

Stronger together:

Judicial districts are hitting the gas, not the brakes, on family engagement

By **Angela Sager**, Office of Children and Families in the Courts' judicial analyst

Now, more than ever, staying connected matters and no one understands that better than the 15 Pennsylvania judicial districts participating in the Pennsylvania State Roundtables' Family Engagement Initiative (FEI).

The Roundtable is a collaborative effort among state and national court and child welfare professionals, started by Supreme Court Justice **Max Baer** and now led by Justice **Kevin Dougherty** on behalf of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, Jon Rubin, Department of Human Services, Deputy Secretary for the Office of Children, Youth, and Families and **Sandy Moore**, Director of the AOPC's Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC).

More than 15 years after creating the Roundtable, Justice Baer reflected on the important work being done. "We've come far, helping thousands of children and families along the way, but we have more work to do. I believe the FEI is going to make Pennsylvania's child dependency system the best in the world."

The FEI's primary goals are to increase family involvement, reduce trauma to children and decrease the time children are separated from those who love and care about them. The core FEI practices used to accomplish these goals include

enhanced legal representation, Family Finding-Revised and Crisis/Rapid Response Family Meetings. The FEI counties receive additional support and resources through the OCFC.

Selected judicial districts

Selected judicial districts and their county child welfare agencies apply for and are selected into the Initiative.

The FEI first started in 2018 with five counties: Blair, Clinton, Lackawanna, Northampton and Union. In 2019, six additional counties were designated to participate: Beaver, Butler, Fayette, Snyder, Tioga and Venango.

Four additional counties – Dauphin, Lehigh, Northumberland and Philadelphia – started the FEI in February 2020 just six-short weeks before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"In the middle of dealing with the unexpected operational challenges

brought on by the pandemic, these judicial districts and their local partners remained focused on their commitment to the FEI, recognizing that involving families and promoting connections is at the core of what keeps children safe and helps families heal," Justice Dougherty said.

Moving forward with resilience

Part of the education that FEI counties receive is on the topic of resilience. They learn how positive, reliable relationships remain at the core of building and strengthening resiliency in all of us, and especially children.

"Despite the pandemic, we have continued the timely rollout of FEI, which is our highest priority in our dependency system," said Administrative Judge of Philadelphia Family Court **Margaret T. Murphy**.

"We recognize the importance of this initiative and the positive impact it has on our most vulnerable children and

(continued ...)



January 2020: Just weeks before the pandemic hit, Philadelphia Family Court hosts an FEI Education Session conducted by OCFC for more than 250 judicial officers, lawyers and child welfare professionals.

families. FEI is not just an initiative in Philadelphia; it is a movement.”

Positive Outcomes

FEI counties continue to show positive outcomes. Some of these outcomes include: children under court supervision for shorter time periods, more dependent children remaining safely in their own home and more children in kinship care when out-of-home placement is needed.

While all three practices are designed to work together, of particular note is the data coming from Crisis/Rapid Response Family Meetings. These meetings gather family and kin to help quickly following an emergent

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event that will likely result in a child’s removal from their home and occur generally prior to court involvement.

In 2019, when families were involved immediately in a Crisis/

Rapid Response Family Meeting, 97 percent of children remained safely in their own home or were placed with someone they love and very few became court involved.

These FEI counties, through their strong collaborative relationships and commitment to child and family well-being, have demonstrated that despite the uncertainty of COVID-19, their own resilience has helped them succeed.

This work is supported through the federal Court Improvement Program Grant designed to assist state courts with enhancing oversight of child welfare cases. [AOPC](#)

NEW DATA SHED LIGHT ON PANDEMIC-RELATED BACKLOGS



When the coronavirus pandemic forced courts to suspend in-person hearings [in 2020] case filings plummeted, and court leaders predicted that a flood of new filings later this year would cause backlogs that would bog down court dockets for months, if not years.

To be sure, backlogs are an issue for state courts to address, but data from 11 states – the first substantial batch that has been analyzed since the pandemic began – show that the problem this year may not be as bad as initially thought, at least not in those states.

The number of cases filed in those states were notably low in traffic, juvenile and criminal courts. Case filings have returned to normal in probate courts and are not expected to spike in 2021. Courts may experience formidable backlogs in domestic relations and dependency cases next year, as well as in civil cases next year and beyond.

NCSC asked all 50 states for data and received it from 11, including states with large populations (Texas, Ohio and Pennsylvania) and small (Idaho and Alaska), but the sample size is not large enough to make conclusions about the nation as a whole, said NCSC researcher Diane Robinson, who analyzed the data.

Robinson made other observations and predictions:

- Civil cases are likely to rise. To take foreclosures as an example, there are a lot of people who aren’t going to get on the right side of their mortgages.
- Improved economies often mean estranged, married couples can afford to separate. When the economy improves, as it may next year, expect to see a surge in divorce cases in domestic relations courts.
- Individual courts in one of those 11 states may experience something different than other courts. That means some courts may experience severe backlogs in, say, juvenile courts, despite what the data show when combined across states.
- The biggest surprise from the data? Courts are seeing backlogs, but they’re not huge.

Although there is positive news in this data, Robinson urges court officials to keep a close eye on their filings and dispositions so they can prepare for potential backlogs that may not seem apparent now.

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