



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Court Releases “Historic” Child Dependency Guide**

*Spurs Family Focus Momentum*

*Aids Permanent, Safe Homes for all Foster Care Children*

**HARRISBURG, PA, July 22, 2010**—A comprehensive reference guide designed to better prepare family court judges and child dependency practitioners for the complex legal issues and special needs of abused and neglected children is being released today by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.

The guide, known as the *Pennsylvania Dependency Benchbook*, “creates a comprehensive resource that combines Pennsylvania law, organized pragmatically to allow quick and efficient use, with a series of state and national best practices that will provide judges and practitioners, from the least to most experienced, with the best possible information to support children and families safely,” said Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Max Baer.

Justice Baer, a former administrative judge of family court in Allegheny County who has handled thousands of cases involving abused and neglected children, called the completion of this document an “historic effort,” culminating 18 months of work by a committee consisting of trial and appellate dependency judges, chaired by Lackawanna County President Judge Chester T. Harhut.

Judge Harhut said the benchbook, which will eventually be distributed to all trial judges and child dependency professionals throughout Pennsylvania, “is a document primarily written by Pennsylvania’s trial court judges for Pennsylvania’s trial court judges, solidifying how the overarching Mission and Guiding Principles for Pennsylvania’s dependency system are demonstrated in the day-to-day operations of the dependency court process.”

**Justice Baer added that the benchbook is a building block in the Supreme Court’s ongoing efforts since 2006 to reduce delays in placing at-risk children safely and permanently in loving, caring homes and to improve the lives of abused and neglected children. The document highlights best practices and court procedures with comments from experienced trial judges and former foster youth.**

**The court’s efforts, which day-to-day have been led by the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts’ Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC) in close partnership with the state Department of Public Welfare’s Office of Children, Youth and Families, are paying off for the children and for the taxpayers, Justice Baer said.**

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Justice Baer cited recent Department of Welfare statistics revealing that the number of Pennsylvania children in foster care is declining significantly, from approximately 21,395 in September 2006 to 15,920 in March 2010.

“These statistics not only mean we have 5,475 fewer children who were in foster care drift now in permanent homes, but we are saving \$220 million in the gross costs for administering foster care programs throughout Pennsylvania,” Baer added. “Even subtracting the costs of subsidized adoptions, legal guardianships and additional community-based family support services from this figure, the taxpayers are saving millions of dollars, while children are being provided a real chance for success in life.

“While the statistics and anecdotal stories are encouraging,” Justice Baer said, “there is much yet to be done. There are still too many children in the system, too many waiting for too long to be placed in permanent homes and too many ‘aging out’ of care with no connection to safe, loving adults. Collectively, we must do even better for Pennsylvania’s children.”

The Supreme Court is pleased to provide this valuable tool for family court judges and child dependency practitioners throughout the state to read and use. The court is confident it will improve outcomes for dependent children.

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*NOTE: Pennsylvania Dependency Benchbook Highlights attached.*

## **Pennsylvania Dependency Benchbook Highlights**

The benchbook, available on OCFC's Web site at [www.ocfcpcourts.us/padependencybenchbook](http://www.ocfcpcourts.us/padependencybenchbook), includes, in part:

- A summary of the legal requirements for dependency court proceedings, as well as detailed information on a number of special topics, such as the rights of older dependent youth and legal representation of children, parents, and guardians.
- Tools such as lists of critical questions to assist in the conduct of many hearings held daily in our dependency courts.
- Best practices derived from the innovations implemented in various Pennsylvania courts and the cumulative experience of judicial officers in the state, as well as national level policy making and research organizations, such as the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, the American Humane Association, the American Bar Association's Center on Children and the Law and the National Center for State Courts.

OCFC Administrator Sandra Moore said, "There are many examples of best practices in the benchbook such as 'Family Finding'—a practice that provides professionals with the tools they need to quickly identify fathers and other relatives who may be viable placement resources or supports for children. Early results have shown that Family Finding has dramatic results producing a 217 percent increase in the number of 'lasting resources' available to assist dependent children."

Moore said another best practice, Family Group Decision-Making, provides an opportunity for families to develop a unique and child-specific care plan that can be used throughout the life of the dependency proceedings. In addition, the benchbook suggests using the one judge-one family approach where the same judge hears the case from the shelter hearing through the termination of dependency, and the practice of combining the hearing which changes a permanency goal with the termination of parental rights hearing, expediting the dependency case trial, any potential appeals process, and safe, permanency for children.

The OCFC, created in October 2006 by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, is funded with federal grants from the Court Improvement Program run by the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.