Every year our nation loses thousands of young people to suicide. Nationally, suicide is the third leading cause of death for persons aged 10 through 24. Suicide is a preventable problem. While the solutions are not easy, neither is the loss of so many wonderful young people across our nation and state. Unfortunately, the problem seems to be getting worse. After some years of gradual decline in the statistics, there was a significant increase in many categories of youth suicides for the years 2003 to 2004. While we parents worry about our children being victims of violent crime, most of us don’t realize that we are more likely to lose our children to suicide than to homicide.

Strangely enough, suicide is not about death. Rather it is about ending unbearable emotional pain. Thus, death becomes the terrible consequence of suicide.

We know from talking to people who have attempted suicide that they generally do not really want to die. They only want to stop the debilitating emotional pain. Sometimes young people convince themselves that family and friends would be better off without them, or that no one cares about them. This is never true, as every youth suicide leaves behind a long trail of sorrow, despair and pain. Survivors are left to cope with terrible losses and, often, feelings of guilt.

Suicide becomes an acceptable alternative to a troubled person when that person has lost faith and lost hope in tomorrow. This can happen when a person is so overwhelmed with personal problems and pain that he or she can not see the possibility that tomorrow will be a better day. Since youth lack the life experience that comes with age, they often do not realize that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.

Compounding the problem, many people mistakenly believe that talking about suicide in some manner encourages it. This is not the case. We must convince our citizens, especially young ones, that it is always okay to ask for help. That is the central theme of the Yellow Ribbon Youth Suicide Prevention Program headquartered in Westminster, Colo. In my home county of Potter, we have effectively utilized the Yellow Ribbon Program, and have organized Yellow Ribbon Youth Clubs in all of our high schools. The program involves direct communications with youth on this difficult topic, as well as letting children of all ages know that suicide is never an acceptable alternative.

(Continued on Page 3)
Message from the Chair

By Craig B. Bluestein, 2007-08 Chair

The Children’s Rights Committee continues to grow with new members joining each year. Again, I issue a renewed challenge to each member of the Committee to bring in one additional member within the next 30 days, so that more Pennsylvania attorneys will become involved in the cause and share our child-related legal experiences. Joining is easy and free. The person joining must be a PBA member and all they must do is contact Louann Bell at Louann.Bell@pabar.org or sign up at www.pabar.org/public/Membership/application.asp.

Bills that affect the rights and lives of children and those who advocate for them frequently are introduced in the Legislature. In that regard, Legislative Subcommittee Chair Laval Miller-Wilson has established a monthly phone conference for the purpose of discussing legislative efforts and bills affecting children. The dates of the remaining conference calls are July 7, Aug. 4, Sept. 8, Oct. 6, Nov. 3, and Dec. 1, 2008. All calls are on Mondays at 3 p.m., and the call-in number is 1-866-409-4300, with a passcode of 941154#.

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All members of the Children’s Rights Committee are invited to participate in these calls, and should raise with the group any legislation of interest that is pending or that you would like to create.

The Advisory Committee to the Joint State Government Commission Task Force on Assisted Reproductive Technology Law (Surrogacy and Gestational Carrier Legislation) has created an Assisted Reproductive Technology Statute that is in the process of being introduced. This is particularly interesting in light of a recent unpublished Superior Court opinion in which concurring Judge Klein called upon the Legislature to take up the issues of the definition of family, whether a child may have three legal parents, and the like. We will keep members posted on the progress of this legislative effort.

On Oct. 11, 2007, at PBI headquarters in Mechanicsburg, we sponsored, in conjunction with PBI, the very successful and interesting seminar “Open vs. Closed Courtrooms for Juveniles,” which included various workshops, including but not limited to “Statutes and Rules Affecting Confidentiality, Who is Allowed in the Courtroom?, “ “Interveners and Standing in Dependency Court,” the Abortion Bypass Decision and Procedure” and “Handling the Secrets of Children.” “Educational” and “entertaining” were the catchwords used by those who attended and evaluated the day!

We met at Committee/Section Day on Nov, 29, 2007, in Harrisburg, where, among other things, we began to organize our next conference. It was there that the new legislative effort was discussed and planned.

