

UPCOMING EVENTS

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			1	2	3	4
5	April 24-25, 2012	Voluntary Judicial Conference for J&DR District Court Judges - Glen Allen, VA				
12	May 8, 2012	Parents' Attorney Conference - Richmond, VA				
	June 9-12, 2012	National CASA Conference - Washington, DC				
19	July 15-18, 2012	NCJFCJ National Conference - New Orleans, LA				
	September 2012	Class of 2012 Best Practice Courts Conference (dates and location TBD)				
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Best Practice Court Matters

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Office of the Executive Secretary
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100 N. 9th Street, 3rd Floor
Richmond, VA 23219

Director: Lelia Baum Hopper
Editor: Jane Lissenden Wiggins
Telephone: (804) 786-5304
Website: www.courts.state.va.us

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STAYING CONNECTED WITH BEST PRACTICES

Court Improvement Program Staff would like to hear from Best Practice Court teams about the progress being made on the selected initiatives listed on page 2. Please e-mail Jane Wiggins at: jwiggins@courts.state.va.us, so we can include your good work in our next newsletter and share your innovative ideas with other teams.

PARENTS' ATTORNEY TRAINING—MAY 8, 2012

The Court Improvement Program is sponsoring a day-long training event for attorneys who serve as counsel for parents in child dependency cases. Invitations were mailed to attorneys in early February. The response rate for this program was overwhelming and **registration for the live event is now closed**. CIP plans to offer regional video replays in late spring and early summer. Dates and locations for those events will be announced shortly.

COURT PERFORMANCE MEASURES FOR CHILD DEPENDENCY CASES

Previewed in September 2011, these Measures will be available statewide by **April 1, 2012**. They are designed to help juvenile courts (i) establish baseline practices, (ii) diagnose areas in need of improvement, and (iii) use information to make improvements, track efforts, and identify, document and replicate positive results. Information regarding accessing the Measures will be provided to all J&DR Courts as the release date nears.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Engaging Fathers:

<http://www.americanhumane.org/assets/pdfs/children/fatherhood/pc262.pdf>

Psychotropic Medications:

www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/child_law/PsychMed.authcheckdam.pdf

Permanency Pact for Foster Youth:

http://fosteringconnections.org/tools/assets/files/transition_toolkit.pdf

Courts Catalyzing Change - Preliminary Protective Hearing Benchcard Report:

<http://www.ncjfcj.org/images/stories/dept/publications/ncjfcj%20benchcard%20study%20final.pdf>

Moving Ahead: Defining the Future of the Best Practice Courts Program

As the Best Practice Courts program enters its 10th year, the Court Improvement Program is highlighting initiatives aimed at improving court processes for children and families that are gaining momentum at the national level and can be fruitful in Virginia courts. The 6th Statewide Best Practice Courts Conference held in Williamsburg, VA, September 8-9, 2011, provided the opportunity for local court team members to learn about some of these efforts and to gain new perspectives and approaches to long-standing challenges in working with at-risk children and families.

Teams were asked to identify a specific issue or court practice upon which to focus their collective energy and expertise during 2011-2012. The outcome of these collaborations should enhance the success of agency and court interventions on behalf of children and families.

In selecting their initiatives, teams considered the plenary and breakout session topics and resources presented at the Conference, as well as team member experiences during the past year. Teams were asked to use data to identify, document and make decisions about their policy choices and practices. The initiatives selected by each Best Practice Court Team and reported at the Conference are set out on page 2.

Regularly identified initiatives of local teams, which are at the forefront of national court improvement undertakings,

are briefly described here. Progress with their implementation by two local teams can be found on page 3.

Courts Catalyzing Change: Preliminary Protective Hearing Benchcard - Developed by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, the Benchcard and its supporting documentation are based upon "research [which] has demonstrated that children and families of color are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system and frequently experience disparate outcomes. While children of all races are equally as likely to suffer from child abuse and neglect, the percentage of African-American children who enter and remain in out-of-home care is greater than their proportion in the population."

