

Chapter 1 - The Charge for Pennsylvania's Dependency System

“If we save the body but in so doing destroy the mind and soul of a child, what good have we really done? We must focus on the whole child, the whole parent, the whole family to bring a child to adulthood as a whole person. Only when we do this for every child will we consider our work a success.”

*Honorable Max Baer, Pennsylvania Supreme Court Chief Justice,
(2021-2022)*

American courts have had a central role in the protection of children since the first modern child welfare case, that of Mary Ellen Wilson, an eight-year-old girl who had for years been whipped, frozen, starved, and otherwise severely abused by her guardians before coming to the attention of “charitable visitors” in 1874 and being brought under the control of the New York Supreme Court pursuant to the Habeas Corpus Act. Mary Ellen’s plight and the public outrage it stirred led to the creation of the first child protection organization, the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, as well as some of the first laws aimed at protecting children from exploitation, abuse, and neglect at the hands of those with responsibility for their care.

Since that time, cases involving alleged child abuse and neglect have required courts to strike a delicate balance between parental rights and children’s rights, between family stability and child safety, stability, and permanency. This Benchbook is intended to help judicial officers strike that balance in a way that is consistent with the *Mission and Guiding Principles for Pennsylvania’s Child Dependency System*, which was created by the Children’s Roundtable Initiative in 2009 and endorsed by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, the Juvenile Court Judges’ Commission, the Department of Public Welfare’s (now known as the Department of Human Services) Office of Children, Youth and Families and the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania. That foundational document, reproduced at the end of this chapter, identifies four fundamental mission priorities for all professionals involved in Pennsylvania’s child welfare system: **protecting children, promoting strong families, promoting child well-being, and providing timely permanency**. Embedding these mission priorities into all aspects of the child dependency system will lead to better outcomes for our children and a brighter future for our communities.

One overarching principle emerges from the Mission and Guiding Principles document and is woven throughout this Benchbook: **the vital importance of judicial**

leadership in the child welfare arena. That includes both administrative leadership in collaboration with the child welfare agency and other professionals that comprise the child welfare system, as well as courtroom leadership that ensures all parties remain focused on the goals of safe and timely permanency while reducing potential trauma to the child.

In addition, wherever possible, practical, court-tested techniques that serve to further the goals of the Mission and Guiding Principles are suggested throughout the Benchbook. These techniques and the Benchbook as a whole support several themes including:

Strong Judicial Leadership & Oversight – All judicial districts should identify a lead dependency judge. Unlike the Juvenile Probation Department (see Juvenile Court Judges' Commission (JCJC) *Standards Governing the Administration of Juvenile Court* for more information), the court does not have direct oversight of the child welfare agency. Even so, judges need to develop an administrative partnership with agency leadership that informs and strengthens the local child dependency system. This includes regular, consistent, collaborative administrative interaction with the agency, identification of gaps in services for children and families, and vocalization of the overall dependency system mission. One way to accomplish this is by participating in the development of the agency's Needs Based Plan and Budget (NBPB), an administrative role for the judge despite the agency's party status (See Chapter 20: General Issues, Section 20.11: Planning & Funding Services). Another way includes the development and support of a robust local Children's Roundtable convened by the lead dependency judge and co-facilitated with the child welfare administrator.




Active and ongoing court oversight – In dependency matters, the court maintains oversight until court supervision of the case is terminated. This Benchbook encourages the sitting judge or hearing officer to actively listen and ask questions that challenge all those before the court to expedite safe permanency for the child and family involved in each case. More frequent, thorough, and timely court oversight can move children to safe permanency expeditiously and simultaneously ensure a child's emotional, social, and physical well-being.

One judge/one family – Given the complexity of most dependency matters, having one judge hear the family's entire dependency case, from the initial hearing until the conclusion of court involvement, is preferred. This approach applies to hearing officers in jurisdictions utilizing them and includes the judge's oversight. This practice promotes stability and continuity throughout the case to help ensure children's emotional, psychological, and physical safety, well-being, and timely permanency.