On April 25, our most recent seminar packed the house at PBI headquarters in Mechanicsburg. We led off the day with a new twist: “30 Hot Tips in 60 Minutes” in adoption, dependency, delinquency and more. Our panelists shared their knowledge, in fast-paced two-minute intervals, on various topics of interest, subject to being cut off by the sounding of the “gong.”

(Continued on Page 4)
Our central message has always been, “It is okay to ask for help.”

We all know that a person with a broken arm will seek out appropriate medical treatment. Many young people, however, are reluctant to get help if their spirit and hope are broken, even though the consequences of not doing so may be fatal. Mental health conditions are real illnesses, and must be treated like physical ailments. Untreated clinical depression is often a common denominator in youth suicide cases. Other issues that can generate suicidal thinking are serious family problems, relationship breakups, bullying, school and academic issues, substance abuse, social isolation as well as unexpected and unwelcome changes in life. Children who abuse alcohol or who are troubled by sexual orientation issues are even more at risk.

Most youth contemplating self-harm give us clues before they act. We must be alert for those signs of self-destruction, which can include withdrawal from family, friends and activities, increased anxiety, suicidal ideation, or talk of suicide, as well as changes in eating or sleeping patterns. Youth thinking about suicide will often express hopelessness or panic. They may even verbalize that they want to die or that family and friends would be better off without them. Before they act, adolescents may give away valued possessions, exhibit significant confusion, be prone to accidents and engage in reckless conduct. They may also show hostility and try to acquire firearms or other weapons. All these circumstances should alert parents, educators and caregivers that something is wrong and that intervention is necessary.

Our county’s involvement with youth suicide prevention grew out of the loss of three wonderful young men in the fall of 2002 and the winter of 2003. Out of this tragedy, we were able to start a public dialog on youth suicide. Interested educators, parents, government officials, mental health providers and citizens come together to address this terrible problem. A task force was formed and we became affiliated with Yellow Ribbon. We know that this program has saved lives and discouraged attempts here in our small county. The Yellow Ribbon Program is also active in many other Pennsylvania counties, every state, and a total of 47 nations. Yellow Ribbon recently started programs in the African nation of Zambia.

Since it is so hard to discuss, suicide is sometimes described as a silent killer. That is why a dialog on this difficult subject is absolutely necessary. As parents and concerned citizens, none of us have the luxury of saying that we or our children are immune from suicide. It is a nondiscriminatory problem, affecting very young children up through the college years, including both sexes as well as various races. Most families who have lost a young person had no idea that their child was in such dire straights emotionally. That is why this problem and, in particular, the need to ask for help should be discussed at every kitchen table.

While Yellow Ribbon assemblies have helped young people learn to ask for help, the message is not as yet universal. It is our responsibility to keep the message of “it’s okay to ask for help” alive and visible so that tragedies such as occurred here will not appear elsewhere.

Most of us involved in prevention work are not trained counselors, as we lack the appropriate professional training to properly advise a young person considering self-harm. Every one of us however, can become a link in the chain of life by listening, asking the difficult questions and promptly referring those who are at risk to a qualified professional. Those of us who lack professional training can’t really say whether a person verbalizing self-harm is serious or not. That must be left to the professionals. We can however, stay with the person who is in a crisis, and make sure that proper help is promptly obtained.

Most counties have mobile crisis services available, and all counties have 911 dispatch. There are also national help lines available to help young people in distress.

We have the ability to save thousands of young lives, but we all must speak up. Some people say that here in Pennsylvania our statistics on youth suicide are “average.” If you speak to the family or friends of a youth who successfully completed suicide, you will rapidly learn that there is nothing “average” about that circumstance. One youth lost to suicide is one to many.

Those of us who work with young people in various capacities need to lead the way on this issue. While it is not easy to broach this topic with children, it must be done.

