

PENNSYLVANIA'S COURT IMPROVEMENT PROJECT
PROGRAM ASSESSMENT REPORT FOR
FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR
2006



AOPC

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE
of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

*Office of Children and
Families in the Courts*

Pursuant to ACF ACYF-CB-PI-07-09, Pennsylvania's Court Improvement Project (CIP) hereby submits its annual Program Assessment Report for the CIP Basic Grant for Federal Fiscal Year 2006 to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Administration of Children and Families (ACF), Children and Families Program Specialist, Alan Ademski as well as to the National Child Welfare Resource Center on Legal and Judicial Issues. This report covers all activities supported by CIP funds. This annual program report addresses the outcomes of court improvement activities and how they help provide for the Safety, Permanency and Well-Being of children and youth in Pennsylvania's foster care system.

Description of needs during the program period

The following list represents those needs that Pennsylvania's CIP has identified and addressed throughout the fiscal year. These needs were identified as a result of the recommendations of the 2005 CIP Reassessment produced by the National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ) as well as from the action plan formulated by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC) and Department of Public Welfare (DPW) officials who attended the national Summit on Justice for Children held in Minnesota in 2005. Additional needs were identified by sessions of the Pennsylvania Bar Association Children's Rights Committee; discussions with Dependency Court Judges, ongoing meetings with DPW Officials; and information, suggestions and ideas gleaned from Pennsylvania's Children Roundtables Initiative. Some of these identified needs and issues were:

- Lack of a statewide coordinated effort to improve court related dependency matters.
- Lack of statewide leadership regarding dependency matters.
- Need for meaningful, ongoing collaboration between the courts and child welfare at a state and local level.
- The need for the courts meaningful involvement in the CFSR/PIP process.
- Need for the state court to assess its roles, responsibilities and effectiveness in the interstate placement of children.
- Need for meaningful, ongoing collaboration between the courts and other member's of the Pennsylvania child welfare system.
- Need for Statewide Data. (See Pennsylvania's Data Collection and Analysis progress report)
- Need for meaningful judicial training. (See Pennsylvania's Judicial and Legal Training progress report)

In addition to these needs the Pennsylvania's 2006 CIP Strategic Plan identified the following issues to be addressed:

- Create a full-time Administrator Position for CIP and establish an Advisory Board;

- Lack of accountability and communication between state and county with respect to CIP project; and
- Lack of Statewide Initiatives.

Actions Completed to Address Identified Needs and Issues raised in 2006 CIP Strategic Plan

The Court has designated Justice Max Baer as the liaison from the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania to this initiative, due in large measure to Justice Baer's vast knowledge of, and deep commitment to child welfare, stemming from his tenure as Administrative Judge in Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas Family Division.

In July 2006, the Supreme Court created the Office for Children and Families in the Court (OCFC) as a unit within the AOPC as a demonstration of the Court's dedication to the welfare of children as a priority. The OCFC, part of the AOPC's Judicial Programs Department, is the first statewide effort dedicated to improving outcomes for dependent children in our justice system.

The Supreme Court then selected Andrea Hoffman Jelin to be the OCFC Administrator. Ms. Jelin has more than three decades of experience in child welfare and has relationships with key stakeholders in the Pennsylvania judiciary; the child welfare system in Pennsylvania; and throughout the nation. Her strong skills, coupled with the leadership of the Supreme Court, have provided new direction in Pennsylvania and lead to a changed culture in child welfare in the state – one of family focused, collaboration, cooperation and innovation.

As a result of the active role and visible leadership taken by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, AOPC and OCFC, many dependency court judges across the state have enhanced their leadership role on behalf of children and families involved in dependency cases. Judges have participated in a variety of meetings, including the Pennsylvania Children's Roundtable initiative at both a local and state level.

To ensure the success of the OCFC the Pennsylvania's Roundtables for Children Initiative has been established. These roundtables have created a statewide infrastructure that allows for effective administration and communication via a three tier system. The first level of the infrastructure was developed within each judicial district. These multidisciplinary county teams are known as the "**Children's Roundtables.**" The **Children's Roundtables** are convened and lead by a Judge. Members could include supervisory and dependency judges, children and youth authority personnel (we believe this is essential as one of our major goals is to encourage a strong collaboration between the judiciary and county children and youth professionals) county solicitors, child and parent advocates, academic experts and anyone the county teams believe will make a

positive contribution to the effective functioning of dependency matters within counties.

In 2006, 58 of the 60 judicial districts have held Children's Roundtable meetings. The goal is that these meetings will be an ongoing and consistent collaborative undertaking. These multidisciplinary meetings will provide a forum for counties to identify strengths, needs and promising practices. Andrea Hoffman Jelin visited many counties throughout the Commonwealth and participated in many of the Children's Roundtables.