Early appointment of competent, well-trained legal counsel – The assignment of competent, well-trained legal counsel for all parties is extremely important in dependency proceedings. Understanding one's rights and responsibilities, as well as the potential legal consequences of action or inaction, is critical to the outcome of a case. As such, courts should ensure that counsel for all parties is well-trained and well-equipped to provide comprehensive and thorough client representation. Additionally, counsel

should be appointed as early as possible upon filing a dependency petition, preferably before the shelter hearing.

Continuous focus on safety – Paramount in all child dependency matters is the issue of safety. Safety includes both physical and emotional aspects of a child's development. While parents and family are ordinarily the foundation for child safety, when this fails, the responsibility shifts to the child welfare professionals and, ultimately, the court. Assessments, decisions, plans, and follow-ups regarding emotional and physical safety are key elements of the dependency system and must be attended to at each judicial review.

Timely processing – Childhood is an incredibly short span of time, with dramatic development needing to occur as the foundation of all subsequent health and well-being. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that children who grow up in stable, loving, permanent family environments do much better in all areas of adult living. Accordingly, timely service implementation, judicial review, and decision-making are critical. **To the extent possible, courts should strongly discourage the use of continuances in dependency proceedings.**  **These are urgent matters that directly affect the lives of children and deserve timely processing.** In the rare instance that a continuance is granted, judges should hold the next hearing as quickly as possible, reminding parties of the urgency of the moment. The issue of timeliness and recommended optimal time requirements is highlighted throughout the Benchbook.

Concurrent planning – The court is ultimately responsible for ensuring permanency for all dependent children, either by safe reunification or securing a safe, alternative, permanent home for the child. Simultaneous planning for both options is necessary to achieve the overarching goal that all children grow up in loving, permanent homes. Accordingly, specific elements of concurrent planning will be highlighted at each stage of the dependency court process.

Service front-loading – This Benchbook recognizes the importance of providing services for children and families upon the initiation of the case. The more quickly services are provided to families, the more likely they are to engage in services, thereby achieving more timely permanency.

Maintaining family connections – Act 118 of 2022: Family Finding (67 P.S. §§ 7501-7509), originally enacted into law in Pennsylvania as Act 55 of 2013, underscores the importance of maintaining family connections, involving extended family and kin in service planning and delivery, and strengthening supportive networks. This Benchbook emphasizes the importance of family connections, even in cases where families may not be reunified, and calls attention to the emotional damage that can be caused to children when proper steps are not taken to maintain these connections while ensuring child safety. Family finding is about the involvement of family and kin and the supportive network they wrap around a child and family; it is not just about finding a placement for a child. (See also Chapter 2: Act 118 of 2022: Family Finding.)

Keeping siblings together – Central to the need to maintain family connections is the more specific need to maintain sibling connections. Often, siblings see one another as the only link to their families, and many older siblings feel responsible for the care and well-being of younger siblings. Placing all siblings together will be highlighted unless this is not warranted for safety reasons. When placing children together is not possible, frequent and safe sibling contact should be prioritized to promote child well-being.

“I spent so much time scared, angry and confused. I know things could have been different for me if someone would have realized how important it was for me to be connected to my family.”

- D.S., 20, Former Pennsylvania Foster Youth

Engaging fathers – Identifying, locating, and involving fathers early in the court process, ensuring needed services are provided in a gender-sensitive manner, arranging for meaningful/frequent contact, and including paternal relatives in the care and planning for children are critical to a court system that values child well-being. Special attention to the needs of fathers is presented at each stage of the process, including a benchcard specific to fatherhood.

Using kinship care and “least restrictive” placements – With the passage of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 and Act 55 of 2013: Family Finding and Kinship Care (currently Act 118 of 2022), the need to identify and involve kin has become more important than ever. In the past, kin have often not been considered as resources because popular belief dictated that if the parents were inadequate, then their relatives must be as well. This has been proven to be a myth, and with innovative tools such as Family Finding and web-based search engines, extended families and kin can be found more often and with more success. Once located, a thorough and unbiased assessment may identify appropriate kinship supports.

