



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

NEWS RELEASE

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Pennsylvania Supreme Court Slates Children's Roundtable **New Court Office Aims to Aid State's Dependent Children**

HARRISBURG, June 25, 2007 — On any given day in Pennsylvania, there are some 20,000 dependent children – abused and neglected they have been placed in foster homes or temporary residential settings where they can wait, in some cases, for years before being placed in a permanent home.

“That’s too many dependent children in the system,” says Chief Justice of Pennsylvania Ralph J. Cappy, “and it’s far too long for a child to wait to be placed in a permanent home where hopefully they will find stability and normalcy in their life.”

On Tuesday, June 26 at the Hershey Motor Lodge in Hershey, PA, beginning at 9:30 a.m., the state Supreme Court will hold the first-ever State Roundtable to improve the plight of dependent children.

The State Roundtable culminates over a year of planning by the Court and the Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC) to establish 60 local Children Roundtables (one in each of Pennsylvania’s Judicial Districts) and ten Leadership Roundtables throughout the state.

OCFC was created in Oct 2006 with the broad goal to make family courts more responsive to the needs of children and families. The roundtables were created to establish a statewide infrastructure that allows for effective administration and communication among Pennsylvania’s judicial districts and child welfare services.

“We believe the State Roundtable will have a profound effect on how abused and neglected children fare in the Pennsylvania judicial system,” said Justice Max Baer, a former administrative judge of family court in Allegheny County. Justice Baer is acting on behalf of the Supreme Court to guide OCFC within the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts.

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Pennsylvania's "Roundtables for Children" Initiative commenced with the establishment of Children's Roundtables in each judicial district. These roundtables, convened and lead by a judge, include supervisory and dependency judges, children and youth authority personnel, county solicitors, child and parent advocates, and academic experts. The 10 intermediate levels of the infrastructure -- called Leadership Roundtables -- have been formed by dividing Pennsylvania's 60 judicial districts into groups of like size and population.

"Through development of the local Children and Leadership Roundtables, as well as consulting relevant national research, we have identified multiple worthwhile programs and initiatives that could benefit Pennsylvania's population of at-risk children," Justice Baer said. "The task of the State Roundtable will be to vet these ideas, and, by consensus, agree upon those that should be implemented statewide. We will identify best practices in the child welfare system and develop methods to promote and implement those practices."

The goals of the Pennsylvania Roundtables for Children Initiative are to:

- Facilitate collaboration and communication among members of the child welfare system within each county to ensure that abuse and neglect cases are conducted with efficiency and timeliness.
- Share best practices and effective procedures from county to county to ensure timely permanency.
- Encourage judicial leadership and provide meaningful training to judges and attorneys throughout the Commonwealth.
- Analyze how data is presently being collected and develop a uniform, effective, user-friendly system of data collection and analysis.
- Form a child protection system collaborative infrastructure aimed at providing permanent, nurturing families for the children of Pennsylvania.
- Implement case processing best practices.
- Strengthen judicial oversight of dependency cases.

The OCFC is funded with federal grants under a program called the Court Improvement Project, which is run by the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It is responsible for facilitating "best practices" in the handling of dependency cases and assuring that judges are given necessary time and resources to reach the best decision, with a minimum of delay, for each child.

The Office of Children and Families in the Courts joins other recent initiatives of the Supreme Court designed to modernize and improve the court system throughout Pennsylvania. Those initiatives include, among others, programs that are designed to provide trained court interpreters; assist in the establishment of specialty – or problem-solving – courts, such drug and DUI courts; and train judges in general and specialized areas of jurisprudence, using the most advanced educational techniques available.

Media coverage of the State Roundtable is invited.

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Note: Roundtable Agenda attached.