In our county, with assistance from a variety of resources, we have been able to get help for many young people who were contemplating self-destructive behaviors. Unfortunately, we have not been totally successful. While lives are being saved, we must expand our prevention efforts. The Yellow Ribbon Program is an excellent approach to dealing with the youth suicide issue, and there are several others, such as S.O. S (Survivors of Suicide) and the Jason Foundation. Lives can be saved and have been saved. We must encourage these efforts and include citizens of every circumstance and age. We can not lose any more of our children to the great unspoken American tragedy of suicide. Everyone needs to know that no matter what, it is always okay to ask for help.
From the Chair

(Continued from Page 2)

The ever-appreciated judges panel again aided the audience in better understanding what is expected in the courtroom at dependency and especially termination of rights hearings. A primer on the basic “Educational Rights of the Exceptional Child in Foster Care” was incredibly educational, especially regarding the rights of children temporarily in placement to remain in their home school district. The case law update, a yearly staple, brought us up-to-date on what is happening in the law of dependency and delinquency. A panel of psychologists discussed “The Five Axes of the Psychological Diagnosis,” How to Cross Examine the Psychologist and “Bonding Issues in Termination of Rights Cases.”

We are in the formation stage of the next conference, and will again meet in Mechanicsburg, on Friday, Nov. 14. Please mark your calendars!

... for the focus of the next seminar, the broad subject of “bullying” was eventually agreed upon ...

As we brainstormed at our last Section meeting for the focus of the next seminar, the broad subject of “bullying” was eventually agreed upon by those in attendance. We are considering topics for the day that include workshops on school policies, liability issues of schools and parents, effects on a child — the bully and the victim, actions families can take, Internet involvement, delinquency implications, community/school/teen courts, peer mediation, feasibility and appropriateness of jail visits and others.

Thanks for all you have done for kids in the past, and I look forward to even greater advocacy for them as time unfolds. Go out and make some law.

Transition to Independence: HB 2582

By Lucy Johnston-Walsh and Jenny Pokempner

As many of us already know from personal experiences, the transition from youth to adulthood can be difficult. This transition can be even more challenging for youth who are leaving the foster care system and moving toward independence. The good news is that House Bill 2582 addresses many of the issues related to this transition and could make the road much smoother. This bill was introduced by Rep. Louise Williams Bishop and is to be voted on by the Children and Youth Committee on June 17.

Too often, youth who are discharged from foster care are unprepared for independence. They frequently are unable to find and afford appropriate housing, nor do they have health insurance or basic forms of identification. They also face significant barriers to finding employment, continuing their education and maintaining their health. House Bill 2582 does several important things to improve the futures of older youth in the child welfare system.

HB 2582 amends the disposition section of the Juvenile Act, 42 Pa. C.S.A. 6351, and requires that meaningful permanency and discharge planning be done for older youth so that they are able to develop networks of support and the skills to make it on their own as adults.

HB 2582, among other things, requires that before a youth age 18 or older is discharged by the court from the child welfare system:
• youth has a viable plan for how his or her housing, employment, education and health care needs are going to be met.
• the youth has crucial documents, such as a social security card and birth certificate.
• youth with special health and behavioral health care needs are connected with the services and systems they need
• youth are made aware of the ability to stay in care past age 18 under 42 Pa. C.S.A. 6301.
• youth are given an opportunity to meaningfully participate in court.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, HB 2582 creates the opportunity for a trial discharge. Youth in care are often not given many of the opportunities and experiences that non-placement children have as they grow up, particularly as adolescents. Most youth want to go out on their own and be independent when they turn age 18. Most, however, can also return to their parents and/or receive significant moral and financial support from them when they make a mistake or learn the important lesson that they do not magically become ready for the adult world at age 18.

HB 2582 provides youth who chose to leave the child welfare system a period of time in which they can re-enter the system if they are not able to make it on their own and need help.

HB 2582 does not impose new obligations on child welfare agencies, it simply codifies standards of practice and brings the court more actively into the transition and discharge process. It is a piece of legislation that will greatly benefit older youth in the child welfare system who are often forgotten and who quietly age out of the system to uncertain futures.

Please contact your legislator to express your support for HB 2582. You can find your legislator’s contact information under the “Legislative Links” button on the PBA Web site at www.pabar.org/public/legislative.