The second intermediate level of the infrastructure will be known as "**Leadership Roundtables.**" Ten (10) **Leadership Roundtables** have been formed by dividing Pennsylvania's sixty (60) Judicial Districts into ten (10) groups by like size and population. Accordingly, the five (5) largest judicial districts will form Leadership Roundtable 1, and the seven (7) smallest judicial districts will form Leadership Roundtable 10. There are five, six or seven judicial districts assigned to each Leadership roundtable. The **Leadership Roundtables** are comprised of counties of like size and population to insure a relevant exchange of information. Also in attendance are representatives of Office of Children, Youth and Families (OCYF), Juvenile Court Judges Commission (JCJC) and OCFC. All Leadership Roundtables were facilitated by Andrea Jelin and Justice Baer. Representatives share their promising practices, strengths and those areas that need improvement. Commonalities in systemic issues as well as promising practices were shared by each group. Areas where they would like to improve services or learn more information for use in their local jurisdictions are exchanged. The OCFC in cooperation with OCYF and JCJC can utilize this information to plan for education and training or provide assistance for agencies at a local and state level. All ten Leadership Roundtables have met this fiscal year.

Finally, there is the State Roundtable (Statewide Interdisciplinary Advisory Committee). This Committee, chaired by Justice Baer, is comprised of Pennsylvania's leaders who each play a unique and vital role in making the system responsive to the issues facing the children and families of Pennsylvania. The group will meet annually to develop policy with regard to effectuating best practices and programming as vetted through the Children's and Leadership Roundtables.

The membership of the Advisory Committee includes the following individuals:

- AOPC Leadership, including Court Administrator of Pennsylvania, Zygmunt Pines;
- Department of Public Welfare Deputy Secretary Richard Gold, Office of Children, Youth and Families;
- James Anderson, Executive Director, Juvenile Court Judges Commission;
- Chairperson, Pennsylvania Bar Association Children's Rights Committee (Kenneth Horoho);

- A parent's attorney who has been active (John Perrott);
- Representatives from each of the regional interdisciplinary groups described above;
- The Administrative Judges of the Family Division of the Court of Common Pleas of Philadelphia and Allegheny Counties, the two largest jurisdictions in the state that combined have approximately 60% of the dependency cases in the state;
- Other individuals as are subsequently identified with substantial knowledge of and interest in the child welfare system in Pennsylvania.

On June 26, 2007, the first meeting of the State Roundtable (Statewide Interdisciplinary Advisory Committee) reached consensus that a paradigm shift must occur with regard to the way we presently work with children and families in Pennsylvania. The membership agreed to adopt a philosophical framework that seeks to respect and empower families to identify their strengths and make their own decisions with regard to the future of their family and children. Practice will be strength-based and family-centered, and families will be engaged in programs and practice. Best practice principles and effective outcome-based programs will be identified and implemented.

The State Roundtable of the Pennsylvania Children's Roundtable Initiative has identified the following as best practice initiatives to promote and support in Pennsylvania.

- **Family Group Decision Making (FGDM)** as a best practice initiative, which is already underway in Pennsylvania as a strengths-based, family focused approach to engaging families. The OCFC has begun to work collaboratively with OCYF, University of Pittsburgh-Child Welfare Training Program, and the FGDM Statewide Implementation Team to continue with the implementation of this initiative by providing training to the judiciary and gaining statewide judicial support for the implementation of FGDM.
- **Family Finding** is a way to provide permanency to foster children by reconnecting them with biological family members that may not have otherwise been identified as a permanency option for these youth. Additionally, Family Finding works to reestablish the relationships with biological family members that may have been lost. The program can ultimately aid an agency by finding youth safety, permanency and well-being that can be provided by members of their biological family.
- **Family Development Training and Credentialing** is provided to private providers' staff (caseworkers and supervisors) and provides training in a variety of areas; particularly strength based family focused issues. This education aligns itself closely with the advisory committee's vision and focus while providing casework staff with the necessary skills needed to work with the families they serve.

Ultimately these activities are expected to provide a reduction in placement; thoughtful and successful case planning; and less stress on caseworkers. As the family claims ownership into their self-created plan there is more likelihood of success. All approaches identified above put the family as the center of the child's world and can work in combination to prevent placement, encourage reunification or provide permanency.

The OCFC and DPW initiated monthly conference calls in May 2007. Meeting dates between agencies are scheduled through June 2008. Included in these meetings are not only representatives from OCYF, but also from the Juvenile Court Judges Commission (JCJC). These regular meetings provide an opportunity for an open dialogue between the agencies. Topics for discussion during these meetings include, but are not limited to:

- Information and Data sharing;
- updates regarding the Pennsylvania Children's Roundtable Initiative;
- legislative updates;
- areas requiring joint training issues;
- CFSR updates; and
- ongoing topics as issues may arise.

OCFC has established many relationships with agencies such as JCJC, ABA, Pennsylvania Bar Association and Pennsylvania Youth Advisory board as well as a variety of other child welfare agencies. Ongoing projects and partnerships are currently underway with various other agencies. OCFC will establish, advance and maintain collaborative partnerships with all members of the Pennsylvania Child Welfare System in addition to DPW/OCYF.

Rules Committee

The Juvenile Court Procedural Rules Committee has adopted the Rules of Juvenile Court Procedure – Dependency Matters. The Rules became effective February 1, 2007.

Summary

The Pennsylvania CIP has developed a new statewide infrastructure with the aid of a very visible and active Supreme Court and the creation of the OCFC, which is dedicated solely to dependency court improvement statewide; developed and maintained partnerships with DPW/OCYF as well as with other child welfare

agencies/organization; and has committed itself to the best possible handling of cases involving dependent children. CIP continues to be committed to improving the lives of children and families as they progress through the Pennsylvania Court system.