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CONTACT:

[Steve Schell](#), Communications Coordinator
(717) 231-3331

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Supreme Court Issues Judicial Guide to Benefit Children, Families *Complex Social, Developmental and Interpersonal Issues Inherent* *in Child Dependency Cases*

HARRISBURG, PA, July 28, 2011—The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania today issued an 800-page guide, developed by judges for judges, to enhance their ability to handle the complex social, developmental and interpersonal issues inherent in court dependency cases involving abused and neglected children.

“This guide is a valuable resource that presents a social science context for the complex and challenging decisions being made daily by all who sit in dependency court,” said Justice Max Baer who oversaw the effort on behalf of the Supreme Court. “It covers topics that are part of our day-to-day work, but not part of the training we receive as lawyers and judges.”

Over the last year, a team of experienced judges and social science experts spent countless hours of thoughtful review and analysis to develop resource material designed to assist judges and judicial officers in 14 areas, including child attachment and bonding; child development; domestic violence; grief and loss; individual case planning; mental health; neglect and deprivation; physical/sexual/emotional abuse; placement; safety and risk; substance abuse; transitioning youth; trauma; and visitation.

The guide is part of the Court's on-going efforts to improve the lives of Pennsylvania's abused and neglected children, getting them out of temporary foster care and into safe, permanent homes. It serves as a supplemental resource to the previously released Dependency Benchbook which has become the central document for dependency proceedings in Pennsylvania and is used by countless judges to the benefit of children and families. Each section of the supplemental guide connects the elements of social science to the many judicial proceedings and practices outlined in the judicial benchbook.

“Like the Dependency Benchbook,” Justice Baer said, “this resource guide is an historic effort, and we collectively agree it will result in healthier children, stronger families and, ultimately, a more vigorous and productive Pennsylvania.”

Lackawanna County Common Pleas Court Judge Chester Harhut chaired the Dependency Benchbook Committee and efforts to develop the supplemental resource guide. Expert consultants

included Dr. Judith Silver, PhD, Pediatric Psychologist, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia; Dr. Pearl S. Berman, Professor of Psychology, Indiana University of Pennsylvania; Jim Nice, Family Unity Project; and Kevin Campbell, Founder, Center for Family Finding and Youth Connectedness—an agency that specializes in reconnecting foster care children with lost biological family members through specialized investigative techniques including an internet-based search technology, when needed.

In 2006 the Supreme Court began efforts to reduce delays in placing abused and neglected children safely and permanently in loving, caring homes and to improve the lives of abused and neglected children. Those efforts, which have been led by the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts' Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC), in close partnership with the state Department of Public Welfare's Office of Children, Youth and Families, are paying off.

State Department of Welfare statistics show a consistent decline in the number of Pennsylvania children in foster care. In September 2006 there were more than 21,000 Pennsylvania foster homes. By September 2010, that number had dropped below 15,000, resulting in an estimated savings of \$220 million in the costs for administering foster care programs throughout Pennsylvania.

The creation of the resource guide and the OCFC was made possible through Court Improvement Project grant run by the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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