Lucy Johnston-Walsh is a clinical professor, director of the Penn State Dickinson School of Law Children’s Advocacy Clinic and a former chair of the Children’s Rights Committee. Jenny Pokempner is a staff attorney at the Juvenile Law Center.
Marsha Levick is Recipient of the Children’s Rights Committee Child Advocate of the Year Award

The PBA Children’s Rights Committee presented its 11th Annual Child Advocate of the Year Award to Marsha Levick at the Committee’s Spring 2008 CLE on Current Issues for Child Advocates in Mechanicsburg.

Levick is the co-founder and legal director of the Juvenile Law Center (JLC), a nonprofit public interest legal center dedicated to protecting and advancing children’s rights. She is a local, state and national leader for reform of the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. She was nominated by Jason Kutulakis of Abom & Kutulakis and Laval S. Miller-Wilson of the JLC.

In addition to co-founding the JLC, Levick has worked as legal director and executive director of NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund (NOW LDF), serving as the manager and public face as it pursued a litigation docket of Title VII, affirmative action, family law and sex discrimination in insurance cases. She returned to the JLC 13 years ago and has been a strong presence inside and outside of the office. Miller-Wilson said in his nomination letter that “[h]er legal acumen and leadership directing JLC’s advocacy is spectacular. JLC would be a much different and lesser organization without her. Her professional excellence in advancing the rights of children speaks for itself.” Levick is also described as a “brilliant lawyer,” demonstrating her skills in the areas of federal and state court litigation, amicus briefs and family court cases.

Levick is committed to encouraging the next generation of child advocates by teaching younger attorneys and law students working at the JLC, and through her mentoring and teaching at the University of Pennsylvania Law School and Temple University Beasley School of Law. She also encourages and assists practicing attorneys by participating in trainings at the Pennsylvania Bar Institute at the PBA Children’s Rights Committee CLEs.

Levick serves as chair of the Philadelphia Bar Association Public Interest Section, and formerly served as co-chair of the Juvenile Justice Subcommittee of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court’s Committee on Racial and Gender Bias. On a national level, she helped create the National Juvenile Defender Center to improve the quality of indigent juvenile defense. She is described as a “national leader in the fight for juvenile justice reform.”

The Child Advocate of the Year Award was established to recognize the accomplishments of lawyers and judges who are advocates for children within the commonwealth or who are involved with child advocacy.
What About the Grandparents?

By Dana E. Greenspan

As anyone in the dependency field is well aware, grandparents are frequently an emotional and physical resource for our clients. They are a first line of defense when it comes to avoiding placement in foster care. Yet, though they may be invaluable in providing stability for their grandchildren, often their role is unclear and they present their own set of issues relating to reunification of parents and children. One of the largest of these issues deals with the essential conflict between expanding the process to allow grandparents a full opportunity to be heard versus the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) requirement that time is crucial in providing permanency for children.

One of the largest of these issues deals with the essential conflict between expanding the process to allow grandparents a full opportunity to be heard versus the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) requirement that time is crucial in providing permanency for children.

In reviewing an Allegheny County trial court order, the Superior Court recently made it clear that grandparents have the right to be present for dependency hearings but cannot be considered as parties through the doctrine of \textit{in loco parentis} for the purpose of determining whether the child is dependent. \textit{In re: F.B.}, 927 A.2d 268, 2007 Pa. Super. 146. The Court of Common Pleas determined that the paternal grandparents stood \textit{in loco parentis} with respect to the child and had the right to intervene, thereby making the child no longer dependent. The guardian \textit{ad litem} appealed the ruling and the Superior Court reversed and remanded the case, confirming the three classes that have party status (i.e., standing) in dependency proceedings as set forth \textit{In re: L.C.} 900 A.2d 378 (Pa. Super. 2006). Those three classes include the parents of the juvenile, the legal guardian of the juvenile, or the person whose care and control of the juvenile is in question. \textit{Id.} At 381-382. The Superior Court ruled that the grandparents did not fit into any of the three classes, but did find that they were entitled to notice of the dependency proceedings and an opportunity to be heard under \textit{Pa.C.S.A.} Section 6336.1. The grandparents were therefore “not entitled to party status [that] would entitle them to the right to participate, to be heard on his or her own behalf, to introduce evidence and/or to cross-examine witnesses.”

