



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

## MEDIA ADVISORY

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### **PA Supreme Court to Co-sponsor 2009 International Conference Aimed at Improving Outcomes for Abused and Neglected Children**

**HARRISBURG, June 2, 2009** — The Pennsylvania Supreme Court will co-sponsor the 2009 American Humane Conference on Family Group Decision Making and Other Family Engagement Approaches at the Westin Convention Center in Pittsburgh on June 3 through June 5. The conference will feature several child welfare experts discussing a variety of practices aimed at improving the outcomes for abused and neglected children.

Marie Belew Wheatley, President and CEO, American Humane; Estelle Richman, Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare and Conference Co-Chair, and Dwayne D. Woodruff, former Pittsburgh Steeler Super Bowl Champion, and current Juvenile Court Judge in Allegheny County, will provide opening remarks at 8:00 a.m., Wednesday, June 3.

**State Supreme Court Justice Max Baer**, also co-chair of the event, will provide remarks during a plenary session on Friday, June 5 at 8:00 a.m. Justice Baer will highlight the work being done through the Children's Roundtable Initiative and the Office of Children and Families in the Courts. The focus of that work is to find an extended family willing and able to provide a safe, loving environment for a dependent child and to reduce the use of traditional practices to place a child in the care of a stranger.

**Your coverage is invited.**

Justice Baer, a former administrative judge of family court in Allegheny County, who is guiding these efforts on behalf of the Supreme Court, encourages all child welfare professionals and judicial officers to attend for a learning experience designed to forever change their work for children and families.

This year's conference, which draws professionals from across the United States and other countries, includes a "legal track" for the first time ever. This new emphasis on the legal community and the courts is a direct result of the work being done by Pennsylvania dependency courts to promote better outcomes for children and families by first keeping them safely within their own homes/communities and, when that is not possible, placing them with relatives.

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“The key to successful child intervention is to minimize the trauma,” Justice Baer said. “We have already implemented Family Finding and Family Group Decision Making practices to make every effort to first find all family members who might help an abused or neglected child, and then give those family members an opportunity to care for the child, thus avoiding adversarial court proceedings or the perils of stranger foster care.”

Sixty-three of Pennsylvania’s 67 counties have implemented Family Group Decision Making – a process through which family members and individuals with significant ties to a dependant child devise a plan for the care and welfare of that child and present it to the court for approval and implementation. To date, thousands of the family-generated plans have been approved by the courts.

Family Finding – the strategy aimed at finding lost or forgotten relatives and others significant to a child willing and able to provide lifelong support for abused and neglected children – has been implemented in 14 counties, resulting in a seven-fold increase in the number of relatives indentified as a potential resource for a dependent child.

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*Editors notes: The International Family Group Decision Making Conference is an annual conference sponsored by the American Humane Association.*

*The Office of Children and Families in the Courts was created within the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts in October 2006 with the broad goal of making family courts more responsive to the needs of children and families.*