Early implementation of visitation – “Family time (visitation) should be liberal and presumed unsupervised unless there is a demonstrated safety risk to the child.” Gatowski, S. et al., *Enhanced Resource Guidelines: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse and Neglect Cases* 16 (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges 2016). As with the front-loading of services mentioned earlier, the timely implementation of an appropriate visitation schedule is imperative to manage the child’s level of stress caused by the removal. Research has shown that, in most instances, children benefit from frequent, meaningful, and regular visitation. Parental and sibling contact often enhances children’s emotional well-being and adjustment during periods of out-of-home care and improves parents’ positive feelings about the placement while decreasing their worries about their children. Further, successful visitation is strongly correlated with achieving the placement outcome of safe reunification, achieving other permanency planning outcomes, and decreasing time in care. (See also Chapter 8: Visitation.)

Individualized services identified with family input – The cookie cutter approach to providing services to families does not work. Each family with which the system works is different, and services need to be tailored to fit each family’s individual needs. Additionally, these needs change over time and, as such, the service provided should be adjusted to

meet changing needs. The identification and delivery of services is best accomplished through a collaborative process with the family. In most situations, this collaborative process can begin before the court has taken jurisdiction of the matter.

Creating a culture and expectation of a non-adversarial process – The use of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) has significantly moderated the traditional adversarial approach to dependency court and the tendency to focus attention and energy on winning rather than children's best interests. ADR approaches provide an opportunity for parents to be empowered to determine their own solutions. This shift from traditional court approaches to family and solution-focused approaches requires significant change in court business processes, but its benefits far override any difficulties with implementation.

Promoting educational success – Educational stability and the success of a child are often seen as key predictors in a child's positive transition to adulthood. For many reasons, children in foster care may struggle with this issue. As such, each child's academic strengths and challenges should be regularly assessed, and resources and support should be provided as needed. In addition, every effort should be made to maximize school stability, even when the actual living situation of a child must change. A child's friends, teachers, and other school personnel are often incredibly important to the child and sometimes the only consistent relationships in a child's life. Minimizing disruption of these relationships may promote educational and future life success.

Recognizing and reducing trauma for children and families

– While it is easy to recognize the physical toll that abuse and neglect at home can have on children who come into court, it is critical to understand that the events that lead to a dependency proceeding are traumatic for children and parents. In addition to the specific events that lead to court action, many of the children and families have experienced multiple traumatic events in their lives. Indeed, the average ACE (adverse childhood experiences) score for dependent children is 8 out of 10, which carries life-threatening consequences when unaddressed. (For more information on ACEs, see Chapter 2: Act 118 of 2022: Family Finding, Section 2.2 The Importance of Meaningful, Life-Long Connections.)

"I just wanted to be a normal kid, but foster children never feel normal. We always feel as if other kids know our histories, what ugly events led to our being pulled from our homes. In my case, I've felt different my whole life."

- J.B., 18, Former Pennsylvania Foster Youth

Moreover, the traumatic toll that the dependency and court process can have on children and families is sometimes overlooked. Families are complex social structures, and their disruption has the potential to be injurious to both children and adults. Michael Town, Circuit Judge in Hawaii, coined the phrase "jurigenic effect" to describe the unintended harm sometimes caused by involvement in the court system. Judicial officers should be mindful of this form of trauma and take steps to mitigate it. Judicial officers should collaborate with the agency to ensure adequate trauma-certified service providers are available. The Needs Based Plan and Budget provides an excellent opportunity

for judges and administrators to plan for adequate trauma-certified services to meet child and family needs. The broader concept of trauma is addressed throughout the Benchbook, in Chapter 20, Section 20.12: Trauma, and in more detail in the Pennsylvania Dependency Benchbook Resource Companion.

