From the Chair and Vice Chair

By Judge Stephanie Domitrovich and Eleanor Bush

As chair and vice chair of the PBA Children’s Rights Committee, we welcome you to our committee’s activities and events. Our next event is our all-day fall seminar — Gurus on the New Rules of Juvenile Court Procedure — at the Pennsylvania Bar Institute in Mechanicsburg on Nov. 9. This seminar has an all-star cast of judges and lawyers as experts on the new rules for dependency and juvenile court proceedings.

In the morning, expert panelists will review Acts 80 and 91 regarding the law, practice tools, best practices and updates. A youth panel will participate and provide their perspectives and insights on recent developments regarding this area of the law. Other issues to be addressed in the morning include, but are not limited to, Disability Issues for Transitioning Youth and the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA) regarding children in the dependency court system.

In the afternoon an all-star judges panel, including Judge Wendy Demchick-Alloy from Montgomery County, Judge Kathryn M. Hens-Greco and Judge Dwayne D. Woodruff from Allegheny County, Judge John C. Uhler from York County and Judge Carol L. Van Horn from Franklin and Fulton Counties, who will provide updates on the Juvenile Court Procedural Rules. They will address issues such as on-the-record disposition hearing statements, child safety, well-being and safety, on-the-record permanency hearing statements, the role of the prosecutor, ensuring a dependent child’s successful transition to independent living, fairness and due process, a juvenile’s capacity, and the issue of nunc pro tunc and records.

We hope you will consider attending this outstanding event! And welcome to the PBA’s Children’s Rights Committee! 🎉

Nominations Sought for 2013 Child Advocate of the Year Award

The PBA Children’s Rights Committee is accepting nominations for the 16th annual Child Advocate of the Year Award. The award recognizes the accomplishments of lawyers who are advocates for Pennsylvania children, who exhibit the highest degree of professional excellence and who advance the rights of children.

Nominations must be received by Jan. 18, 2013.

Download the nomination application here.
Gurus on the New Rules of Juvenile Court Procedure

Led by an all-star judicial panel, this day of discovery will ensure effective use of the new dependency and delinquency court rules in your practice!

There’s a rule for that
The Supreme Court has adopted numerous rules aimed at promoting fairer treatment and better outcomes for youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. This program, led by an all-star panel of judges, practitioners, and youth, share the highlights of the changes.

Plan to stay the day: this two-part program promises to deliver
In the morning: practitioners and youth share their perspectives and experiences in court, and explain how the new rules and other recent developments have impacted their cases.

In the afternoon: a panel of distinguished judges focus on the new rules, highlighting the changes that will most impact your practice.

Gain from a day of updates that are changing the legal landscape
Learn how Act 80 & 91, SORNA, and disability issues are shaping your practice. Plus—a youth panel brings it all together with an inside look at their personal experiences!

Step up your practice—know where big change is happening
The judges’ panel will discuss:
- On the Record Dispositional Hearing Statements
- Child Safety, Well-being and Stability
- On-the-Record Permanency Hearing Statements
- Role of Prosecutor
- Ensuring a Dependent Child’s Successful Transition to Independent Living
- Fairness and Due Process
- Juvenile’s Capacity
- Nunc Pro Tunc
- Records

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Moderator, Judges’ Panel

Hon. Wendy Demchick-Alloy
ADMINISTRATIVE JUDGE, JUVENILE COURT DIVISION
COURT OF COMMON PLEASES OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY, NORRISTOWN

Hon. Kathryn M. Hens-Greco
ADMINISTRATIVE JUDGE, FAMILY COURT DIVISION
COURT OF COMMON PLEASES OF ALLEGHENY COUNTY, PITTSBURGH

Hon. John C. Uhler
SENIOR JUDGE COURT OF COMMON PLEASES OF YORK COUNTY

Hon. Carol L. Van Horn
COURT OF COMMON PLEASES OF FRANKLIN & FULTON COUNTIES, CHAMBERSBURG

Hon. Dwayne D. Woodruff
COURT OF COMMON PLEASES OF ALLEGHENY COUNTY, PITTSBURGH

To Register
Mechanicsburg • Fri., Nov. 9, 2012

Tuition (includes course book and lunch)
- $229 Members—Pa., or any co. bar assn.
- $209 Members admitted after 1/1/08
- $249 Nonmembers
- $99 Paralegals w/attorney
- $115 Judges and judicial law clerks
- $105 Judges and judicial law clerks

Add $25 for registrations received 2 or fewer business days before the presentation.

