

Thurston County Family and Juvenile Court:
Dependency Transformation Project Update,
Anne Hirsch, Lead Judge

Since the Court received our National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) Technical Assistance Grant in late 2016, the NCJFCJ has conducted three site visits, issued three reports, and assisted the court in creating many improvements in the way we conduct dependency hearings and address these cases. A small leadership team (Pam Hartman-Beyer, Edith VanderWal, Senior AAG Karen Small, and I) and more importantly **many** court, system and community partners, have worked throughout the grant to accomplish the court's goals, as outlined in our grant. None of our many accomplishments could have been made without the active efforts contributed by each of those partners.

Prior to each site visit the NCJFCJ surveyed system partners and participants and while visiting observed court and met with all dependency stakeholder groups. After each visit reports outlining areas for potential improvement were issued and have been previously distributed. Some of the NCJFCJ's recommended improvements included:

- Consider developing and implementing a trauma-specific policy and protocol, including screening in every case;
- Consider making the courthouse more child and family friendly;
- Reduce waiting time for families at court;
- Reduce noise level at court (both in hallways and in the courtrooms);
- Continue making collaborative FRC improvements including for staffing and court procedures;
- Consider offering additional court-based training on implicit bias and cultural sensitivity;
- Consider restructuring the current calendar to time certain calendaring;
- Consider training all staff on trauma informed practices and positive communication styles;
- Consider implementing programs for celebrating good work by stakeholders;

- Consider enhancing ways to solicit feedback on environment, practice and policy from consumers;
- Consider increasing support for staff regarding secondary traumatic stress;
- Explore use of mediation and settlement conferences throughout the life of a dependency case;
- Encourage children to attend court and institute other in-court improvements to have more meaningful hearings for youth and families;
- Increase judicial engagement with parties during court to include better attention to making ICWA inquiries;
- Provide more cross training for all system partners;
- Eliminate pre-trial hearing requirements;
- Participate in trauma audit;
- Assess and restructure, if necessary, dependency team structure;

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Some of the many areas of improvements, changes, shifts in practice we have accomplished since 2017 include the following:

1. System wide day-long facilitated strategic planning session to determine project goals and priorities. As a result of that and work ahead of time by the Leadership team for the grant, a new dependency team structure was created including an Executive Team, and three work groups: Calendaring and Court Practices, Trauma Responsive Improvements and Data. The entire team created an agreed upon mission statement and self-selected work groups.
2. Continued focus on youth involved in multiple cases (Cross System Youth). Our court has included this area of focus for many years; under the grant we have
 - a. Instituted a weekly calendar for regular court reviews of Cross System Youth matters;
 - b. Continued to assign these youth to a specific Judge;
 - c. Fine-tuned our system (coordinated by a Juvenile Department manager) of tracking these cases so that all needed parties and stakeholders receive timely notice of any court hearings;

3. Created weekly opportunities for Settlement Conferences in dependency cases;
4. Connected with new resources for private mediation (conducted by a retired judge) in appropriate dependency cases, on a case by case basis.
5. Created a new process for tracking “legally free” cases: this has resulted in a more individualized approach so that cases needing more active court supervision are timely scheduled and likewise that cases on track for a timely adoption are not required to have frequent court appearances;
6. Created new pretrial process (in family law and dependency cases) that requires parties to provide written pre-Trial reports to the court in lieu of required attendance at pretrial conferences. This process will provide the court with information needed for efficient trial scheduling and also relieves attorneys from court appearances, something most attorneys requested.
7. Creation of new local court rules regarding pretrial process and case scheduling orders (local rules currently in draft form);
8. Creation of agreed protocol for dependency hearings including shelter care, fact finding and terminations.
9. Creation of new court report forms for dependency hearings;
10. The final and most significant accomplishment of the Calendaring/Court Process Workgroup was the start of a new time specific calendar system. Creating a new calendar system was extremely work intensive and took a long time to complete, in part because staff (FJC Manager) had to work to create new systems in Odyssey. Many attorneys and other stakeholders also actively participated in this work and as of June 2019, the new system started. As part of the change in scheduling, we also changed the days of the week that dependency reviews and FRC take place. This change addressed other important recommendations made by the NCJFCJ: decreasing wait times for families, noise reduction in courtrooms and hallways, and fewer people in the building during court times. Each of those changes improved the experience of families having to appear at court. The collective result of the changes, especially the change of court days for dependency cases, has also improved the work

environment for court staff because of the reduced numbers of people needing assistance from staff all at the same time.

