

COURT LIAISON PROGRAM

A never-ending battle continues for most Juvenile Court and Children Services agencies over unruly and delinquent children. The usual strategic plan for the Court is to give custody of these children to Children Services. The usual strategic plan for Children Services is to panic, become confused, and start rushing around trying to find an adequate placement for the child while complaining about Juvenile Court. Sound familiar? It did to Scioto County Children Services Board (SCCSB) until the agency decided to take a different direction. The new direction was an evolutionary process. The process started approximately five (5) years ago when the Executive Director, Assistant Director, and the agency's staff Attorney started meeting with the Juvenile Court Judge to review the unruly and delinquent children in the custody of SCCSB. The Administration would voice the hardship placed on the agency by having so many of these children in custody. After the meeting, the children coming into custody from Juvenile Court would decline, but eventually, they would rise, sometimes to even greater heights.

In 1998, with Juvenile Court involvement and approval, the two (2) entities developed a Court Liaison position. This caseworker from SCCSB would be available to go to court for a hearing upon receiving a phone call from the Court. This process worked for a short period of time. However, several problems developed. The caseworker had limited time to do any planning, at times the caseworker was not available when the Court called, and the Court did not regularly call the agency to notify the caseworker of the hearing. The number of unruly and delinquent children coming into custody was still increasing.

In March 1999, Scioto County Children Services made a commitment to have a caseworker at Court-everyday, all day. After several meetings with the Juvenile Judge and Court Administration, and because of the possibilities of reducing the number of cases actually needing to be accepted by Juvenile Court, the Court gave its approval. We now have this program in place.

When a child comes to the attention of Juvenile Court for unruliness or delinquency, the case is referred to the Court Liaison before charges are accepted, whenever possible. The Court Liaison meets with the child and family and attempts to reconcile the problems that caused the child and family to contact Juvenile Court. If the issues can be resolved, charges are not accepted by the Court. If charges are accepted, the Court Liaison is still involved and recommends to the Court that the child remain at home with voluntary services provided by SCCSB; that the child remain at home with court ordered protective services provided by SCCSB; that custody of the child be given to a kinship caregiver; that custody of the child be given to SCCSB.

In February 1999, Scioto County Children Services received custody of fifteen (15) children. However, during the period of April 1, 1999 through September 30, 1999, numbers of children placed in SCCSB's custody have declined. During this six (6) month period, SCCSB was involved in 141 cases referred by Juvenile Court. The agency received custody of twenty two (22) of these children. Sixty two (62) children were prevented from being placed in the custody of SCCSB by the involvement of the Court Liaison. These were children that the Court indicated they planned to place in the agency's custody.

The Court Liaison also carries a small caseload of unruly and delinquent children who are projected to be in the agency custody for only a short period of time. Most of the children now placed in custody have had shorter stays (less placement days) because of the services provided by the Court Liaison.

The key to the implementation and current success of the program is relationship. Building and maintaining a relationship with - the Juvenile Court Judge is essential. The lines of communication must be open and strive for a win-win-win outcome: child and family, Court, and Children Services. ■