*Ethics information has been integrated throughout this program.
To receive 1 hour of ethics credit, you must attend the entire course.

Gurus on the New Rules of Juvenile Court Procedure

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**Act 91: Positive Changes for Older Youth in Care**

By Jessica Parisi

On July 5, 2012, Gov. Tom Corbett signed Act 91. Although Act 91 primarily focuses on “sexually violent persons and registration of sexual offenders,” it also “amends various provisions of the Juvenile Act, expand[ing] the criteria for youth to stay in care past age 18 and also allow[ing] youth to re-enter care before turning 21 if they aged out at 18 or older.”

Before Act 91, youth could only remain in care past the age of 18 if they were in a “program of treatment or instruction.” As a result, many youth left care close to their 18th birthday and experienced many difficulties such as homelessness, unemployment, etc. Therefore the provision of Act 91 allowing re-entry is a significant benefit for youth, especially those whose plans do not work out as predicted and who may return to care. Furthermore, as a result of Act 91, Pennsylvania law more directly follows the federal Fostering Connections to Success Act. The Fostering Connections Act passed in 2008 with the goal of easing the transition for youth from foster care to independence.

Given these positive changes to Pennsylvania’s child welfare laws, it is important that everyone involved in the lives of foster youth — child welfare agencies, attorneys, counties, foster families, organizations and, importantly, youth themselves — are aware of these amendments and of the criteria youth must meet in order to remain in or re-enter into care. Act 91 now permits youth over the age of 18 to remain in care if they are doing any one of the following:

(i) completing secondary education or an equivalent credential;
(ii) enrolled in an institution that provides postsecondary or vocational education;
(iii) participating in a program actively designed to promote or remove barriers to employment;
(iv) employed for at least 80 hours per month;
(v) incapable of doing any of the activities described in [above] due to a medical or behavioral health condition, which is … [documented] in the permanency plan.

While the re-entry option for youth is a positive change, the act still leaves implementation questions open for debate. The AOPC Office of Children Families and the Courts Statewide Roundtable’s Transitional Youth Workgroup are currently working to address many of the implementation issues. The workgroup is comprised of representatives from legal and social organizations from across the state, as well as from the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare. As a member of the Penn State’s Dickinson School of Law Children’s Advocacy Clinic, I have the honor of participating in the workgroup. The workgroup convenes regularly to address the Act 91 implementation questions, as well as to make appropriate amendments to the Juvenile Dependency Benchbook. The questions range from Title IV-E Funding issues to how to locate all the youth who were discharged but are possibly eligible to re-enter. These issues and the others raised at the meetings are going to be addressed in a Department of Public Welfare Special Transmittal to be released this month.

Jessica Parisi is earning her J.D./M.Ed from Penn State’s Dickinson School of Law and College of Education. Jessica earned her Bachelor’s of Arts in Political Science and Urban Education Policy & Practice from the University of Pennsylvania. Jessica hopes to use her dual degree to reform the education system to provide more equal access to quality education for all children.