Recognizing neurodiversity—It is incumbent upon the court to recognize that not all persons process information in the same way. The court is responsible for recognizing individual needs, including information for children and adults on the autism spectrum, and using appropriate tools to assist in communicating with persons in a respectful and meaningful way.

As Justice Dougherty often quotes:

***“One doesn’t have to operate with malice to do great harm.
The absence of empathy and understanding is sufficient.”***

*Honorable Kevin M. Dougherty,
Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice*

Mission and
Guiding Principles
For
**PENNSYLVANIA'S
CHILD DEPENDENCY SYSTEM**

Prepared By:

CHILDREN'S ROUNDTABLE INITIATIVE
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SUPREME COURT OF PENNSYLVANIA

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Introduction

With approximately 20,000 children in Pennsylvania's foster care system, the need to examine and enhance our child dependency system is paramount. To do so, collaboration between the courts and the child welfare agencies is essential. This point was highlighted in the 2004 Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care Report to Congress stating,

“Although child welfare agencies and the courts share responsibility for improving outcomes for children in foster care, institutional barriers and long-established practices often discourage them from collaborating. Effective collaboration requires that both entities change the way they think about their respective roles, responsibilities, and priorities and engage in a new way of doing business together. Jurisdictions in which courts and agencies have been able to make this shift have yielded better results for children” (Pew Commission, 2004, p. 38).

The initiative set forth herein combines the efforts of professionals from both the child welfare service and legal system in attaining the overarching goals of **child safety, well-being and permanency**. All involved in this work, from child welfare professionals to attorneys to commissioners and judges, are united in this common goal of helping children and families. To support and guide these efforts, this document was created by the Pennsylvania Children's Roundtable Initiative.

The document identifies a new mission for Pennsylvania's child dependency system and sets forth guiding principles that will lead to accomplishing that mission under the name:

“Families 4 Children” stands for the collection of Pennsylvania individuals and organizations who have agreed to communicate and cooperate in pursuing the common purpose of finding or creating safe, permanent homes for every dependent child in Pennsylvania as quickly and practically as possible. This common purpose should be achieved through application of the Mission Statement and Guiding Principles set forth below, which are symbolized in its logo and summarized in its name.

CHILDREN'S ROUNDTABLE INITIATIVE

The Children's Roundtable Initiative, supported by the Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC) within the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC) and established by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in 2006, formally adopted the Mission Statement & Guiding Principles on May 29, 2009. The Children's Roundtable embodies a collaborative, cross-system statewide infrastructure that allows for effective administration and communication via a three-tiered system.

The first tier of the infrastructure is comprised of local **Children's Roundtables**. These exist in each judicial district and are convened by a judge. Members include supervisory and dependency judges, children and youth professionals, county solicitors, child and parent advocates, academic experts, and anyone interested in making a positive contribution to the functioning of the dependency system within counties.

The intermediate level (tier 2) of the infrastructure is comprised of **Leadership Roundtables**. There are eight Leadership Roundtables dividing Pennsylvania's sixty judicial districts into groups based on size. The number of judicial districts per Leadership Roundtable varies slightly to keep like-size judicial districts together, with a minimum of five (5) judicial districts per roundtable.

These Leadership Roundtables are comprised of three members from each local Children's Roundtable including a Dependency Judge, the Children & Youth Administrator, and one additional Children's Roundtable member. Leadership Roundtables provide a forum for members to identify, discuss, and share concerns and solutions.

Issues are identified during Leadership Roundtable meetings and common themes are brought to the highest roundtable level the **State Roundtable**. The State Roundtable (tier 3) is comprised of at least two members from each Leadership Roundtable and others with specific expertise in child dependency matters. In addition to facilitating intrastate communication, the State Roundtable sets priorities related to child dependency court improvement efforts and is involved in the national dependency reform movement to keep Pennsylvania apprised of evolving trends and best practices.

