

# Dependency courts in the family engagement initiative focus efforts on implicit bias and the urgency of awareness

Earlier this year, The Office of Children and Families in the Courts held the largest virtual-education event ever hosted by the AOPC with more than 800 participants from Pennsylvania dependency courts and child welfare agencies, who are part of the State Roundtable's Family Engagement Initiative (FEI).

Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice **Kevin Dougherty** opened the session and encouraged participants to be very intentional in examining beliefs and biases.

Justice Dougherty said, "What we believe impacts how we behave and when we self-reform, we judicially reform."

"The Urgency of Awareness: Unlocking The Power within Individual, Organizational and Community Efforts," was presented by national expert and author Jodi Pfarr.

Since 2001, Pfarr has conducted seminars with police departments, judges, teachers, religious institutions, social service workers and fire departments. She is the author of Tactical Communication: Law enforcement tools for successful encounters with people from poverty, middle class and wealth.

The session focused on gaining a deeper awareness of the various societal categorizations placed upon us such as:

- married or non-married
- formally educated or informally educated
- white or of color
- working poor/impoverished or middle/upper class

Pfarr emphasized that "there is an urgency of awareness in our world," and these categories help shape the lenses through which we see ourselves and others. By gaining a better understanding of these categories, we can decrease

our implicit bias and improve our subconscious awareness.

"It has been incredible to see the willingness of those within Pennsylvania's dependency court system to gain more individual awareness and apply that new awareness to the system itself," said Pfarr. "This type of drive and application is crucial on the march towards systems with equitable outcomes for children and families."

Following Pfarr's session overview, Beaver, Blair, Snyder and Union Counties were selected to work more directly with Pfarr to further examine how having a better understanding of these societal categorizations can enhance their engagement of families and impact their specific county work in the FEI and dependency system overall.

"We've accomplished much in the FEI and see this work with Ms. Pfarr as being the next step to improving the quality of service provided to the children and families that come before our court," said Judge **Michael Sholley**, Snyder/Union Counties. "Knowledge helps us understand people's behavior...not to excuse behavior, but to fashion our interventions and our systems in ways that are more likely to result in meaningful change."

Blair County President Judge **Elizabeth Doyle** added, "We are excited about this opportunity. It's a significant commitment of judicial time, but one that is certain to enhance our understanding, meaningful engagement of families, and positive outcomes for the children and families that come before our court."

These four counties will begin their work with Pfarr next month (September 2021) and the opportunity will include:

- Directly working with Pfarr 2.5 hours each week for five weeks.

- Participating in two, hour long follow-up meetings.
- Reflecting upon how their own life experiences shape how they see and interact with people, as well as how these experiences play out in their professional role within the Societal System.
- Completing an analysis of their organization/system and creating a plan for moving their organization/system towards healthier engagement between people with differing categories.
- Using specific tools and resources to assist in their journey.

Each county group will consist of the county dependency judge and child welfare administrator, along with 25 participants selected by the judge and administrator.

"Beaver County has embraced this opportunity to unlock our minds from the implicit bias that may be hindering our path to true, unfettered understanding, compassion and empathy for those we serve and everyone that we interact with in our lives," said Judge **Mitchell Shahan**, Beaver County.

## Family Engagement Initiative:

"While we are extremely proud of the work being done in each FEI county and their outcomes are better than we imagined possible, we are especially excited about the work these three judicial districts will be doing with Ms. Pfarr," said **Sandy Moore**, director, Office of Children and Families in the Courts. "Gaining a deeper understanding of how our life experiences impact our interaction with others is sure to improve the work being done to help children and families."

To date, 15 counties have been selected as FEI participants out of 67 counties:

Beaver, Blair, Butler, Clinton, Dauphin, Fayette, Lackawanna, Lehigh,

Northampton, Northumberland, Philadelphia, Snyder, Tioga, Union and Venango.

These counties have the distinction of being selected to enhance their system for children and families. All 15 FEI counties, including dependency judges, dependency juvenile court hearing officers, attorneys, child welfare professionals and state and community partners attended the

virtual education event with Pfarr.

The overall goal of the FEI is to engage families in a more genuine and meaningful way so that when a child comes into the system, the county is reaching out to the family, friends and community of that child/parent to provide support and decrease trauma.

It's no secret that people need connections – and sometimes

those connections get lost. The focus for counties is generally to help find, sustain and rebuild these relationships by enhancing three components of practice:

- Enhanced Family Finding
- Enhanced Legal Representation
- Crisis/Rapid Response Family Meetings. ▲



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### Connected in Purpose

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After losing her son Isaiah during a medical emergency in 2019, AOPC IT Asset Coordinator **Alice Rahn** and her husband decided that each year, they wanted to do something special in his honor.

Last year, they helped to fund a ministry soccer, basketball and volleyball field in Haiti, and as they were thinking about what to do this year, they felt called to aid another international mission.

“I began learning about human trafficking and as I was in prayer about this issue, I felt led to help with the rescue efforts. In doing so, we would be connected in purpose with Isaiah,” Alice said.

It was around this same time that their friends were building recovery safe houses in Belize and while they initially thought about building a recovery house there, they soon learned about another couple in Nepal who have rescued over 1,000 women and children and were in danger of losing their home.

“One reason we decided to help Nepal is because, the victims have to pay for their prosecution, and since many are poor, it is a real issue for crime and sexual offenses there,” Alice explained.

*“We are lucky to live in a nation that prosecutes criminals, but many of the people in Nepal don't have the funds to do so. Answer International helps to prosecute criminals by paying for the prosecution and as a court employee, this was a big draw for me.”*

With the goal to help raise \$100,000, Alice and her husband organized a fundraiser where all funds went to Answer International for the purchase of a recovery/safe house with a trauma center for sex- trafficked women and children.

The fundraising event – held on Aug. 21 at The Dream at Top Notch in Bloomfield, Pa. – consisted of a catered meal, live entertainment, live and silent auctions, a cash raffle and T-shirt sales. Also part of the fundraising efforts was a memorial motorcycle ride the week prior on Aug. 14. ▲

**moreinformation**

More information about the charity is available at <https://answerinternational.org/>.