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1 2012 Pa. Legis. Serv. Act 2012-
**Rules 1608 and 1613: Helping Older Youth in Foster Care Transition Successfully to Adulthood**

By Jennifer Pokempner and Jennifer Staley McCrady

A little more than one year ago, amendments to Rules 1608 and 1613 of the Pennsylvania Rules of Juvenile Court Procedure (Dependency Matters) became effective. These rules require increased court involvement and oversight of children’s independent living needs and help ensure that youth leave the child welfare system at age 18 or older with the skills, supports and competencies needed to make it on their own. Rule 1608 specifies findings that the court must make at every permanency review hearing for youth age 16 and older. Rule 1613 provides safeguards to ensure that youth are present at a hearing before they can be discharged from care at age 18 or older and that they have a meaningful and concrete transition plan approved by the court before court and agency involvement can be terminated. With the recent enactment of Act 91, which allows more youth to remain in care past age 18 or re-enter care, it is an opportune time to revisit Rule 1608 and 1613 because it is likely that the number of older youth who remain in care past age 18 will increase. This refresher on Rule 1608 and 1613 will help the court and lawyers to be in a better position to help these youth make a smooth and successful transition to adulthood.

**A. Rule 1608: Findings and Report on Independent Living Needs and Services**

Rule 1608 requires judges to make findings about specific services and competencies that are needed to assist a child successfully transition to independent living (IL). These findings must be made at every permanency hearing for all youth who are age 16 or older. Rule 1608 fleshes out in more detail what is a requirement of federal law. Independent living services include things such as budgeting, job readiness and career exploration, preparation for post-secondary education, housing search and home management. These are skills that many of us learned in the home. Courts and advocates should be mindful that some youth do not have as many opportunities to practice these skills in placement and that monitoring is important to make sure these services are ordered if they are not being provided.

In addition to requiring findings on education and employment skills, the new rule requires that findings also be made on areas that impact the youth’s ability to acquire independent living skills, such as placement in the least restrictive setting and the development of supportive adult connections. For example, even more restrictive placements, such as residential facilities, must find ways to provide IL services to youth and level of restriction cannot be used as a reason to not provide services. The rule also requires that the court address planning and needs related to the acquisition of housing after leaving care and meeting any behavioral and physical health needs that may continue past discharge. Because these are “big ticket items” that can make or break a good discharge plan, early preparation is essential.

While Act 91 expands the criteria by which a youth can remain in care past age 18, among the goals of the child welfare system remains adequately preparing youth who leave care as adults to be as successful and independent as possible. The court’s close scrutiny of the Independent Living Plan is an excellent way to ensure that the child welfare agency and the team of people working with the youth are actively and effectively moving the youth toward the goal of independence and identifying any barriers to its achievement. By investing time in reviewing the Independent Living Plan under Rule 1608 the court helps ensure that the youth’s road to a positive discharge will be smoother so that when the youth leaves care they are truly ready, whether that be at age 18, 19 or 21.

**B. Rule 1613: Termination of Court Supervision/Jurisdiction**

Rule 1613 integrates the Foster Connections transition planning requirement into the court process. Rule 1613 requires that a hearing occur where the youth is present prior to discharging a youth 18 or older from court jurisdiction and children and youth care. Requiring both the youth to be present at court and the court to play an active role in transition planning will help ensure that youth are fully aware of the consequences of their decisions about leaving care and that the court fully understands the discharge/transition plan for the youth, including how and where they will be living when they leave care. As with the findings related to independent living planning and needs, Rule 1613 requires that the county agency and the youth provide the court with concrete and specific information about the youth’s plan. For example, a plan for housing would have to include an address and description of type of housing. Referring a youth to the housing authority or to fill out rental applications would not be an acceptable concrete and specific plan for housing as it would provide no assurance that housing would be available and maintainable upon discharge. This is especially true in counties where waiting lists for public housing are years long. In addition, referring a youth to a homeless shelter would not be an acceptable housing plan.

The Rule requires that the court approve the contents of the transition plan. If the plan is unacceptable, Rule

(Continued on Page 5)
Rules 1608 and 1613: Helping Older Youth in Foster Care Transition Successfully to Adulthood

(Continued from Page 4)

1613 requires that the court must keep the case open until an acceptable plan is presented. In such a situation, the court may order additional services or activities that would make the plan acceptable, then schedule a new hearing after those services have been provided and approve the updated transition plan, if acceptable. This provision provides a safeguard to prevent discharges when youth are not prepared and it sends an unequivocal message that planning for the transition to adulthood and out of care should be taken seriously and that the court will closely scrutinize plans rather than merely “rubber stamp” vague, incomplete or otherwise unacceptable plans. The rule sends a message to youth, GALs and those working with youth that they must be engaged in planning early and extensively so that the youth is prepared to transition from care. The rule makes clear that all parties are accountable for good planning and that the court will not hesitate to hold all parties accountable when an unacceptable transition plan is presented by keeping the case open until an acceptable plan is presented. This ensures that cases can only be closed when outcomes and goals are achieved that assure child well-being.