As recommended in the 2004 Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care Report, the Children's Roundtable Initiative encourages strong communication and collaboration on behalf of children. The State Roundtable first met in June of 2007. Through a collaborative discussion process at that meeting, a consensus was reached that a paradigm shift must occur regarding the way we presently work with children and families in Pennsylvania. The State Roundtable adopted a philosophical framework of respect by empowering families to identify their strengths and make their own decisions regarding the future of their children. It was further agreed that practice supported by the initiative henceforth would be strength-based and family-centered, engaging families in a manner that would guide them in developing their own collaborative solutions. That paradigm shift is described in this document.

LOGO & NAME



Description of Logo

This logo depicts the picture and words that we believe a child would create from blocks and crayons if that child were asked to show what he or she really wanted from the Pennsylvania child dependency system:

To grow up in a safe, nurturing, and permanent family.

This logo is child and family-friendly, representing a new philosophy and approach to child dependency in Pennsylvania which builds on the strengths of the family as a foundation for protecting children.

The adult figures represent all families, and the child figure represents all children.

The blue circle contains the Mission Statement set forth below.

Description of Name

The name "Families 4 Children" summarizes the ultimate goal of this initiative and the Pennsylvania child dependency system:

To ensure that every child grows up in a safe, nurturing, and permanent family.

The name also stands for the "family" of Pennsylvanians who are "for" children and are communicating and cooperating with each other to achieve that goal.

MISSION STATEMENT & GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The ultimate goal of “Families 4 Children” is to ensure that every child grows up in a safe, nurturing, and permanent family. This goal will be accomplished through the following four mission priorities: protecting children; promoting strong families; promoting child well-being, and providing timely permanency.

Embedding these mission priorities into all aspects of the child dependency system will lead to better outcomes for our children and a brighter future for our communities.

These principles represent the fundamental beliefs that should guide the overall operation of the child dependency system in Pennsylvania and be reflected in the delivery of all services to children and families within that system. These beliefs should also guide court and policy decisions at all levels within the system and the relationships among all participants in the system. Doing so should increase child safety and well-being while reducing the number of dependent children in Pennsylvania and/or the length of time that any particular child remains dependent.

To accomplish this mission and redefine, refocus, and redirect the goals, actions, and operation of the child dependency system in Pennsylvania, the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, through its Office of Children & Families in the Courts and the Children’s Roundtable Initiative, presents the following Mission Statement and Guiding Principles.

MISSION STATEMENT

***“Protect Children;
Promote Strong Families;
Promote Child Well-Being;
Provide Timely Permanency”***

Protect Children

All children have the right to be protected from physical neglect and abuse, including sexual victimization, and from emotional neglect and abuse.

Promote Strong Families

All children have the right to live in a strong family that provides a safe, nurturing, and healthy environment in which to be reared, as families are the primary source of the protection and nurturing of children.

Promote Child Well-Being

All children have the right: to be happy, thriving, self-actualized, educated, healthy, and content; to have the opportunity to reach their full potential as individuals capable of healthy relationships and productive lives; and to have a fair chance in life with opportunities for healthy, balanced, and well-rounded development.

Provide Timely Permanency

All children have the right to live in a permanent family and to timely permanency decisions, as these are critical to the health and welfare of dependent children.

PROTECT CHILDREN

OUR BELIEF:

All children have the right to be protected from physical neglect and abuse, including sexual victimization, and from emotional neglect and abuse.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

Pennsylvania's child dependency system shall protect children who:

- Are without proper parental care or control, subsistence, without education as required by law, or other control necessary for that child's physical health, mental health, emotional health, or moral development;
- Have been placed for adoption in violation of law;
- Have been abandoned by their parents, guardian or other custodian;
- Are without a parent, guardian, or legal custodian;
- Are habitually and without justification truant from school;
- Have committed an act of habitual disobedience of the reasonable and lawful commands of their parent, guardian, or other custodian and are ungovernable and found to be in need of care, treatment, or supervision;
- Are both under the age of ten years and have committed a delinquent act;
- Were formerly under the jurisdiction of the court or on informal adjustment who commit an ungovernable act;
- Are born to a parent whose parental rights regarding another child have been involuntary terminated within three years immediately preceding their date of birth and the conduct of the parent poses a risk to their health, safety, or welfare.