The facts of this case are very relevant to the day-to-day work we do as guardians \textit{ad litem}. The previous shelter care hearing had allowed the child to remain with the grandparents. When those grandparents were not supportive of the child’s best interests — by limiting the child’s visitation with siblings, limiting the access of the social services agency to the child and neglecting her American Indian ancestry — the agency was forced to move forward with dependency proceedings. The court made it clear that consistent with the ruling \textit{In re: L.C.}, \textit{supra}, the decision to remand the case would not effect the grandparents’ petition for custody, and confirmed that should that custody petition be granted, the grandparents could then argue about whether the child was dependent.

This case highlights some of the persistent issues we deal with in our dependency practice in Montgomery County. There are many considerations when recommending whether legal and physical custody should be transferred to grandparents. Often times the family, including grandparents or other relatives, does not want the involvement of the social service agency. To become a kinship foster parent, one must meet strict home study standards. The relatives must also be supportive of the agency’s requirements for visitation and any other terms and conditions relating to the goal of reunification. The financial support (including assistance with subsidized daycare) provided to kinship foster parents may be crucial to permitting children to stay with family members. If the grandparents wish to become kinship foster parents, legal and physical custody is granted to the social services agency with placement going to the family member. This choice allows grandparents to just be grandparents. In the alternative, giving legal and physical custody to the grandparents means that they are now required to police the compliance of their adult child with their Family Service Plan (FSP) goals in order to insure the safety and well-being of their grandchildren.

Another development in these complicated family situations is when parents have left their children with their parents to be raised, or in the above situation where the decision has been made to give the grandparents’ legal and physical custody after they have been adjudicated dependent. What happens when those children now need to be removed for dependency issues arising from their grandparents’ care? As in the case of \textit{F.B.} \textit{supra}, the court must first focus on reunification with the parents, regardless of how long and under what circumstances the children have been in the care of the grandparents. Once, however, the parents have been ruled out for reunification due to a goal change to adoption, the question arises as to whether the social service agency is obligated to treat the grandparent as a kind of “additional parent,” with issues to be resolved (Continued on Page 7)
What About the Grandparents?

(Continued from Page 6)

through the provision of their own set of FSP goals. Should grandparents, who were rejected for a kinship foster care placement due to dependency issues, in order to be considered an adoptive resource, be treated similarly to the parents, with the opportunity to work toward a resolution of their issues? Is our priority to promote permanency as soon as possible as dictated by ASFA, or to give grandparents who are bonded to their grandchildren additional time to resolve their own problems in order to be considered an appropriate adoptive resource? If determining permanency as soon as possible is our priority, it would seem that the grandparents should not be given as much time as the parents to complete their FSP goals. Before the parents’ goal has been changed to adoption, the clock may have already been running for at least one year. While there is supposed to be concurrent planning for the children, there is an assumption that the concurrent plan (that is, placement with other relatives) is immediately available should reunification with the parents not be possible. Each parent has FSP goals to accomplish for reunification. Should we then have possible additional FSP goals for one or more grandparents, to be simultaneously pursued by the social service agency? When this confusing situation results in contested adoption proceedings between the grandparents and foster parents, doesn’t this become yet another source of delay in permanency for the children to be avoided?

Grandparents who don’t step forward when the children are initially placed can find themselves eliminated as an adoptive resource later on. Their inaction in requesting either custody or to become foster parents may be interpreted by the social service agency as a lack of desire to protect their grandchildren from their parents. If placement with grandparents, as stated above, cannot be considered due to their own dependency issues, they can find, during the pendency of the dependency case, their request for placement by the social service agency denied. Although In re: Adoption of Hess, 550 Pa.218, 608 A.2d 10, Pa., 1992, along with In re: Adoption of: J.E.F., 587 Pa.560, 902 A.2d 402, Pa, 2006, make it clear that the social service agency is not the gatekeeper for who can submit a petition to adopt, grandparents can find themselves in a tough position when requesting to adopt if the above issues remain unresolved for an extended period. The grandparents would certainly have standing to be heard on an adoption petition, as they are clearly within the definition of those with a substantial, direct and immediate interest in the outcome of the litigation.