Jennifer Pokempner is a supervising attorney at the Juvenile Law Center. Jennifer Staley McCrady is a supervisor at KidsVoice. They chair the Legislative Subcommittee of the PBA Children’s Rights Committee.

ACT 91

(Continued from Page 2)

91 (H.B. 75)


3 Id.


Mark your calendars for upcoming PBA events

Fall Child’s Advocate CLE
Nov. 9 • PBI, Mechanicsburg

Board of Governors Meeting
Nov. 14 • Holiday Inn East, Harrisburg

Committee/Section Day
Nov. 15 • Holiday Inn East, Harrisburg

House of Delegates Meeting
Nov. 16 • Sheraton Harrisburg Hershey, Harrisburg

Family Law Section Winter Meeting
Jan. 18-20, 2013 • The Westin Convention Center Hotel, Pittsburgh

Conference of County Bar Leaders
Feb. 21-23, 2013 • Nittany Lion Inn, State College

Minority Attorney Conference
March 14-15, 2013 • Sheraton Philadelphia Downtown Hotel

Check the PBA Events Calendar at www.pabar.org for more information, or call the PBA at 800-932-0311.
Fostering a Real Change

By Catherine Chezik and Brian Mertens

Samantha Scott-Murphy, 22, remembers what it was like to enter a new foster home for the first time, “I was scared and nervous and didn’t really feel comfortable. The house rules weren’t explained. I felt like I was punished for no reason. I remember coming and feeling like [the foster family] didn’t want me there.” In her 19 years in care, Samantha lived in over 10 foster homes, group homes and residential facilities in Pennsylvania and Virginia and experienced the same feelings of fear, confusion and anger after each move.

Today, Samantha works as a youth advocate for Juvenile Law Center’s Youth Fostering Change program. Youth Fostering Change is comprised of youth who have been involved in the child welfare system and work with Juvenile Law Center staff to improve the system for other youth care. The Youth Advocates discuss their experiences in care, learn about the child welfare system as a whole and develop a campaign to bring positive change.

Last year, based on their experiences as older youth in care, Youth Fostering Change chose to focus on improving relationships between foster youth and foster parents. Many of the youth advocates reported conflict with their foster parents over rules they didn’t understand or felt weren’t appropriate for their age.

“My first foster home experience was terrible,” explained Youth Advocate Breonia Robinson. “I was treated like a stranger in a place I was supposed to call home. I was not allowed to use the house phone and there was a lock on the kitchen door.” When she was 16 years old, Breonia had a curfew of 8 p.m. that made it difficult for her to spend time with her daughter after school, particularly since her daughter lived so far away from her foster home. Breonia often had to choose between being with her daughter and following her curfew, which led to frequent conflict with her foster mother.

Youth Advocates also wanted their foster parents to take a more active role in their development as young people. They felt as though they were not given the same opportunity to learn life skills as their peers who were not in care, such as cooking, cleaning or driving. “I was kind of messy when I was younger and had a bunch of clothes around the room,” explained Samantha Scott-Murphy. “My foster parents wanted to have me wash my own clothes in order to teach me, but no one had taught me how to use detergent or bleaches … so I ended up bleaching my whole summer wardrobe.” Samantha and other youth advocates found that foster parents sometimes assume that a foster youth knows certain skills and that youth are sometimes too shy or embarrassed to ask for help.

After the youth advocates identified these challenges for older youth in foster care, they started discussing possible solutions. The youth were inspired by Florida’s Teen Normalcy Plan. The Teen Normalcy Plan, which is required by Florida law, was designed to ensure that teens in care had the same opportunities and freedoms as those who were not in care.

