

# Kinship Care Placement with Family or Friends is Focus of Pa. Dependency Court Attorney Educational Session

On Aug. 15 at the Inn at Villanova, the Pennsylvania State Roundtable's Kinship Care Taskforce concluded its third statewide, regional education session for dependency court attorneys.

The State Roundtable is made up of state and national leaders with specific expertise in dependency matters and the Taskforce is chaired by Justice **Kevin M. Dougherty** on behalf of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. Kinship care refers to grandparents, other relatives and even family friends who are caring for children.

The sessions provided dependency court attorneys with the same education previously provided to dependency court judges, hearing officers and child welfare professionals on the importance of safe kinship care use when a child can no longer remain in the care of their parents/guardians.

Over 80 dependency court attorneys representing 10 eastern counties were in attendance.

Justice Dougherty opened the session with a message from the bench on prioritizing safe kinship care.

"Removing a child from their home can be a traumatic experience for children and their parents, but one that can be lessened by enlisting the support of relatives and kin," said Justice Dougherty. "We must do better at creating a sense of urgency around kinship care. We must help preserve family and culture when a child is removed from their home."

Philadelphia Family Court Supervising Judge **Walter**



**J. Olszewski** spoke next, emphasizing the positive impact of high-quality legal representation in dependency court proceedings.

"Attorneys play a critical role in bringing forth kinship options for the judge's consideration," Judge Olszewski said. "It's not enough to wait for the child welfare agency to present information on kin. An attorney should talk to their client, gather the names of available kin and advocate on behalf of their client in court."

Taskforce members Cathy Volponi, Esq., director, Allegheny County Bar Foundation Juvenile Court Project, and Marisa McClellan, Esq., administrator, Dauphin County Social Services for Children and Youth, led a discussion on the role of the guardian ad litem, parent attorney, child welfare solicitor and counsel for the child. **Cori Dunn**, Esq., Office of Children and Families in the Courts judicial analyst, provided a thorough legal analysis of kinship care.

Research shows that when children are placed with relatives or kin, outcomes are better in the following areas:

- Placement stability.
- School stability and positive educational outcomes.
- Reduced re-entry into the child welfare system.
- Permanency through reunification, adoption or guardianship.
- Better physical, behavioral and mental health outcomes.
- Increased likelihood of living with or staying connected to siblings.
- Greater preservation of race and cultural identity, including community connections.

Currently in Pennsylvania, 44 percent of all children in out-of-home care are placed in kinship care, compared to 20 percent in 2006, according to CPCMS data. Nationally, this number is 35 percent (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022).

Presently, 25 counties are at or above the statewide average, an increase of five counties from the previous year, and 16 counties have at least half of all out-of-home children living in kinship care.