The problem for grandparents when attempting to adopt, is that during the time they have not had their grandchildren in their care, for whatever reason, the children may have bonded with their foster parents, who, upon the termination of parental rights, wish to adopt them. The core of ASFA is that time is crucial in promoting permanency for children and to look to a relative placement whenever possible. If a family wants to ensure that dependent children are kept within the family, they must act promptly. Since no one can be assured that the biological parents will comply with their goals to reunify, it behooves grandparents to act immediately and decisively. They must a) request placement or custody of their grandchildren; b) if they cannot be a placement resource, they should identify other relative placements or resolve their own dependency issues; c) if the children are in foster care, they should participate in visitation and be active in the planning for the children and d) always be aware that the passage of time is no more helpful for the grandparents than it is for the parents. The focus of ASFA may be reunification with parents in a timely manner, but permanency for children requires that grandparents assert their rights promptly as well, to protect their own interests as well as those of their grandchildren.

Dana E. Greenspan, Esq., is a paralegal/social worker with the Montgomery County Public Defender’s Juvenile Division.

Help your clients better understand the issues they face and how you can help.

The PBA offers a series of pamphlets that explain — in layman’s terms — important legal issues, and directs clients to consult an attorney for help.

Some of the titles include:

| Child Custody (English & Spanish) |
| Divorce & Separation |
| Educational Rights of Children with Special Needs |
| How a Lawyer Can Help You Protection from Abuse |

Pamphlets can be purchased for $10 (plus tax) per set of 25 copies. PBA members are offered a discounted price of $6 per set. See the complete list and order online from the PBA store at www.pabar.org.
Too often children are the silent victims of painful custody battles. For the most part, these children have no legal advocates. Yet, they have the most at stake in the proceedings. On the other hand, would we make matters worse by inserting an additional attorney into an already lengthy legal process? In a perfect world, we would have no reason to consider this issue. Until then, we seek to do the best we can as a profession.

In their efforts to address this problem, the American Bar Association Child Custody & Adoption Project awards a small number of grants each year to projects from across the country. MidPenn Legal Services/Dauphin County Bar Association Pro Bono Program was selected as one of the recipients under the 2007-08 program “Starting a Dialogue; Bringing People Together to Develop Pro Bono Child Representation Programs in Private Custody Cases.” Many thanks to pro bono attorneys Heather Paterno and Nancy Datres for their work on the grant proposal.

The purpose of the grant is to host a series of meetings with members of the bench, private family law attorneys, bar association leaders, legal services staff attorneys, pro bono attorneys, courthouse staff and local law school legal aid clinics to discuss whether or not it is a good idea to develop a program that would provide pro bono representation to children in private custody (not abuse or neglect) cases.

After two meetings, the discussion continues in Dauphin County. We realize other counties have dealt (or are dealing) with these same issues and we hope to learn from you! What do you think?

Is an organized program to provide pro bono representation for children in custody (not abuse/neglect) cases a good idea or not?

Has your community discussed this issue? What happened?

If your county already does this, has it helped? Or made matters worse?

If your county already does this, do the judges appoint attorneys too often? Or not enough?

Should the attorney’s role be a guardian ad litem/Best Interests Attorney? Or a child’s attorney? Or some combination?

If you are willing to share your perspective, ideas and/or concerns, please contact Dauphin County Bar Association Public Service Coordinator Sandy Ballard at sandy@dcba-pa.org or (717) 232-7536. We thank you in advance for your willingness to share your wisdom as we share the common goal of helping children in need.

Is It A Good Idea To Provide Pro Bono Representation For Children In Custody Cases?

By Sandy Ballard

Using Your PBA Children’s Rights Committee Listserv

To subscribe, login on the PBA Web site with your PBA member username and password, select the “Committees/Sections” tab, then the “Committees” tab, then the “Children’s Rights Committee” tab, then the “Listserv Sign-Up” tab. The subscription form can also be accessed directly at www.pabar.org/public/listservform.asp. Once subscribed to the listserv, you will get the following confirmation message:
“File sent due to actions of administrator traci.raho@pabar.org.”

To send a message to members of the listserv, address your e-mail to childrenrts@list.pabar.org.

To reply only to the sender, hit “Reply,” and type your personal reply to the sender. This response will only go to the sender, not to the entire listserv membership. You can manually add other recipients outside of the sender or the membership.