With the Teen Normalcy Plan as a guide, Youth Fostering Change created the Teen Success Agreement, a tool to ensure that older youth in care have the same opportunities, freedoms and responsibilities at their peers. Reflecting the challenges the youth advocates experienced in care, the Teen Success Agreement outlines caregiver responsibilities and age-appropriate activities and life skills that are necessary for a teen’s successful transition to adulthood and independence. The Teen Success Agreement facilitates discussions between the teen and foster family about what support the teen needs, the household rules and expectations, appropriate rewards for good behavior and consequences for poor behavior. The Teen Success Agreement is designed to be completed by the foster youth, foster parent and social worker when the youth enters a new foster home, and to be reviewed and amended every six months.

The Teen Success Agreement aims to create more supportive foster homes, more placement stability and better outcomes as older youth transition out of care. According to Breonia, using the (Continued on Page 7)
Fostering a Real Change (Continued from Page 7)

Teen Success Agreement “just makes you feel welcomed and that you are being treated like a young adult and that you are a part of those conversations.” “[If the tool had existed while I was in care] I would have felt like I was part of those big conversations that were about me, and not like they were just talking about me,” she said. “You can get everything out in the open so you can get a feel for the foster parent. It gives everyone the chance to be accountable for their actions, no more broken promises.” She says it also will lead to “more stability within homes, better foster children and better foster parents.” Samantha agreed that the Teen Success Agreement would have transformed her experiences in care. “If something like this was created, I feel like I wouldn’t have moved to a bunch of homes. I would have had a stable environment. I feel like the [caseworker] and the foster parents weren’t talking enough about what I wanted.”

In May 2012, Youth Fostering Change presented their final Teen Success Agreement to Philadelphia Department of Human Services Commissioner Anne-Marie Ambrose. Commissioner Ambrose endorsed the Teen Success Agreement, and the Juvenile Law Center and the Department of Human Services are currently exploring ways to pilot its use with a provider agency. The Teen Success Agreement is available as a tool for provider agencies, caseworkers, foster families, teens, and child advocate attorneys who seek to support successful, stable placements for older youth in care. To receive a copy or more information about the Teen Success Agreement, please contact Brian Mertens or Emily Keller at the Juvenile Law Center at (215) 625-0551.

Catherine Chezik is a Youth Engagement intern at the Juvenile Law Center in Philadelphia through Bryn Mawr College’s Masters in Social Services/Masters of Law and Social Policy program. Brian Mertens is the associate for Youth Engagement at the Juvenile Law Center.

Moving Children to Timely Permanence

By Christy R. Stanek

In 2009, through the Pennsylvania State Roundtable led by Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Max Baer, leaders in the dependency system began discussing the need to enhance the legal representation provided to children and families. It was determined that a strong correlation existed between high-quality legal representation and a better understanding by those represented of dependency proceedings. As such, the Legal Representation Workgroup was created and charged with developing a set of recommendations regarding pre-service and ongoing training for guardians ad litem and parents and attorneys.

Since the workgroup’s initial charge, there has been much progress and success. The workgroup created a training curriculum aimed at educating practicing attorneys on the fundamental aspects of each dependency hearing and a myriad of best practices outlined in the Pennsylvania Dependency Benchbook. The first part of this training, Core I, was completed in the fall of 2011, with participation from over 600 attorneys across the state. Core I included hearing and practice elements related to shelter, adjudication, disposition and permanency hearings. The session also highlighted issues of grief and loss and communication skills. The second part of this training, Core II, will begin in the fall of 2012 and include information regarding the termination of parental rights hearings, appeals and the effects of trauma on families and professionals in the dependency system.

In addition to the training, the workgroup created a pre-service training DVD, which is now required for all new guardians ad litem prior to their first dependency case. Participants involved in the DVD include Justice Baer; Superior Court Judge Susan Peikes Gantman; eight trial court judges; Beverly Mackareth, deputy secretary, Department of Public Welfare’s Office of Children, Youth & Families; Sandra Moore, administrator, Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Court’s Office of Children and Families in the Courts; and direct practitioners in the legal and social work field. The workgroup also released a Children’s Dependency Court Activity Workbook, to aid in educating children about the courtroom and dependency process. Finally, a subcommittee was convened at the beginning of 2012 to explore the issue of practice standards for attorneys. This group continues to meet and hopes to present draft standards to the Pennsylvania State Roundtable in May 2013.