There is a "critical need for collaborative efforts to not only further study the factors that contribute to racial disproportionality and disparities in the child welfare system, but also to design and implement specific actions that courts and child welfare system stakeholders can take to reduce these inequities and ultimately improve outcomes for all children and families."

Both plenary and breakout sessions focused on specific actions court team members can pursue to address appropriately cultural identity, genders and background of the family, increase parental engagement in the process, and enhance success for child safety and placement.

"This Conference is invaluable! It provides meaningful information and opportunities to network with peers and re-energizes our commitment to excellence in the ongoing challenges in child dependency cases."

-Conference Attendee

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Best Practice Court Team	Identified Task
Alexandria	Implement "Courts Catalyzing Change Benchcard."
Amherst	Engage fathers and families.
Bedford	Develop transition plans for teens in care.
Campbell	Engage fathers and families.
Charlottesville/Albemarle	Re-engineer case process to ensure participants understand what is happening.
Chesapeake	Develop a DVD on "Learn Your Rights;" Focus on aging out of foster care.
Culpeper	Engage fathers and families.
Fairfax	Support older youth in care - realign DFS services, improve educational outcomes, eliminate aging out.
Franklin Co.	Implement "Courts Catalyzing Change Benchcard."
Fredericksburg	Identify youth at-risk of aging out of care - develop list of services, support child beyond 18 th birthday, involve local Community College.
Hampton	Utilize "Child Safety: A Guide for Judges and Attorneys."
Harrisonburg/Rockingham	Poll youth leaving foster care about their experiences in care; respond.
Henrico	Implement "Courts Catalyzing Change Benchcard."
Lee	Implement "Courts Catalyzing Change Benchcard" - Training for Attorneys, GALs and Social Workers.
Loudoun	Focus on teens aging out of foster care and permanent connections.
Louisa	Implement "Courts Catalyzing Change Benchcard."
Montgomery	Monitor docket of Protective Order Cases; achieve permanency more quickly; develop a notebook for foster children; record of proceedings
Nelson	Implement "Courts Catalyzing Change Benchcard."
Newport News	Develop familiarity with psychotropic medications – List and reasons for medications; Engaging fathers.
Northampton	Engage fathers and families.
Pulaski	Improve work of GALs and presence of youth at hearings.
Richmond City	Engage fathers and families.
Richmond County	Engage fathers and families.
Roanoke City	Poll children leaving foster care about their experiences in care; speak with children in foster care and identify possible changes.
Roanoke County/Salem	Focus on teens in foster care; expand initiative for youth aging out.
Smyth	Engage service providers.
Stafford	Support youth leaving foster care - increase permanency, develop permanency pact.
Staunton/Augusta/Waynesboro	Improve identification of fathers and families; identify disparities among various policies.
Suffolk	Focus on older youth in care – early intervention/prevention.
Tazewell	Substance abuse program parallel CD timelines; continue working with teens in foster care.
Virginia Beach	Engage fathers; establish connections for children; reduce congregate care.
Warren	Review data to identify problem areas and focus on findings.
Washington/Bristol	Review "Advocacy in Motion: A Guide to Implementing the Standards to Govern the Performance of Guardians Ad Litem for Children" - adopt local policies and conduct training for GALs; implement "Courts Catalyzing Change Benchcard."
Williamsburg/James City	Engage fathers; development of program on Domestic Violence and effects on children.
Winchester/Frederick	Integrate trauma-informed practice into the team's Strategic Planning Process.
Wise/Norton	Change policy from department specific procedure to court specific.

(Continued from page 1)

Engaging Fathers and Families

Howard Davidson, Director of the ABA Center on Children and the Law, led a breakout session and asked "is there a difference in child and family outcomes in child welfare cases based on non-resident father involvement?" One study found that highly involved nonresident fathers' children exited foster care more quickly.

