

The MODEL COURT Project

PENNSYLVANIA COURT IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

Safety

Early and quick intervention for a child who is the victim of neglect or abuse, including temporary emergency removal of the child from the harmful environment.

Assessment

Evaluation of the child's current and/or future placement, including individual or family assessments (drug & alcohol, mental health, etc.)

Services

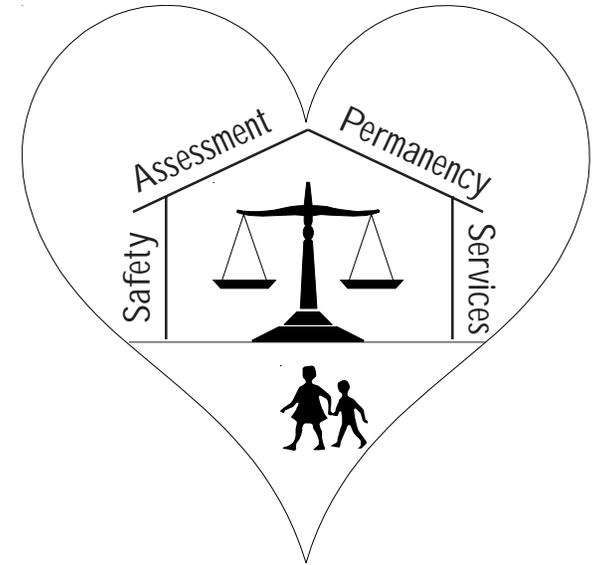
The recommendations and services which result from assessments provide an enhanced support network, allowing the child and family every opportunity for reunification.

Permanency

Examination of permanent plan options, which include returning the child home or legally freeing the child for adoption and/or placement in a permanent, safe and nurturing environment.

For Information, Contact:

Court Improvement Project
First Judicial District
of Pennsylvania
Court of Common Pleas
Family Division
1801 Vine Street, Room 208
Philadelphia, PA 19103
215-686-7786
FAX: 215-686-4041



FIRST JUDICIAL DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA
COURT OF COMMON PLEAS
FAMILY DIVISION

Honorable Paul P. Panepinto
Administrative Judge

Honorable Lillian Harris Ransom
Project Chairperson

Pennsylvania Court Improvement Project

The roles and responsibilities of juvenile courts in the handling of abuse, neglect, and dependency cases have expanded dramatically since the passage of the federal Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (P.L. 96-272) in 1980. Juvenile courts are required to take a far more active role in the decision-making and oversight of child welfare cases and are expected to monitor case progress and ensure that a safe, permanent and stable home is secured for each abused and neglected child. Recent federal legislation, the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89), further cements the court's role in monitoring case progress and ensuring child safety and shortens timelines for permanency hearings and initiation of termination of parental rights proceedings.

Congress created the Court Improvement Project because juvenile courts found themselves in the untenable position of having to achieve these expanded judicial oversight requirements, as their dependency caseloads continued to rise. Philadelphia Family Court decided to avail itself of funds made available through the national Court Improvement Project to examine the judicial handling of the Commonwealth's abused and neglected children.

The purpose of the Pennsylvania Court Improvement Project (CIP) is to examine the judicial handling of the Commonwealth's cases involving abused and neglected children and to develop new procedures and strategies that focus on reducing the time children stay in the child welfare system. An assessment of Pennsylvania's Dependency Courts was conducted and the recommendations of the study are being implemented.

The Model Court

In November of 1998, in response to recommendations in the Assessment Report of the Court Improvement Project, Family Court of Philadelphia opened a new dependency courtroom known as the Model Court. The Model Court is a front-loaded system which provides information and services to the family, coupled with intensive court involvement, early in the court process. The Model Court's goal is to minimize the length of time children remain in temporary placement and families remain court-involved.

A five-point strategy is employed in the Model Court:

- **One Judge for One Family** — Each case will be handled by one judge throughout the entire court process, allowing comprehensive knowledge of the case and interest in a successful outcome.
- **A Time-Specific and Accelerated Court Calendar** — Each case is designated a specific time for hearing, allowing for greater ease of handling. Increased notification further reduces continuances of court hearings, thus minimizing the time the child spends in placement. Each hearing is preceded by a conference led by a facilitator to assist the parties in reaching agreement in matters of placement, visitation, and services. Attorneys are to see their clients before the initial hearing date.
- **Model Court Training** — All parties associated with the project receive training regarding the goals and objectives of the Model Court. These include attorneys, social workers, drug and alcohol and mental health practitioners, as well as court employees.
- **Collaboration** — Family Court is working with the Department of Human Services, Defender Association's Child Advocacy Unit, the Support Center for Child Advocates, Community Legal Services, School District of Philadelphia, City of Philadelphia Law Department, CASA and others to increase the possibility for early success in dependency cases.
- **Data Collection and Tracking** — Computer programs have been created to ensure a more accurate retrieval of essential information necessary to track, monitor, schedule, review, and process each case. All parties receive a copy of the court order generated at each hearing.



These strategies highlight early and quick intervention. If successful, these strategies can be extended to other dependency courtrooms in Philadelphia, and recommended to other courts in Pennsylvania.