

Focusing on Children at Risk

What are the courts doing to help dependent children?

Thousands of children in Pennsylvania's 67 counties are living in foster homes and other temporary settings such as group homes or residential institutions. In most cases, these children have been removed from their parents by court order because they have been abused or neglected. By legal definition, they are "dependent children" because they are dependent on the courts and the child welfare system for protection.

When a family court judge orders a child removed from his or her parents, the goal is to get the child safely resettled as quickly as possible in a permanent home, whether back with parents in a stable environment, with grandparents, with other relatives, with a caring non-relative or with an adoptive family. The focus is on establishing a healthy, permanent living situation for the child.

Unfortunately the sad reality is that many of these children remain in temporary care for years moving from home to home. In addition, many youth "age out" of the system with few connections to healthy caring adults.

To address these and other issues the Supreme Court established the Office of Children and Families in the Courts in 2006 within the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC). Supreme Court Justice Max Baer is the Court's liaison to the Office of Children and Families in the Courts. The Office's main goals are to address the needs of dependent children and their families, to reduce the time children spend in temporary homes and to improve the experiences of these children while in temporary care.

Funds for the office are provided through grants from the Court Improvement Project, which is run by the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Since 2006, the Office of Children and Families in the Courts, along with the Department of Public Welfare and other partners, has safely reduced the number of dependent and delinquent children in temporary foster care homes by more than 7,000, or 33 percent. Placing these children into a permanent family setting greatly improves their chances to succeed and significantly reduces the cost of institutional care, saving an estimated \$117 million annually.

Working with county family courts and child welfare officials, the Office of Children and Families in the Courts seeks to provide more training for judges, to urge more leadership by judges in dependency cases and to ensure frequent hearings for each dependent child. Family courts also are encouraged to share information with each other as they develop "best practices" in the handling of dependency cases.

More information about the Office of Children and Families in the Courts is available at www.ocfcpcourts.us.

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