



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE of PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

Public Information Office

Focusing on Children at Risk

More than 20,000 children in Pennsylvania's 67 counties are living in foster homes and other temporary settings such as group homes or residential institutions. In most cases, these children have been removed from their parents by court order because they have been abused or neglected. In legal terms, they are referred to as "dependent children" because they are dependent on the courts and the child welfare system for their protection.

When a family court judge directs that a child be placed in care, the child typically remains there for more than a year. But many children remain in foster care or in other court-directed residential placement much longer, being shifted from one temporary home to another, while judges, in consultation with lawyers and social workers, consider whether to return them to their parents or to terminate the parents' rights and place them for adoption or in other permanent homes.

It is widely agreed among child welfare professionals that dependent children, already traumatized by neglect or abuse, should not be kept for long periods in foster care or other nonpermanent settings.

The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania has launched a program aimed at reducing the length of time dependent children spend in limbo.

Under a mandate from the court, the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts has formed the Office of Children and Families in the Courts to address problems that contribute to the extended length of time children spend in nonpermanent residences when removed from their parents.

The goal is to minimize the length of time a child, once removed from his or her parents, spends in care and to assure that every dependent child is resettled as quickly as possible in a safe and permanent home, whether with the child's parents, with grandparents, with other relatives or caring individuals, or with an adoptive family.

Working with family courts and child welfare officials, the Office of Children and Families in the Courts seeks to provide more training for judges, to urge more leadership by judges in dependency cases and to ensure frequent hearings for each dependent child. Family courts in all counties also are encouraged to share information on “best practices” in the handling of dependency cases.

The Office of Children and Families in the Courts is be funded with federal grants under a program called the Court Improvement Project, which is run by the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The effort to improve the plight of dependent children is part of a commitment by the Supreme Court to make family courts throughout Pennsylvania more responsive to the needs of children and adults who, through tragedy or personal crisis, have become involved in domestic or juvenile legal proceedings.