

By Max Baer

Justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania

Moving to Place Abused Children in Permanent Homes

Most children are “dependent” on their parents for what they need and receive, which is unequivocal love and nurturing as well as all of life’s physical necessities. But the term “dependent child,” as used in the Pennsylvania courts, has tragic meaning: that children are “dependent” on the state for their physical needs and must find love and nurturing where they can.

The courts are forced, because of parental deficits, to remove many of these children from their homes and place them in foster care, group homes or other “temporary” residential settings. The time dependent children spend in this “temporary” care often, unfortunately, is not temporary.

Children are young for a very short time and they need the courses of their lives to be set during these formative years. When days drag to months and years, children are harmed. Whatever decision is considered best, it often consumes too much time for too many of the approximately 20,000 children in “temporary” out-of-home care in Pennsylvania.

The court system is spearheading a massive effort to change this. Together with our partners at the Department of Public Welfare’s Office of Children, Youth and Families and in every county children youth service in Pennsylvania, we are working to reduce delays in getting dependent children home or into permanent placements with their relatives, using stranger foster care as a last alternative. We believe we are making significant progress.

Nearly three years ago, to orchestrate this sustained movement, the Supreme Court created the Office of Children and Families in the Courts within the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts. This new office created “Children’s Roundtables” in every county; “Leadership

Roundtables,” comprised of representatives from each Children’s Roundtable, grouped by population; and a “State Roundtable,” which meets once a year and decides plans for future innovations in the Pennsylvania dependency system.

While the State Roundtable has already been responsible for many completed and ongoing changes in Pennsylvania, I write today because in May of 2009, it adopted what is the first clearly articulated mission statement and set of guiding principles for dependent children in Pennsylvania history. This mission statement establishes priorities for those who make decisions affecting the lives of abused and neglected children.

These priorities are *protecting children, promoting strong families and child well-being, and providing timely permanency*. While these priorities may sound abstract, they have important concrete application: with each priority goes a set of guidelines designed to assist court and child welfare professionals in carrying out the goals.

We believe that three years of foundation-building is beginning to show promise. Statistics suggest fewer numbers of out-of-home placements and faster permanency for children removed from their homes.

The story of every dependent child is heart-wrenching. We have a collective obligation to help them. Restoring loving family connections is essential. Our goal in the court system is to place each dependent child in a safe, stable and happy home—as quickly as possible. We are committed to meeting that goal.

###