

REDUCING CASEWORKER STRESS IN THE COURTROOM

Judge and Hearing Officer

- ◆ Model and set expectations for professionalism in the courtroom
- ◆ Become familiar with caseworker job responsibilities and limitations
- ◆ Address concerns about agency policies, services, etc. with agency administration
- ◆ Discuss caseworker trauma in the courtroom during a local children’s roundtable meeting
- ◆ Ask if there is anything else you should know to render your decision

Caseworker and Supervisor

- ◆ Know the Dependency Benchbook
- ◆ Block time to prepare your case and discuss with your supervisor and solicitor
- ◆ Testify to facts, avoid characterizing efforts and engaging in speculation
- ◆ Share agency recommendations with the family and all other parties prior to the hearing
- ◆ Anticipate stressful situations that may occur and develop strategies to depersonalize what is not within your control

- ◆ Provide shadowing opportunities
- ◆ Attend hearings and provide support to your caseworker as needed

Solicitor

- ◆ Meet with the caseworker, obtain relevant case information, and discuss non-negotiables of the agency recommendations
- ◆ Review and practice questions with caseworkers; yours and those anticipated by other parties
- ◆ Debrief caseworker about court findings, rulings, and expectations and discuss strategies for moving forward
- ◆ If additional training or support would benefit the caseworker, consider discussing the same with them and their supervisor
- ◆ Help caseworkers appreciate that contrary rulings do not automatically equate with judicial disregard of the caseworker’s expertise or efforts

Respectful Communication

- Promotes cooperation
- Reduces defensiveness
- Keeps everything family focused

Guardian ad Litem,

Child Attorney, Parent Attorney

- ◆ Speak with the caseworker prior to the hearing
- ◆ Work out stipulations and disposition agreements when possible
- ◆ Keep your questions professional in tone and form
- ◆ Do not engage in inappropriate non-verbal communication (i.e. eye rolling, pounding the table, etc.)
- ◆ Focus on presenting facts to support your client’s position and best interest

In 2015 the Caseworker Retention Workgroup was created, by the Pennsylvania State Roundtable, and asked to examine the impact Caseworker Retention has on children and families in the dependency system. The Workgroup includes Judges, County Commissioners, Juvenile Court Hearing Officers, Attorneys, Child Welfare Administrators, Supervisors, Caseworkers, Department of Human Services, University of Pittsburgh, Child Welfare Resource Center, Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators Association, Juvenile Justice and other key partners within the dependency system.

To better understand what made caseworkers stay and leave their jobs, the Workgroup administered a statewide “Stay Interview,” which received an impressive 1359 responses. Caseworkers identified stress as the number one reason they would leave their job. One specific stressor identified surrounded their court experience, specifically preparation for court, testifying in court and cross examination by attorneys. In response to this stressor, the Workgroup created this guide. The guide’s intended use it to spur local examination of the issue and, if needed, change. While some of the included strategies are grounded in research, others were created through the collective expertise and knowledge of Workgroup members. In addition, the guide was reviewed by the State Roundtable Trauma Workgroup, Benchbook Committee and former Legal Representation Workgroup Attorneys.