiding the Office of Children and Families in the Courts in its efforts to improve the plight of dependent children.

"Justice Baer has shown a deep commitment to all people whose cases are heard in family courts," Cappy said. "It is my goal, his goal and the goal of the entire Supreme Court to improve the lives of all dependent children in Pennsylvania."

The Office of Children and Families in the Courts will be funded with federal grants under a program called the Court Improvement Project, which is run by the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The Office of Children and Families in the Courts joins other recent initiatives of the Supreme Court designed to modernize and improve the court system throughout Pennsylvania. Those initiatives include, among others, programs that are designed to provide trained court interpreters; assist in the establishment of specialty – or problem-solving – courts, such drug and DUI courts; and train judges in general and specialized areas of jurisprudence, using the most advanced educational techniques available.

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