Participants were given tips for overcoming legal barriers to non-custodial father and paternal kin engagement for children in foster care and offered best practices for the early identification, location and involvement of fathers in their children's welfare cases.

The National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System supports efforts to determine, through a research design, the impact of non-resident father involvement on child welfare outcomes. Mr. Davidson recommended identifying dads early, using family team meetings, encouraging visits and case planning with dads, and understanding male-help seeking and learning styles.

Youth Aging Out of Foster Care. Dr. William Bell, CEO of Casey Family Programs, Seattle WA., in a keynote address challenged court team members to adopt the standard of "what is best for my children is best for children in care." Accepting that foster youth will leave care at age 18 without permanent connections substantially diminishes their potential for success as adults. A breakout session further examined child welfare practices that can support older foster youth and discussed the recent elimination in Virginia law of "independent living" as a permanent goal for 16 and 17 year olds in care.

Conference participants were advised to begin transition planning well before youth reach 18, to put youth in charge of the process for integrating permanency options into their futures, to deal with their sense of

betrayal and loss, and to understand why youth resist "permanency." The development of a "permanency pact" in which a supportive adult pledges to provide specific supports to a foster youth with the goal of

establishing a life-long, kin-like relationship was described and advocated.

Implementation

Best Practice Court teams began work on their selected initiatives in the fall of 2011. Two of the activities reported to CIP are shared here.

The **Louisa** Best Practice Court team chose to integrate the *Courts Catalyzing Change* Preliminary Hearing Benchcard into its court proceedings involving child dependency cases. Lead Judge, Susan Whitlock, consulted with Judge Louis Trosch, Mecklenburg, NC, in the development of a mock trial script. J. Trosch had provided training on the Benchcard for Virginia Juvenile Court Judges in April 2011 as well as at the State Best Practice Court Conference.

The Louisa Team planned and conducted four trainings for local social services staff, attorneys and GALs on the enhanced court process. CIP filmed a mock trial demonstrating the Benchcard for an audience of 40 local stakeholders at the Louisa J&DR Court. Team members filled the various roles for the trial. A DVD of the mock trial has been shared with other Best Practice Court teams that have selected this initiative.



After a trial run of the enhanced process in December 2011, the Louisa J&DR Court

began using the Benchcard scheme in all applicable preliminary hearings for children in January 2012. This mock trial will be presented at the April 2012 J&DR Court Judges Conference.

The **Hampton** Best Practice Court team has embraced the critical thinking and methodology underlying the publication, *Child Safety: A Guide for Judges and Attorneys*. Published by the ABA, copies of the *Guide* and training have been provided for all Juvenile Court judges, and guardians ad litem who attend a CLE program. The *Guide's* decision-making framework requires the judge, attorneys and child welfare staff to establish higher standards for information quality and processing. The goal is to make decisions about child safety more consistent and timely and based on accurate information.

The *Guides'* authors, Jennifer Renne and Therese Roe Lund, conducted trainings for Hampton child welfare staff and a broad group of community stakeholders in January 2012. Ms. Renne and Lead Judge Jay Dugger will lead a training for all GALs in March 2012. The *Guide* methodology will be used in all child welfare cases in Hampton beginning in April 2012.

Bringing the Children into the Room

Successful Best Practice Court initiatives will be supported by the voices of those they seek to serve: children, youth and families. Youth, in particular, need and deserve to be a part of court proceedings determining their futures as well as our collaborative activities.

Three members of the State Youth Advisory Council, supported by the Va. Department of Social Services, provided advice and context for the 300 participants at the Statewide Conference. Dr. William Bell, CEO of Casey Family Programs, moderated a panel of these young adults who spent substantial time in foster care. They talked with humor and passion about their experiences with school, family and court and received a standing ovation.

One attendee commented, "Dr. Bell and the three youth were outstanding. We can do more for our foster care youth and need to examine their needs, so their lives can be improved and in turn stop the cycle of neglect and abuse."