

# Best Practice Court Matters

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

Court Improvement Program

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## Best Practice Courts of Virginia—2003 Conference

Juvenile and domestic relations district court judges and clerks' office staff, members of the bar, and representatives from local departments of social services from around Virginia met on November 17-18, 2003, at Virginia Crossings Resort and Conference Center in Glen Allen, Virginia for the Second Annual Best Practice Courts of Virginia Conference. The Best Practice Courts program recognizes communities that have committed to a collaborative effort to improve the response of the judicial system to litigation involving dependent children and their families.

The conference, planned for the purpose of sharing innovative ways of handling child dependency litigation, opened with remarks by the Hon. Robert P. Frank, Judge, Court of Appeals of Virginia. Judge Frank intro-



Keynote speaker, Judge Douglas Johnson of Nebraska, and Joey Orduna, Virginia's Model Court Liaison from the NCJFCJ in Reno, Nevada, enjoy conversation by the reference table during a break.

duced the keynote speaker, the Hon. Douglas Johnson of Omaha, Nebraska, who spoke on "Implementing Best Practices". Judge Johnson is the Presiding Judge for the Separate Juvenile Court of Douglas County, Nebraska, and serves as a Model Court Lead Judge for the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges' Permanency Planning for Children Project (NCJFCJ) in Reno, Nevada. Joey Orduna, Virginia's Model Court Liaison from the NCJFCJ, participated in last year's meeting and returned this year to again support conference activities.

As with the 2002 conference, learning from each other was the focus of the November meeting, with the anticipated result being better service to Virginia's youngest citizens and their families. The juvenile and domestic relations district courts which began their Best Practice Courts activities in 2002 are in the following localities:

Albemarle/Charlottesville, Alexandria, Bedford, Campbell, Fairfax, Hampton, Henrico, Newport News, Pulaski, Richmond, Warren, and Wise/Norton. These teams were represented by the lead judge(s) and one chosen representative from the court's local stakeholder group. Seven additional courts were added in 2003. They are in: Culpeper, Fredericksburg, Staunton/Augusta, Louisa, Roanoke County/Salem, Tazewell and Virginia Beach. Each of these teams consisted of five or six members—a lead J&DR judge(s), a member of the clerks' office staff, a representative from the local department of social services, an attorney who represents the local dss, and an attorney who serves as guardian ad litem for children.

At the close of the conference, the new 2003 court teams shared their goals and expectations as participants in the Best Practice Courts initiative with the group. (See page 3.) The 2002 court team representatives met together to brainstorm and plan future activities.

The November conference provided participants a chance to share how their communities are serving children and families in child dependency cases. Attendees had the opportunity to learn from their colleagues around the state as they exchanged success stories and offered new approaches to encourage enhanced case management of these cases.

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### Plenary Session Focuses on Improving and Expediting Child Abuse/Neglect/Foster Care Cases

The primary mission of the Best Practice Courts initiative is improving and expediting the courts' consideration of child abuse, neglect and foster care cases. During the first plenary session of the 2003 conference, a panel comprised of six J&DR judges discussed their approaches to court management, trial, and community collaboration for these cases. Hon. William W. Sharp of Warren discussed front-loading the child dependency case and monitoring the efforts of parents; Hon. Philip A. Wallace of Bedford – using affidavits to support court findings, foster care checklists, and a guardian ad litem handbook developed by the Bedford County FOCUS team; Hon. Elizabeth S. Wills of Wise – documenting termination of parental rights and the JustChildren statewide foster care project (a training on educational issues for children in foster care); Hon. A. Ellen White of Campbell – using monthly active foster care children lists provided by the local dss and Adoption Saturday Celebrations; Hon. Jay E. Dugger of Hampton – expediting appeals of foster care cases in the circuit court; and Hon. Stephen W. Rideout of Alexandria – Alexandria's Victims Act Model Court Retreat, the use of surveys of foster parents and older foster children, and streamlining case processing. Hon. Sharon B. Will, Judge, Henrico County Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court, served as moderator for this panel.