To reply to the entire listserv membership, hit “Reply to All,” and type your response. This response will go to the sender and to the entire listserv membership.

To unsubscribe, send a message to listserv@list.pabar.org with “unsubscribe childrenrts” in the body.

To change your e-mail address, you must unsubscribe the old e-mail address using the old e-mail address and subscribe the new e-mail address using your new e-mail address. Sending an e-mail to the list will not change your e-mail address on the listserv.

For customer service, contact Traci Raho, PBA internet coordinator, (800) 932-0311, ext. 2255.
Many of us are familiar with the role played by trained canines in the service to the blind and severely disabled. Some of us have even been exposed to the less skilled, but equally qualified pets that visit nursing homes, personal care homes and even assisted living apartment buildings and condominiums.

A few of us have been introduced to the relatively new phenomenon of a grief therapy dog at a funeral home that we have visited.

Recently a member of the PBA’s Children’s Rights Committee drew my attention to the article in the ABA Journal about the use of therapy dogs in the Special Assault Unit of the Seattle, King’s County Prosecutor’s Office. These dogs are specially trained to ease the qualms of children who have been physically or sexually abused. They are with the children from first interview to testimony, even accompanying them to the witness stand.

When I mentioned them to the district attorney in Butler County where I practice, she thought it was a “wonderful idea.” She said that it is “incumbent on all those within the system to make it as comfortable as possible for all victims, but especially for the children.”

She would, if she could, implement it in her office.

Personally, I know just how beneficial the presence of a quiet, well-mannered dog, or dogs, can be in the construct of an office that deals extensively with the custody and/or support of children.

For nearly 15 years, my English Springer Spaniel Bonnie accompanied me to my office in a renovated house three blocks from the Butler County Courthouse. For most of that time, she made the 70-mile round trip from Pittsburgh to Butler and back with me.

She was quiet, gentle and well-loved by most of the clients and the children who frequently accompanied them.

Women who cried or became agitated when describing mental and/or physical abuse by a partner relaxed when Bonnie pushed her head into their laps. Bonnie’s favorite visitors, however, were the infants.

Even when she became seriously ill, her personality never changed and the children never knew. Unfortunately, neither did my husband or I until the very day we were required to put her to sleep. As that was occurring, I was representing a mother whose right to raise her infant son was being challenged, even though no one was sure which of two men was the father.

When Bonnie died in September 2006, the atmosphere in the office changed significantly.

For five months the void went unfilled. There seemed to be more tension in the office and in the client interviews.

On Feb. 15, 2007, my husband and I adopted two dogs who had been living together before their owner’s death sent them back to the Butler County Humane Society shelter from which they had each been adopted.

The very next week, both dogs made the first of their almost daily trips to the office.

Neither dog’s personality duplicates Bonnie’s. However, each exhibits some elements of it.

Babe, a three-year old Husky mix is willing to provide love 24/7. As a result, she has assumed Bonnie’s role of greeter and child care supervisor.

T-Bone, more often called T, a German Shepherd mix who, while having the coat of a Shepherd, has Bonnie’s smaller size. He is 10 years old, and it took him a while longer to accept the frequent human contact from the children, whose eyes light up when they see the dogs. T has assumed Bonnie’s role of calming the troubled waters.

Through the four separate solo practitioner offices that share my building walk accused criminals, injured workers, victims of accidents and the battered and abused men, women and children struggling with the disintegration of their families, and spouses and others who have recently lost a loved one. Almost all leave more at peace with the situation because of the appropriate legal advice and representation provided by the fallible professionals therein and the unfailing friendship and calming influence provided by the caring canines.

I hope that the experiment in the King’s County office spreads quickly to Pennsylvania and the therapy available there becomes available here.

Contact your local district attorney and/or the Children’s Rights groups, like KidsVoice, in your area. Maybe your county can be the first in Pennsylvania to follow the example set by King’s County.

If you work with hurting children in any capacity and you have the ability to provide contact with a gentle, loving creature, no matter its size or its breed, whether dog, cat, bird or even fish, try it, you’ll like it.