11. Trauma responsive work group was created to work on physical improvements to the building and also court related practices. Some of the work of this group has included:

- a. A trauma audit conducted by the NCJFCJ in 2018;
- b. Working together with the data work group to incorporate specific questions into user satisfaction survey;
- c. Trauma responsive training for staff and for system partners, including and in addition to the FJC Lunchtime education:
 - i. ½ day training conducted by Dr. Joyce Gilbert on trauma (this training was put together and coordinated by the Juvenile Department, Dana Hansen).
 - ii. Two “Roles and Responsibilities” trainings, one in 2018 at the department and the second in 2019 which also included training on “family time “and implicit bias.
 - iii. A day long training on family time (visitation) coordinated with AOC and the OPD in 2018.
 - iv. Training on Procedural Justice issues for both Superior and District Court staff and judicial officers, local attorneys and other interested people, conducted by the Center for Court Innovation (CCI).
 - v. Informal session on self-care and trauma for staff, following a particularly upsetting incident in a court case.
 - vi. Upcoming special 2-hour training on suicide awareness and related issues, for the September lunchtime education session;
 - vii. Lunchtime education and a separate TCBA training on implicit bias provided by a Court Commissioner.
 - viii. Creation of a schedule of training for staff by our Court Administrator.
- d. The Trauma responsive work group has also connected with a local (Tumwater) service organization that wishes to support funding building improvements and also with providing volunteers to read with children when they are at court. Recently

this service group has offered to provide backpacks to older youth who have undergone emergency disruptions in their placements so that these youth can have needed supplies and a little comfort during these especially difficult times;

- e. This group is also ready to submit a grant for a Court therapy dog, as soon as a full-time handler can be identified;
- f. Connected with local teacher/artist to work with the YDP program on art projects;
- g. The work group has connected with Facilities, to ensure that previously planned but not yet finished building improvements and maintenance are trauma informed and responsive. Through that collaboration and led in part by our Court Administrator, Facilities has agreed to create two designated waiting areas upstairs at FJC, one for young children and one for older youth.
- h. FRC screenings and intakes now include trauma screening in every case.
- i. New signage has been placed in FJC that is more positive and in plain language.
- j. NCJFCJ staff, and consulting judges associated with NCJFCJ, plan to offer a day long training on the NCJFCJ Enhanced Resource Guidelines (ERGs) in early 2020 for the entire dependency team.

12. Data Work group:

Worked with AOC and NCJFCJ to develop a satisfaction survey for all court users at FJC to measure experiences of individuals using court. Survey were distributed the week before calendar changes made and unfortunately only a very small number of responses were submitted. The data workgroup continues to meet and will take another sample after the first of next year, with better advance planning to include recruiting volunteers to actively engage the public to complete and return surveys. We also will be creating a survey for professionals to measure their court experiences. After the calendar changes have been in place for a period of time, we will also survey to measure whether

wait times and noise levels have decreased with the new calendar system. Staff at the NCJFCJ has plans to assist the court with that audit.

13. Family Recovery Court (FRC):

The Center for Children and Families (CCF) is a highly regarded national family treatment court technical assistance provider and assisted our FRC as part of other technical assistance work they were already contracted to do in our state. Although we are not one of their assigned courts, because the courts they were working with are in our geographic area, and because we asked, they agreed to assist us. Our work with CCF began in early 2018 and they visited our court in the summer of 2018. Much the same as the NCJFCJ, they conducted a pre-survey with all FRC stakeholders, met individually with stakeholder groups, observed court and staffing, and issued a report with multiple recommendations for improvements we could make to better assist FRC participants. In the year following the report, FRC has accomplished **each** of the recommendations. The recommendations, and the actions taken to incorporate the recommendations in FRC practice, are attached to this report. Thanks to FRC Coordinator Laura Vogel for her work in compiling that information; and thanks to Laura and the entire FRC team for their hard and focused work in implementing FRC improvements over the past year. FRC should be at capacity by the time this report is posted.

Conclusion:

Recently our grant leadership team attended our third All-Sites meeting, gathering with over 20 other courts from around the country also working to improve their dependency practices. At the meeting we reviewed our progress since the beginning of the grant, received training and set new goals. As a team we decided our goals would be to:

1. Complete our trauma informed building and practice improvements, including finalizing plans and completing building improvements;

2. Continue to schedule and participate in dependency and trauma responsive trainings, including for staff; and
3. Finish the tasks remaining from our calendar change work, including:
 - a. Institutionalizing calendar and process changes.
 - b. Formally adopt local rules to reflect and formally incorporate the many calendar and practice changes we have created over the life of the grant;
 - c. Reconstituting our Calendar and Court Process work group to address areas that may need adjusting as the new calendars and process begin.

As stated at the beginning of this report, none of the many accomplishments we have made over the course of this NCJFCJ grant could have been made without the active and engaged support of many, including local attorneys, court staff, CASA and Juvenile staff, community partners, DCYF staff, and the support of the experts at the NCJFCJ, CCF and from other courts around the country. The Board of Judges has supported this work from the beginning which has been a large part of the successes to date. As a court we know that court improvement is a continuous process and we are looking forward to continuing to assess and improve our practices on an on-going basis, for the benefit of the families we all serve.