Improving Court Practice for Children and Families

### Panels Discuss Concurrent Planning and Family Treatment Drug Courts

Specialized court initiatives for concurrent planning, an important topic of the 2003 Conference, was discussed by a panel moderated by the Hon. Gayl B. Carr, Judge, Fairfax J&DR, on Monday, November 17. The audience viewed an excerpt from the video, "Introduction to Mediation, Family Group Conferencing and Concurrent Planning: Pathways to Permanence", before hearing presentations from the panel. According to panelist Therese Wolf, Foster Care Policy Specialist of Virginia DSS, "concurrent rather than sequential consideration of permanency options leads to timely case decisions. *And... the child's sense of time must be primary in all decisions regarding placement and permanency.*" Other panelists were Katherine Froyd, Director, Children, Youth and Family Services of the Fairfax County Department of Family Services, Neal T. Knudsen, Esq., counsel for Warren County dss, and Hon. William W. Sharp, Judge, Warren County J&DR.

Family treatment drug courts were also highlighted during this plenary session. The video, "Legal Innovations: Dependency Drug Court", was viewed prior to presentations by Hon. Edward D. Berry, Judge, Charlottesville J&DR; Lucretia Blythe, Case Manager, Piedmont CASA; and Hon. Nolan B. Dawkins, Judge, Alexandria J&DR. The Hon. Anne B. Holton, Judge, Richmond J&DR, served as moderator for this panel, which discussed the family drug court programs in Charlottesville, Alexandria, and Richmond. The panel shared information regarding overall program planning and objectives, related court procedures, and related court forms.

### Future BPC Commitments from the Class of 2003

Individual "Class of 2003" local teams met to plan future Best Practice Courts activities and identify resources needed for support. They were asked to report back to the closing plenary session at least one activity to pursue as a part of their Best Practice Courts commitment. Here's what these ambitious courts are planning:

Culpeper: Make hearings more efficient and valuable; reduce continuances; assure that services are begun within 30 days in at least 50% of cases.

Fredericksburg: Begin collection of data on children in foster care by mid-January; host a kick-off community meeting in February or March.

Louisa: Identify community resources; host a kick-off meeting; provide joint education for interested stakeholders in the community; begin front loading services and concurrent planning.

Roanoke/Salem: Establish a community team by January; develop protocols for child conferences to occur within six weeks of coming into foster care; review and develop a revised foster care report.

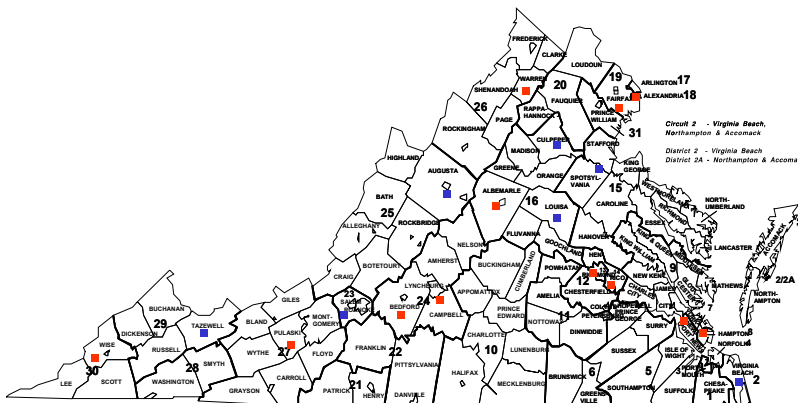
Staunton/Augusta: Choose a name for the team (have now named the group "CAP" for "Children Achieving Permanency"); hold an all-inclusive community stakeholders meeting (currently scheduled for January 27!); plan a retreat.

Tazewell: Plan monthly team meetings; provide mandatory GAL training; identify community resources; plan an assessment of needs.

Virginia Beach: Training community stakeholders; identify community resources; seek funding for substance abuse treatment.



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Contributions of articles or information are always welcome. If we know about it, we'll write about it!

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

- Jan. 27 - Staunton/Augusta "CAP" kick-off meeting
Jan. 27 - Alexandria Core Group Meeting
Feb. 6 - Roanoke/Salem BPC Community-wide meeting
April 30 - Fredericksburg BPC Training
June 4 - Richmond BPC Training
June 8 - Alexandria BPC Training

Check Your Mailbox! Upcoming Statewide Training on Standards to Govern the Performance of Guardians Ad Litem for Children

Seminars will be held across Virginia later in 2004 for discussion of the recently adopted Standards to Govern the Performance of Guardians Ad Litem for Children. These programs are being planned through efforts of the Virginia Bar Association and the Office of the Executive Secretary, Supreme Court of Virginia.

Watch for information in the near future regarding the planning of and expectations for these upcoming seminars.



Best Practice Class of 2002 Convenes to Ask "Where Do We Go From Here"?