The 2012 report to the Pennsylvania State Roundtable contains further detail on the areas mentioned above, as well as the recommendations accepted and charged for 2012-13.

Additional information and reports may be found at www.ocfcpcourts.us under “Children’s State Roundtable.”

Christy R. Stanek is a judicial analyst in the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts’ Office of Children and Families in the Courts.
The Children’s Rights Committee is pleased to announce the recipient of this year’s Child Advocate of the Year Award is Maura McInerney. McInerney is a senior staff attorney with the Education Law Center in Philadelphia. In 2007, she joined the staff of the Education Law Center, however her work in child advocacy began 17 years ago when she started as a volunteer attorney with the Support Center for Child Advocates.

ELC is a public interest law firm and its staff works on behalf of Pennsylvania’s public school students who are most at risk of school failure, such as children who are poor, homeless, in the child welfare system, or those who have disabilities. McInerney’s recent work has included serving as lead counsel in two important lawsuits under the McKinney-Vento Act (related to school enrollment of homeless children), which led to the Education Law Center receiving an award from the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty. Also a result of these lawsuits, the Pennsylvania Department of Education issued a directive clarifying that children with no fixed residence can attend school in any district with which they have a substantial connection. McInerney also recently developed a toolkit for homeless shelter staff statewide to help them address issues related to school enrollment for children in their shelters.

McInerney’s work on behalf of children involved in the child welfare system has been groundbreaking and truly instrumental in shaping the state of law and practice in Pennsylvania, as well as nationally. Along with her colleagues, she has developed a screening tool for caseworkers in the child welfare system to use in determining whether the educational needs of the children in care are being met. She persuaded the Department of Public Welfare’s Office of Children Youth and Families to mandate the use of the screening tool for every child that comes into care. This effort has resulted in a change of practice within child welfare agencies statewide. According to a colleague at the American Bar Association, McInerney’s screening tool and training curriculum have since been used as a model for other states. McInerney is also a key author of a nationally recognized publication, “Solving the Data Puzzle,” that provides information on how education and child welfare agencies can share important student data in a way that is consistent with applicable confidentiality laws.

In her work with children who have disabilities, McInerney has recently served as lead attorney in a complaint filed with the Pennsylvania Department of Education on behalf of 65 children in short-term drug and alcohol treatment programs who were not receiving sufficient education at their treatment facilities. The Department ruled in her favor and now the children receive the same amount of instruction as all public school students. In another lawsuit on behalf of foster children living in residential care who were being educated in a segregated program, the result of the suit was that the segregated educational program has now been shut down.

Although she is deeply involved in policy issues and systemic reform, she does not hesitate to help individual children as well. As one nominator reported, “she won’t rest until she is assured that each student is properly enrolled in school.” McInerney has been described by her nominators as “passionate, brilliant, and creative.” The nominators also noted that “Pennsylvania is lucky to have her as an attorney.”

We are pleased to select Maura McInerney as this year’s recipient of the PBA Children’s Rights Committee Child Advocate of the Year Award!
A Conversation in the Courtroom

By Marisa K. McClellan

“We are here today in the interest of M.M. for a permanency review hearing on April 24, 2012. at 9:00 a.m. I am the solicitor for the County Social Services for Children and Youth. Because these proceedings are recorded, we first go around the room and introduce ourselves for the record, beginning with the caseworker.”

I will say this 20 more times today, just changing out the child’s name each time. It is a good way for me to start the hearing; it sounds official and usually gets everyone to stop murmuring because we are about to begin.

