



2013 Report to the Pennsylvania State Roundtable

Hearing Officer Education

Chairperson:

Honorable Joy Reynolds McCoy
Court of Common Pleas of Lycoming County



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Chairperson

Honorable Joy Reynolds McCoy
Judge
Court of Common Pleas of Lycoming County

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Background:

In 2011, through the roundtable system utilized by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, leaders in the child welfare system began to talk about juvenile court hearing officers and enhancing their exposure to the changing dependency practice. As quasi-judicial officers, hearing officers, or masters, are often the first and sometimes only interaction families have with dependency court. Their critical role supports the need for high quality hearings that are consistent with those conducted by judges in their jurisdiction. While trial court judges gather several times a year at a statewide conference, there is nothing geared specifically toward hearing officers. As such, the Pennsylvania State Roundtable commissioned a workgroup with the goal of developing and holding educational sessions for hearing officers.

Hearing Officer Educational Session Planning:

During an initial planning session, the workgroup discussed a number of issues as they relate to hearing officer practice and educational needs. While many of those topics mirror issues that are of concern to judges, the Workgroup decided to build upon the structure of the 2011 educational session with continued focus on the various dependency proceedings heard by hearing officers.

As such, the curriculum for the one-day 2012 Hearing Officer Educational session will focus on the crucial questions to be answered at each hearing, providing hearing officers guidance for each as well as highlighting the corresponding sections of the Dependency Bench Book. Additionally, the session will include a youth panel discussing the importance of/strategies for engaging youth in the courtroom.

The tentative agenda for the day is:

8:30-9:00	Registration and Continental Breakfast
9:00-9:15	Welcome and Opening Comments
9:15-10:45	Presentation
10:45-11:00	Break
11:00-11:30	Application to Practice
11:35-12:10	Questions and Highlights
12:10-1:00	Lunch
1:00-2:45	Presentation
2:45-3:00	Break
3:00-3:30	Youth Presentation
3:30-4:15	Application to Practice facilitated by youth
4:20-4:50	Questions and Highlights
4:50-5:00	Evaluation and Closing

The educational session is scheduled for September 3, 2013 at the Pennsylvania Judicial Center in Harrisburg, PA. The session, hosted by the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts' Office of Children and Families in the Courts, will be held without cost to hearing officers. It is anticipated that CLEs will be available for a nominal cost. The Hearing Officer Workgroup strongly urges all judges to ensure the attendance of their hearing officers at this important educational session. Not only will they be provided with relevant information and an opportunity to apply that to their daily practice but they will also be afforded an opportunity to network with their colleagues and participate in peer-to-peer learning.

Survey

The Hearing Officer Workgroup is also planning to survey judges and hearing officers in the Commonwealth in order to determine the scope and level of hearing officer practice. In doing so, the Workgroup will issue separate surveys for judges and hearing officers. The survey for judges will include elements such as:

- Usage
- Structure and Caseload
- Consistency: Do they follow the one judge/one family practice?
- Oversight/Consultation

The survey for hearing officers, will explore needs and challenges as well as their practice. Elements will include:

- Training needs
- Communication/Flow of Information
- Oversight
- Scope of Practice

Survey results will be used to organize and structure future educational sessions.

Conclusion

Hearing Officers play a vital role in Pennsylvania dependency practice. They enable the court to make good use of its judicial resources and ensure a steady flow of cases. In many jurisdictions, hearing officers are the primary face of dependency and as such, hold great power in the lives of the children/families that come before them. Efforts to share new knowledge, State Roundtable priorities, and practice strategies while ensuring the overall quality of hearings will benefit children, families and the court itself. Indeed, based upon feedback from the first hearing officer educational session, court observations, and Leadership Roundtable discussions the Workgroup believes ongoing educational sessions for hearing officers should occur.

Recommendations:

The Hearing Officer Educational Workgroup respectfully requests permission from the State Roundtable for the following:

1. Development of an annual education session for hearing officers; and
2. Completion of a survey of judges and hearing officers.