In protecting children, the system shall also:

- Recognize and address the trauma a child experiences as a result of abuse and neglect.
- Recognize and address the trauma a child experiences as a result of placement.
- Ensure that "reasonable services" are provided to parents or other caregivers prior to removal, if possible.

- When placement is required to ensure child safety, first and foremost, make all reasonable steps to immediately locate a safe, kinship care option, preferably within the child's community.
- Utilize shelter and congregate care facilities only when the child's immediate physical and emotional needs require such care.
- Ensure that the voice of the child is heard at each stage of the process.
- Regard child safety, well-being, and timely permanency as the shared responsibility of those within the system and the community.

PROMOTE STRONG FAMILIES

OUR BELIEF:

All children have the right to live in a strong family that provides a safe, nurturing, and healthy environment in which to be reared, as families are the primary source for the protection and nurturing of children.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

Pennsylvania's child dependency system shall:

- Recognize that a family is the primary source for the nurturing and protection of a child and has the primary responsibility to meet a child's needs for permanency, safety, and well-being.
- Encourage families to utilize all available resources to meet that responsibility.
- Define "family" broadly to include parents, relatives, those not related by blood but who have a close and meaningful relationship with the child.
- Recognize that a child should be maintained with his or her parents whenever possible and, if not, then with other family members.
- Recognize that the family is significant to all aspects of the child's development.
- Recognize that families are capable of change and, with support, most can safely care for their children.
- Engage families respectfully.
- Recognize that each family is both unique and diverse and provide services tailored to its unique and diverse strengths and needs by respecting its economic, ethnic, class, cultural, and religious beliefs, values, practices, and traditions.
- Inspire hope, growth, and change in each family by identifying its strengths.
- Engage custodial and non-custodial parents, as well as kin, in the care of their children.
- Engage non-participating parents effectively.

- Include family members in the ongoing care of their children, even when those children are temporarily placed outside of the family home.
- Support families by stressing the importance of formal education for the child.
- Educate families in parenting and life skills.
- Ensure that a child in placement maintains safe family connections.
- Find and engage absent parents, siblings, and other relatives to keep children connected to their birth families.
- Value extended family members as permanent resources for children.

PROMOTE CHILD WELL-BEING

OUR BELIEF:

All children have the right: to be happy, thriving, self-actualized, educated, healthy and content; to have the opportunity to reach their full potential as individuals capable of healthy relationships and productive lives; and to have a fair chance in life with opportunities for healthy, balanced, and well-rounded development.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

Pennsylvania's child dependency system shall:

- Recognize and promote the physical, emotional, social, and educational well-being of each child.
- Inspire hope, growth, and change in each child by identifying his or her strengths.
- Recognize that each child is unique and provide services tailored to his or her unique strengths and needs.
- Provide opportunities for each child to develop individual talents and skills.
- Provide opportunities for each child to build self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Empower every child to develop a sense of individual responsibility and accountability for their actions.
- Identify and engage an adult with whom a child can develop a reliable, sustaining, and meaningful life connection.
- Ensure that siblings are placed together unless there is a compelling reason not to provide such placement.
- Implement a visitation schedule including siblings, parents, and kin that meets the developmental needs of each child, understanding frequent, and quality visitation as being key to successful family reunification.
- Seek and strengthen informal and formal community resources for children and families.
- Ensure that early assessment is made of each child's cognitive development and, where possible, include family members in any recommended treatment.

- Encourage a child's interaction with peers in order to foster healthy social development.
- Strengthen an older child's ability to live independently as he or she transitions into adulthood by providing supportive services such as education, life skills training, prevention services, and employment and housing education.