The hearings go in their typical fashion: the caseworker talks about progress, the child, the visits, the parents. However, lately there is something more. The guardian ad litem (GAL) seems to know exactly what the caseworker is going to say. Not only that, the parents’ attorneys seem to know as well. Really the only person who does not yet know where this case is heading is the hearing officer. This is because the attorneys have met together prior to the case being presented today. This is a difficult case that has been dragging out for too long in dependency court. But there are compelling reasons not to proceed with termination of parental rights.

So the attorneys met together and basically stated the obvious: “What do we do? How do we get to permanency for this child?” There is no obvious answer. This is not an automatic permanent legal custodianship (SPLC) case. Worst of all, the kinship resource and the natural parents do not get along. But the agency has been trying new approaches and it seems to not only be promoting reunification and permanency for children but it is also helping the players to present alternative solutions to the court in difficult cases.

The agency itself “triages” cases that take a bad turn. Sometimes, the parents’ attorneys and GALs are included in those meetings as well. Because of that model, the dependency attorneys have realized that, by sitting around a table together and presenting all possibilities, we can create unconventional solutions to even the worst of cases. By meeting together after a difficult and drawn out hearing, we are preparing for the next time we enter court together and that is when we are making a difference in the outcome.

Our dependency courtroom is not an impressive room. It is not overbearing and churchlike. It does not have vast vaulted ceilings and ornate wood trim throughout. The room is small, especially when a large family shows up and all of the providers assisting the family come along as well. The courtroom looks more like a room used for meetings. There is a wooden sign behind where the hearing officer sits that announces “Juvenile Court” in large gold engraved letters. There are some dusty flags standing next to the sign (or at least I think there are). But our courtroom, for all that it lacks in pomp and circumstance, brings something to the parties that enter it: our courtroom facilitates and demands communication. The attorneys in the room interact with each other on a daily basis and work as a “legal team.” There is a common goal among the participants that is palpable as soon as we walk into the courtroom.

The legal team approach was not developed by our agency. However we have embraced this approach. The same solicitor, GAL, parents’ attorneys and hearing officer are involved with the case from the shelter hearing through completion. This has helped facilitate ongoing communication not only among the agency, parents and child, but also among the attorneys. The teams have built a rapport that has translated into something even bigger within the courtroom: a desire to reach a successful outcome.

There is an understanding that we are ... there ... to create a safe and stable environment with resources from the community to assist the family and to strengthen the family. ...

Yes, we have a hearing and it is an official proceeding. But we are also having a conversation together in the courtroom. We are talking about the child — together. Sometimes the child is talking too. There is an understanding that we are not there just to hear ourselves talk, but to listen to each other — to listen to what needs to be done to give the case the momentum to accomplish something great — to assist not only the child, but the entire family as well — to create a safe and stable environment with resources from the community to assist the family and to strengthen the family instead of tearing it apart. Opposition is not a necessary component to our courtroom. Argument comes easily. Discussion and proposing solutions, that is the challenge.

There is a lot of talking going on in our courtroom and the conversation is dynamic and important. It is life changing.

So I will start this hearing today in a typical manner. However, I know that because of the efforts that occurred prior to today and that will continue after today, that the conversation will continue and a solution, no matter how unusual, will present itself through these conversations, helping one more child to achieve permanency.

Marisa K. McClellan has served as the solicitor for Dauphin County Social Services for Children and Youth since 2010.
Three Little Words
By Ashley Rhodes-Courter
Atheneum Books for Young Readers
(January 8, 2008)

Synopsis
“Sunshine, you’re my baby and I’m your only mother. You must mind the one taking care of you, but she’s not your mama.” Ashley Rhodes-Courter spent nine years of her life in 14 different foster homes, living by those words. As her mother spirals out of control, Ashley is left clinging to an unpredictable, dissolving relationship, all the while getting pulled deeper and deeper into the foster care system.

Painful memories of being taken away from her home quickly become consumed by real-life horrors, where Ashley is juggling between caseworkers, shuffled from school to school, and forced to endure manipulative, humiliating treatment from a very abusive foster family. In this inspiring, unforgettable memoir, Rhodes-Courter finds the courage to succeed — and in doing so, discovers the power of her own voice.

