

Best Practice Court Matters

An update on the latest events of Best Practice Courts of Virginia

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Court Improvement Program
Office of the Executive Secretary, Supreme Court of Virginia

Winter 2005

3rd Annual Best Practice Courts of Virginia Conference *Continuing to Learn Together*

“... It’s not just learning things that’s important. It’s learning what to do with what you learn and learning why you learn things at all that matters.” Norton Juster

Best Practice Courts of Virginia team members found many opportunities to learn from each other - and to be reminded of *why* they learn - as they once again gathered to share their ideas for innovative ways of handling child dependency litigation. The 3rd Annual Best Practice Courts Conference took place on November 14-16, 2004, at the Sheraton Park South Hotel in Richmond with approximately 150 people in attendance for the three-day event.



Lauren Bacon and James E. Harris, Jr., former foster children, were introduced by Judge Winship Tower, Virginia Beach.

spent many years in the foster care system and shared with the audience both the positive influences and challenges involved in their life experiences. “Bringing the children into the room,” is an important key to understanding the essential work of Best Practice Courts, helping everyone involved to remember why they are engaged in this often difficult and heart rending work. James’ and Lauren’s remarks were a conference highlight.

This year’s conference began with a special session on Sunday evening for the purpose of introducing five

On The Inside

3rd Annual Best Practice Courts of Virginia Conference	1
Plenary Session Focuses on the Health and Well-Being of Infants and Toddlers in JDR Court.....	2
Conference Snapshots Tell the Story.....	2
Representing Local Departments of Social Services: Building a Strong Case.....	3
Adoption Day Celebrations- November 2004.....	3
Future Commitments of Best Practice Courts-Class of 2004.....	4

new courts to the Best Practice Courts concept. The Class of 2004 first-time participants from **Prince William, Stafford, Waynesboro, Williamsburg/James City County, and Winchester/Frederick** joined returning teams from the Class of 2002 and Class of 2003. A total of twenty-four teams consisting of J&DR district court judges and clerks’ office staff, representatives from local departments of social services, and attorneys who serve as DSS counsel or as guardians ad litem for children attended.

“Voices of Youth: A Look at Foster Care Through the Eyes of the Child,” was a special presentation by two former foster care children, Lauren Bacon, a student at Lynchburg College, and James E. Harris, Jr., a student at St. Lawrence College. (See photo above.) These two young people

Robert N. Baldwin, Executive Secretary of the Supreme Court of Virginia, expressed gratitude to the audience as he closed Monday afternoon’s session with these words: “By your presence here today, you demonstrate a commitment to enhancing your community’s ability to respond to the needs of these children and their families. I thank you for your support of the court system in meeting its obligations in this regard and offer my best wishes to each of you for sharing a vision as to how to accomplish this work effectively.”

In keeping with tradition, the conference closed with the Class of 2004 court teams sharing with the group their future plans and goals as new participants in the Best Practice Courts initiative. (See page 4)

Plenary Session Focuses on Health and Well-Being of Infants and Toddlers in J&DR District Courts



Judge Philip Wallace, Bedford, with guest speakers—Judge Cindy Lederman (left) and Dr. Vicky Youcha (right) .

- “Outstanding, insightful, moving.”
- “Excellent. Opened my eyes....The videos were great in showing the real issues.”
- “Enlightening/amazing/frightening in some ways.”

These comments are but a sample of those made in response to the 3rd Annual Best Practice Courts Conference Tuesday morning plenary session, “Health and Well-Being: Infants and Toddlers in J&DR District Court - Strategies for meeting the needs of the child dependency program’s youngest clients.” Attendees were fortunate to have two nationally known guest speakers for this presentation - Judge Cindy S. Lederman, Presiding Judge of the Miami-Dade Juvenile Court, a model court in Miami, Florida, and Dr. Vicky Youcha, Project Director of Zero to Three in Washington, D.C. Arrangements for these speakers were made with the help of Joey A. Orduna, J.D., Manager, Model Courts Division, through support of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges’, Permanency Planning for Children

Department (NCJFCJ) in Reno, Nevada.

Judge Lederman and Dr. Youcha explored the needs of infants and toddlers in the foster care system through the use of lectures, videos, and team discussions of a hypothetical case. Conferees learned that in the United States, children under age 5 are the fastest growing population in child welfare; that infants comprise 1 in 5 of children in foster care; and that they remain in foster care twice as long as older children. In addition, children in foster care have a developmental delay that is 4 to 5 times that of children in the general population, with more than half suffering from serious health problems.

The speakers emphasized that there is no quick fix, but that early intervention can make a difference in the well-being of these young children. Dr. Youcha suggested early intervention services such as family training, counseling, home visits and parent support groups; medical services for diagnosis or evaluation purposes; nutrition services; psychological services; and case management. From a legal perspective, Judge Lederman provided a list of recommendations for improving the outcomes for young children in the system including: the use of evidence-based models to prevent child abuse and neglect; prevention of multiple placements for infants and toddlers in foster care; the use of appropriate visitation practices; and court oversight to ensure safety and permanence. Attendees were encouraged to be responsible for young children in their courts through community groups, such as local Best Practice Courts teams. The resulting dedicated teamwork can be an effective strategy in promoting better health and well-being for infants and toddlers in Virginia.

Conference Snapshots Tell the Story!



Representing Local Departments of Social Services: Building a Strong Case



Lelia Hopper, CIP Director (standing) welcomes DSS attorneys to the program, while panelists (from left) Steve Arey, Tazewell; Joan O'Donnell, Petersburg; David Shreve, Campbell; and Moderator Jean Kelly, CIP Staff Attorney, look on.

