

Work to guide and improve foster care grows in size and deed



Roundtable sessions such as this one in Snyder County boost services.

Children in Pennsylvania’s foster care system are benefiting from a statewide effort to enhance family court services.

This achievement was reached through a collaboration of the courts and child welfare agencies known as the Pennsylvania Roundtables for Children Initiative (CRT). The three-tiered program consists of local roundtables in each of the state’s 60 judicial districts, seven regional leadership roundtables and one state roundtable.

In 2006 Pennsylvania’s Supreme Court asked judicial districts to voluntarily convene a local roundtable group to examine and enhance the operations of their child dependency system. Since that time, local CRTs have grown in number, size and accomplishments.

“This local communication structure has become the foundation for moving our dependency system forward in a consistent, uniform and informed manner,” Justice **Max Baer** said. “It permits our courts to work with local human service agencies, community-oriented police, schools, charities and the like to address critical issues related to child safety, well-being and permanency. It’s resulted in more children in safe, loving and permanent families.”

“Through our local roundtable, we have revolutionized the whole child welfare system in Venango County,” President Judge **Oliver J. Lobaugh** said. “The cornerstone of our success has been our all-inclusive approach with members of the roundtable, and engaging families and kids.”

Since 2006, the Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC), along with the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services and other partners, has reduced the number of dependent children in temporary foster care homes by 33 percent. Studies show that putting children into

permanent homes greatly improves their chances to succeed while also significantly reducing costs.

Montgomery County Judge **Wendy Demchick-Alloy** reports that her county’s roundtable meetings draw an impressive attendance – often with standing room only.

“I think that the high attendance demonstrates the severity and urgency of the issues we address, but also our commitment to the children,” she said.

The roundtable provides a means for participants to communicate, generate ideas, address misconceptions, share information and educate one another on issues impacting children.

“Everyone has a voice, and the momentum generated by our judge has been contagious, with a high level of commitment from a core group of volunteers,” added **Laurie O’Connor**, Children and Youth Director in Montgomery County.

Some local CRTs focus only on children and families involved in the dependency and child welfare systems. Other counties have taken a broader focus to enhance the lives and promote the health, safety and welfare of *all* children and families in the county.

“I attribute our success to our broad mission; broader membership and true cross-systems, collaborative approach to helping children and families – at home, in court, in school, in the community and in our service agencies,” Monroe County Judge **Jonathan Mark** said.

“We’ve tackled many issues, but I look forward to focusing on new changes in the law related to bringing normalcy to our foster children and developing new programs to address identified problems before they become unmanageable,” Snyder-Union counties Judge **Michael H. Sholley** said.

A few of the issues addressed by local CRTs include family group decision-making, family finding, data collection, children of incarcerated parents, permanency and placement trends, trauma, substance abuse, psychotropic medications, father engagement, truancy and school success, transitional youth and visitation practices.

Fayette County Judge **Linda Cordaro** said, “Bringing together the agency, parents’ attorneys, guardians *ad litem* and the court

empowers us to solve problems before they snowball, and reinforces that we're all working together to serve families, protect children and provide permanency."

"Local CRTs are critical to the overall structure of the Roundtables for Children Initiative, as ideas and issues addressed by the statewide and leadership roundtables really begin at the local level," said **Sandy Moore**, OCFC director.

As for words of advice for counties considering implementing a local children's roundtable, Lehigh County

Judge **J. Brian Johnson** says, "Identify a strong leader, get sincere buy-in from partners, allow partners at the table to identify concerns and develop a collective means to address them and celebrate successes." **AOPC**

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INFORMATION

For more information on the Pennsylvania Children's Roundtable Initiative, visit the OCFC's website at <http://www.ocfcpcourts.us/>.



Saving face(s)

Jefferson County commemorated Constitution Day with the ceremonial unveiling of the refurbished portraits of three former president judges who served the northwestern Pennsylvania judicial district. The three (pictured above, left to right: **Elijah Heath Clark, John W. Reed** and **Charles Corbet**) join

the portraits of six other president judges hanging in the large courtroom at the county courthouse in Brookville. The refurbishing project was planned, funded and produced by the Jefferson County commissioners, Jefferson County



President Judge John H. Foradora

Bar Association and the Jefferson County History Center. President Judge Clark is the great great-uncle of Court Administrator of Pennsylvania **Tom Darr** (third from right), who was on hand for the event. The portrait of Darr's grandfather, **William Thompson Darr**, who served as president judge from 1925-1935, also hangs in the courtroom. Current Jefferson County President Judge **John H. Foradora** (second from right) delivered the keynote address. Also participating was Magisterial District Judge **Gregory M. Bazylak** (far left)

of Brookville. Jefferson County Bar Association President Joseph H. Ellermeier is pictured above right along with Carole Briggs, curator of the Jefferson County Historical Society. **AOPC**