This article originally appeared in the PBA Solo & Small Firm Practice Section newsletter. Marion Laffey-Ferry is chair-elect of the Section. Her office is located in Butler.
**Pa. Supreme Court Working to Help Abused and Neglected Children**

**Washington County First in State to Implement Child Dependency Data Tracking**

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The state Supreme Court today [April 24, 2008] announced the Washington County Common Pleas Court was the first to begin detailed tracking of dependency cases as part of a statewide effort to make Pennsylvania’s courts more responsive to the needs of children and families and to reduce the time abused and neglected children spend in foster homes.

This new automated dependency tracking module is the first of its kind in the nation, and will move Pennsylvania far ahead of other states in understanding what is occurring within its child welfare population. It represents one of the first innovations of the Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC), which is coordinating Pennsylvania’s efforts to improve the lives of its abused and neglected children.

State Supreme Court Justice Max Baer, a former administrative judge of family court in Allegheny County, who is guiding these efforts on behalf of the Supreme Court, said, “We will enhance and standardize the collection of child dependency information throughout the state, assuring that judges and other child welfare professionals are given the necessary data and resources to solve the local and statewide problems which are impeding efforts to assure that every Pennsylvania child grows up in a quality permanent home.”

Sandy Moore, administrator of the OCFC, added, “On any given day in Pennsylvania, there are tens of thousands of dependent children in foster homes or temporary residential settings because they have been abused and/or neglected. They can wait, in some cases, for years before being placed in a permanent home. That’s too many children in the court system and it’s far too long for dependent children to wait to be placed in a permanent home where they have a better chance for successful lives.”

Washington County Judge Mark Mascara, who hears dependency cases, said, “It is an honor to be the first in the state to begin collecting and tracking details regarding child dependency cases. I applaud our court staff, our Clerk of Courts, Barbara Gibbs and our agency personnel assigned to this task, all of whom spent weeks with the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts’ computer staff to pilot this effort. Our President Judge, Debbie O’Dell Seneca, has also been very supportive. It has been a collaborative effort which has improved how we handle these important cases.”

In addition to Washington County, the system is being piloted in the Common Pleas Courts of Bucks and Northampton counties. The statewide county rollout of the dependency tracking system begins with this effort, and is scheduled to be completed by the end of the year.

For more information on Pennsylvania’s overall Dependency Court Improvement Project, court officials and dependency advocates can contact the OCFC at (717) 295-2000, Ext. 4255.

Editor’s Note: The OCFC 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 provide trained court interpreters; assist in the establishment of specialty- or problem-solving courts, such as drug and DUI courts; and train judges in general and specialized areas of jurisprudence, using the most advanced educational techniques available.

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**PLEASE MARK YOUR CALENDAR FOR THESE UPCOMING EVENTS:**

**July 17-20**

PBA Family Law Section Summer Meeting
Baltimore Marriott Waterfront, Baltimore, Md.

**July 24**

PBA Committee/Section Day
Omni William Penn Hotel, Pgh.

**October 29**

PBA Committee/Section Day
Radisson Penn Harris, Camp Hill

**November 25**

Fall 2008 Children’s Rights CLE
PBI Conference Center, Mechanicsburg

For more information, check the PBA Events Calendar: www.pabar.org or call the PBA at (800) 932-0311.
Photo Highlights from the Spring Children’s Rights Committee “Current Issues for Child Advocates” CLE

Faculty included (left to right): “Child’s Advocate” editor Pamela Parascandola, judicial clerk to Judge Todd A. Hoover, Dauphin County; Children’s Rights Committee Chair Craig B. Bluestein, guardian ad litem, Montgomery County; and Children’s Rights Committee Co-Vice Chair Andrea Marceca, Domestic Relations Section, York County.

(left to right) Judges Stephanie Domitrovich, Erie; Maureen E. Lally-Green, Superior Court of Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh; Samuel Kline, Lebanon; and Leslie Gorbey, Lancaster, provided their perspectives from the bench.

(left to right) Maura McInerney of the Education Law Center - PA and Neha Desai of the Juvenile Law Center, both of Philadelphia.

Judge Stephanie Domitrovich (center) is joined at lunch by Cumberland County attorney Anthony “Buzz” B. Andrezeski and his wife, Daniela Gabor.

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