About Ashley Rhodes-Courter
Ashley Rhodes-Courter is the quintessential American success story. Born in 1985 to a single teen mother, by the age of 3 she was in Florida’s foster care system where she spent almost ten years being shuttled between 14 homes — some quite abusive — before being adopted from the Children’s Home in Tampa. Despite her ordeal, she excelled in school because she believed that, “my education was the one thing nobody could take from me.” Early in her life she felt compelled to advocate for herself and the other children she lived with, particularly in the abusive foster homes. When she reported the abuse that she experienced and witnessed to her public school teachers, they protected her and called in the authorities. Soon after, a guardian ad litem/CASA took her case and helped her exit foster care and become available for permanent adoption.

The stability of a caring family allowed Rhodes-Courter the opportunity to develop more than survival skills and to further her academic skills. Thriving in the public school system, she took as many advanced courses as she could and even started taking college classes while still in high school.

Her efforts and academic achievements landed her Eckerd College’s Trustee Scholarship — the school’s most prestigious full-tuition award. She graduated with honors and ahead of schedule, earning a double major in communications and theater and a double minor in political science and psychology. Rhodes-Courter also enrolled in the Masters of Social Work Program with the distance learning division of the University of Southern California, with a concentration in children and families.

In 2007 Rhodes-Courter was one of 20 college students selected for the USA Today All-USA Academic Team. That year, she was also one of the four Golden BR!CK Award winners for outstanding advocacy for community change by Do Something. As part of their campaign, she was featured on 25 million bags of Cool Ranch Doritos. She appeared in the June 2007 issue of Glamour magazine, being nationally named as one of the Top Ten College Women. She was the Youth Advocate of the Year for the North American Council on Adoptable Children, and has received the Kids to Kids National Service Award from the Child Welfare League of America. In 2011, Ashley was selected to represent and mentor as part of Levi’s “Shape What’s To Come” campaign, an online, global community for women that offers opportunities to exchange ideas, collaborate and provide support to one another.

Rhodes-Courter currently serves as a national child welfare ambassador for the American Humane Association as well as on several national and international boards including Amici de Bambini, OrphanAid Africa, Ghana; Children Without a Voice USA; and Family Focus Adoption, USA. Recognizing that child welfare issues are universal, Rhodes-Courter spent time in Europe, South Africa, and China studying child welfare and social policies. She serves on the board of the Pasco/Pinellas Heart Gallery, PEHMS (Personal Enrichment Mental Health Services), and consults with many local agencies and groups that work in the mental health, human rights, education, and child welfare fields.

On June 1, 2003, the New York Times Magazine published her grand prize-winning essay about her adoption day. She expanded her essay into a memoir, Three Little Words, which was published by a division of Simon & Schuster in January 2008 and quickly became a national bestseller. The book is currently optioned for a major motion picture. It has been adopted by schools and communities as part of “One School, One Book” initiatives across the country.

From the age of 14, Rhodes-Courter has advocated for the half-million children still in foster care in America by giving speeches throughout the U.S. She has spoken on Capitol Hill, has twice been invited to the White House, and has taught at numerous colleges and conferences for elected officials, judges, social workers, policy makers and families.

Rhodes-Courter has been featured on “The Today Show,” “Good Morning America,” “Nightline,” “Nancy Grace,” “ABC Primetime,” “Montel Williams” and other national media outlets. She frequently appears in local television and newspaper markets as a national child welfare ambassador.
need of loving and permanent homes. This segment won an Emmy in 2009.

In April 2012, the St. Petersburg Chamber of Commerce selected Ashley as the International Woman of the Year at their Iconic Women of St. Petersburg event.

In 2010, Ashley married Erick Smith of St. Petersburg, who also graduated from Eckerd College with a degree in American Studies and minor in Environmental Science. Both have served as guardians ad litem in the Pinellas juvenile court. They are also foster parents and for almost two years, have fostered 10 children under the age of five. Ashley and Erick are expecting their first biological child election week, November 2012.

Source: www.rhodes-courter.com
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