In October 2004, Jean Kelly, Staff Attorney, Court Improvement Program (CIP) mailed questionnaires to gauge interest in a proposed continuing legal education program planned specifically for those attorneys who represent local departments of social services in child dependency cases. The response was overwhelming! On January 7, 2005, approximately 100 attorneys who serve as DSS counsel traveled from all corners of the state to T.C. Williams Law School at the University of Richmond to attend "Representing Local Departments of Social Services: Building a Strong Case." This free, one-day seminar was co-sponsored by the Permanency Unit, Division of Family Services, Virginia Department of Social Services and CIP, Office of the Executive Secretary, Supreme Court of Virginia.

Highlights of the program included guest speakers from the National Child Welfare Resource Center on Legal and Judicial Issues, American Bar Association, Center on Children and the Law. Kathleen McNaught, Assistant Director of Child Welfare, presented "Improving Outcomes for Older Youth," discussing youth develop-

ment issues concerning federal laws and well-being issues facing youth who are ready to age out of foster care. The afternoon session began with Jennifer Renne, Assistant Director of Child Welfare, who created a great deal of audience enthusiasm and lively discussion with her presentation, "Ethics for Attorneys Representing Local Departments of Social Services." Using her extensive knowledge (as well as a good dose of humor), Ms. Renne presented attorneys with scenarios that would create ethical issues for lawyers representing child welfare agencies in child abuse/neglect and termination of parental rights proceedings.



CLE attendees take their discussions outside during lunch at T.C. Williams Law School, University of Richmond.

Best Practice Courts were well represented at this event. Of the twenty-four localities participating in the program, twenty-three had DSS attorneys in attendance. In addition, team members Steve Arey, Tazewell, and David Shreve, Campbell, were panelists for a discussion on termination of parental rights cases.

Evaluation results for the CLE indicated great appreciation for the program and a strong desire to make this type of gathering an annual event. Typical comments were similar to this one at the end of one evaluation form: "We want more!"

Adoption Day Celebrations November 2004

For the past several years, Best Practice Courts of Virginia have been involved in recognizing and celebrating adoptions in honor of National Adoption Awareness Month. On November 20, 2004, ceremonies and celebrations were held in Roanoke, Richmond, Hampton, Campbell, and Alexandria.

Ruth Bates, Clerk, Roanoke County J&DR wrote, "Just wanted you to know what a blast we all had this past Saturday at our first Adoption Saturday. We ...ended up with close to 300 [people] ! We had games,...a photographer, food, and music. We all felt so emotional as we watched the families come in. This was truly a blessing for us!"

Hampton reported a successful event as well, with twenty children's adoptions celebrated and seven final orders signed that day.

Richmond, Campbell, and Alexandria have made Adoption Day Celebrations an annual event and continue to reap the joys and rewards of this special day, as courts nationwide bring attention to children who need "forever homes" with loving families.



*"When I approach a child
He inspires in me
two sentiments:
Tenderness for what he is,
And respect for
what he may become."*

Louis Pasteur

Best Practice Court Matters...

Future Commitments of Best Practice Courts—Class of 2004

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Class of 2004 teams planned for the future and reported back to the closing plenary session on the activities that they will pursue as part of the Best Practice Courts commitment. Here are some future plans and goals:

Prince William: Implement child dependency court, after seeking guidance from established Best Practice Courts; develop front-loading service plans.

Stafford: Hold quarterly meetings (beginning Jan. 5, 2005); broaden community team membership; review forms from BPC courts; elect (rotating) chair; draft a mission statement; set further goals (hold a foster care forum, develop a resource fair).

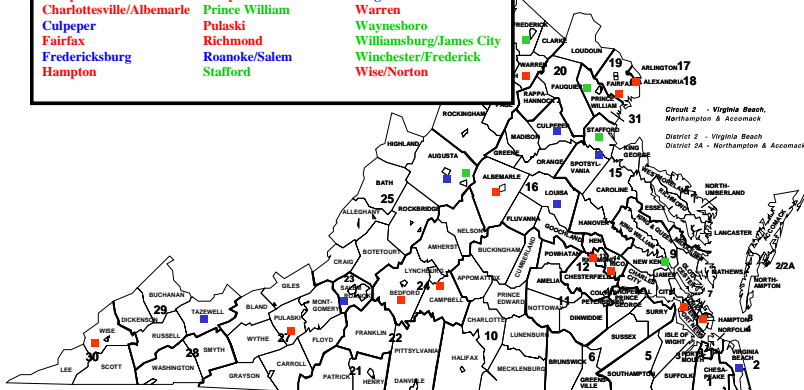
Waynesboro: Develop a resource book; implement a system to expand visitation between parents and children; designate a committee to work with local circuit court regarding a time line for appeals; offer substance abuse help for parents.

Williamsburg/James City Co.: Hold regular meetings (first one was scheduled for Dec. 16, 2004); conduct a survey on foster care cases; address drug abuse issues and parenting classes (in cooperation with local hospital).

Winchester/Frederick: Chose team slogan, “Better outcomes for children”; offer GAL training; offer cross training for stakeholders and provide resources; improve communication by listening to recommended changes; establish a center for supervised visitation.

Best Practice Courts of Virginia
 2002, 2003, 2004

Alexandria	Henrico	Staunton/Augusta
Bedford	Louisa	Tazewell
Campbell	Newport News	Virginia Beach
Charlottesville/Albemarle	Prince William	Warren
Culpeper	Pulaski	Waynesboro
Fairfax	Richmond	Williamsburg/James City
Fredericksburg	Roanoke/Salem	Winchester/Frederick
Hampton	Stafford	Wise/Norton



A bird’s-eye view of Best Practice Courts conferees sharing and learning together.

November 14-16, 2004
 Richmond, Virginia