



OJJDP FACT SHEET

Shay Bilchik, Administrator

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Model Courts Serve Abused and Neglected Children

by Mary Mentaberry

For the past 25 years, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) has sought to focus national attention on abused and neglected children. Today, one of NCJFCJ's recent initiatives, Victims Act Model Courts, a nationwide effort to improve how courts handle child abuse and neglect cases, is helping children spend less time in foster care and resulting in earlier resolution of cases in dependency courts.

The Model Courts initiative is one of many effective innovations NCJFCJ has collaborated on with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) to aid child victims. Since 1973, NCJFCJ has been providing training and technical assistance to judges, court personnel, attorneys, social service agency representatives, child advocates, and other youth-serving professionals through its Permanency Planning for Children Project. Recently renamed the Permanency Planning for Children Department (PPCD), its goal is to educate judges and other practitioners on the need to expeditiously secure safe permanent placements for all maltreated children, either by making it possible for them to safely stay with or return to their own families or by finding them safe adoptive homes.

With funding from OJJDP, PPCD released a major publication in 1995 to help courts better respond to child victims. *RESOURCE GUIDELINES: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse and Neglect Cases* is a national blueprint for courts, providing step-by-step recommendations on how to improve court practice. Recognizing that court improvement generally starts with a single judge, PPCD took the Model Courts initiative a step further and identified "Lead Judges" in several State courts that had shown both interdisciplinary commitment and court/agency collaboration. PPCD helped these Lead Judges mobilize their colleagues, court personnel, and child-serving agencies to develop, within their jurisdictions, Model Courts that provide children with a permanent resolution of their cases as expeditiously as possible.

Today, PPCD oversees 17 Model Courts in 16 States (see box). These Model Court jurisdictions have implemented a variety

of programs that can be easily replicated by other courts. For example, reorganized "one-family/one-judge" court calendars ensure that judicial decisionmakers assigned to specific dependency cases remain on those cases until the children involved achieve permanence—either by being safely reunited with their rehabilitated families or by being placed in permanent adoptive homes.

Family group conferencing and mediation programs have been incorporated into many Model Court jurisdictions. Child health and safety remain paramount concerns as these innovative alternative dispute resolution methods are integrated into court and community responses to child abuse and neglect. Many Model Courts have expanded preliminary protective hearings to ensure that related issues are substantively investigated at the early stages of child abuse and neglect litigation. Scheduling hearings at specific times, implementing strict continuance policies, and developing state-of-the-art data information systems are goals of several Model Courts, while others are focusing on increasing adoptions. All Model Courts are seeking to shorten timelines for children under court supervision, and many are striving to decrease the number of cases under court supervision by examining records and clearing case backlogs.

Model Court innovations are resulting in significant and measurable outcomes for children. When Lead Judge Nancy Salyers, Presiding Judge of the Child Protection Division of the Cook County Circuit Court in Chicago, IL, started work to establish a Model Court in 1996, more than 58,000 children were under the Division's supervision. By carefully coordinating their efforts to implement programs that improve the handling of abuse and neglect cases, the court, related government agencies, the legal community, and community-based child welfare and adoption advocacy groups streamlined court operations and reduced case backlogs. The court's caseload had dropped to 31,534 children as of August 31, 1998.

While the Hamilton County Juvenile Court in Cincinnati, OH, the first jurisdiction designated a Model Court in 1993, has had similar success in reducing court caseloads, it has also reduced

foster care placements. The court recently established a new adoption initiative that involves 23 counties in 3 States. Social services agency personnel, court officials, and related professionals from counties in Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky have formed a coalition to identify and address local, State, and regional barriers to adoption. The court has also developed an Internet site (www.hcadopt.org) that lists children awaiting adoption.

For Further Information

To learn more about PPCD, to receive copies of *RESOURCE GUIDELINES: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse and Neglect Cases*, or for technical assistance or training program dates, contact NCJFCJ's Permanency Planning for Children Department, Resource and Technical Assistance Division, University of Nevada, Reno, P.O. Box 8970, Reno, NV 89507; call 775-327-5300; e-mail ppp@pppncjfcj.org; or visit PPCD's Web site, www.pppncjfcj.org. Information about permanency planning and other child protection and juvenile justice issues is also available from OJJDP's Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, 800-638-8736, or from OJJDP's Web site, www.ncjrs.org/ojjhome.htm.

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Founded in 1937, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, the Nation's oldest judicial membership organization, represents judges from all 50 States, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories.

Model Court Jurisdictions

Alexandria, VA	Honolulu, HI	Portland, OR
Buffalo, NY	Louisville, KY	Reno, NV
Charlotte, NC	Miami, FL	Salt Lake City, UT
Chicago, IL	Nashville, TN	San Jose, CA
Cincinnati, OH	New York, NY	Tucson, AZ
El Paso, TX	Newark, NJ	

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