PROVIDE TIMELY PERMANENCY

OUR BELIEF:

All children have the right to live in a permanent family and to timely permanency decisions, as these are critical to the health and welfare of dependent children.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

Pennsylvania's child dependency system shall:

- Identify all possible practices and strategies that address the needs of a child and family and encourage solutions which do not require court intervention.
- Recognize that a child should be reunified with his or her parents whenever possible and, if not, then with other family members.
- Understand the need for urgency in service delivery and decision-making for those children who do require court intervention.
- Whenever possible, employ non-adversarial court processes including facilitation and mediation strategies as a means for resolving concerns.
- Employ family finding strategies in recognition of the potential trauma caused by family separation.
- Employ decision-making and planning strategies that are family driven.
- Employ family engagement strategies as a means of insuring strength-based family centered skills for professionals serving children and families.
- Employ non-adversarial, family-driven planning strategies at the initial stages of the dependency process and at any other stage at which a plan is being developed or updated.
- Assure timely and thorough court hearings and expeditious decisions for each child.
- Assure competent legal representation for children and parents before a shelter care hearing and throughout the legal process.
- Ensure that the voices of parents or other caregivers are heard at each stage of the process.
- Employ concurrent planning for permanency as each case commences and at every stage of the proceedings.

- Minimize the length of time children must spend in foster care and other temporary living situations.
- Timely accomplish permanency for every dependent child according to the law.
- Terminate court intervention in the life of a child when that child is no longer dependent.
- Identify, create, and implement additional systemic improvement practices.
- Ensure that recruitment activities are fully pursued to identify the best adoptive family for those children who cannot return to their families.
- Ensure close coordination with Orphans' Courts aimed at finalizing adoptions in a timely manner.
- Recognize that permanent legal custodianship is a viable option when reunification or adoption is not possible.

CHILD DEPENDENCY SYSTEMS OPERATIONS

OUR BELIEF:

To accomplish the Mission Statement and implement the Guiding Principles above, the Pennsylvania child dependency system must improve in every facet and at every level, increase the resources dedicated to that system, and measure its progress toward these new goals.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

Pennsylvania's child dependency system shall:

- Communicate and cooperate with others within the child dependency system working toward the common goal of providing each child with a safe, nurturing, and permanent family.
- Provide appropriate and effective prevention, intervention, and treatment programs and ensure that all decisions made and all services offered are designed to meet the unique needs of each child and family.
- Ensure strong and responsible leadership from all facets of the dependency system, beginning with our courts.
- Ensure competent, trained legal counsel for children and parents who qualify for court-appointed legal counsel.
- Ensure that children and parents are fully informed about their rights, the court process, and the function and duties of legal counsel who represent them.
- Utilize the Children's Roundtable Initiative as a mechanism for local and statewide communication, decision-making, and leadership.
- Create unified methods to measure practices and outcomes.
- Collect and manage data, then evaluate and plan for future needs.
- Establish and monitor accountability for all system participants.
- Employ highly trained, competent, and caring staff who are prepared to serve children and families in accordance with the Mission Statement and Guiding Principles set forth herein.
- Treat all child dependency professionals with respect and dignity, establish clear expectations and standards for their performance, evaluate them regularly, and compensate them appropriately.

- Assure that families receive priority in the delivery of human services including mental health treatment, drug and alcohol treatment, training and employment connections, housing services, child care services, and other needed services.
- Educate community members and organizations to the within Mission Statement and Guiding Principles and the functioning of the child dependency system.
- Encourage community members and organizations to participate in all aspects of the child dependency system, because local communities are our greatest resource in meeting the needs of families and children.
- Develop and work within a strong and integrated network of service systems, since neither the child dependency system, nor any other system can alone address all the needs of children and families.
- Support the educational needs of all dependent children and advocate on their behalf.
- Continually increase the effectiveness of all services, programs, and processes.
- Advocate for stable and sufficient funding to support all aspects of service delivery and account for the expenditure of all such funds.
- Ensure that courts, child welfare agencies, permanent families, and all other participants in the child dependency system are provided with the necessary resources and capacity to implement these Guiding Principles and accomplish the mission to “protect children, promote strong families, promote child well-being, and provide timely permanency” in Pennsylvania.