



Statewide Assessment of Juvenile Dependency Court in California

The Judicial Council of California has released the **California Juvenile Dependency Court Improvement Program Reassessment**, the first statewide study of California dependency courts since 1997 and the most comprehensive study of these courts ever undertaken. The study presents the viewpoints and concerns of hundreds of participants in the dependency system, including judicial officers, attorneys, social workers, parents, children, and volunteers.

Dependency Court Improvement

The study finds that substantial progress has been made in areas targeted by the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) Dependency Court Improvement Program. Findings of the *Reassessment* include:

- **Legal Representation.** Nearly all children in dependency have legal representation throughout the trial court action.
- **Judicial experience.** Many judicial officers hearing dependency cases are highly experienced in dependency court proceedings, and most receive a good deal of continuing education in the field.
- **Satisfaction.** Judicial officers are largely satisfied with the quality of work and information provided by attorneys, social workers, and Court Appointed Special Advocates.
- **Collaboration.** In most courts, judicial officers and court staff are substantially engaged in collaborative efforts with the local child welfare system.

Barriers to Safe and Permanent Placement

The study also finds that dependency courts in California continue to struggle with major barriers to achieving safe and permanent placements for all children in dependency. Key problems are:

- **Delays in hearings.** Courts struggle to meet state and federal hearing timeliness guidelines. Many participants in the study, including judicial officers, attorneys, and parents voiced great frustration with hearing delays.
- **High caseloads.** Average caseloads for judicial officers are far in excess of any caseload standards for dependency that have been recommended by national policy makers or the Administrative Office of the Courts.
- **Computerized information systems.** Almost no courts have access to meaningful data on dependency cases to help in managing caseloads, measuring performance and ensuring accountability.

Recommendations

The study makes numerous recommendations for the California Dependency Court Improvement Program, including:

- Develop a comprehensive strategy for collaboration with the child welfare system and other partners, including the establishment of a statewide commission on dependency court improvement.
- Create a self-assessment process for local courts that allows them to measure their progress and to target areas in which they can receive technical assistance from the Center for Families, Children & the Courts.
- Pilot key elements of the National Council of Family and Juvenile Court Judges' *Resource Guidelines: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse & Neglect Cases* to reduce delays and improve the effectiveness of dependency hearings.
- Develop a statewide automated case management system that provides the reports and performance measures required for effective case management.
- Develop new dependency attorney performance standards and provide the resources and training to implement them.

California Juvenile Dependency Court Improvement Program Reassessment, November 2005, can be found at: <http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc/pdf/CIPReassessmentReport.pdf>.

About the CIP Reassessment

The federal Court Improvement Program is administered by the Children's Bureau of the US Department of Health and Human Services. California's Court Improvement Program (CIP) is administered by the Center for Families, Children & the Courts at California's Administrative Office of the Courts. The program has been ongoing since 1995.

California recently completed its second federally-mandated assessment of how its courts handle cases involving child abuse or neglect. The *Reassessment* included a legal review focusing on California's compliance with federal and state statutory mandates; and a court system evaluation conducted through a variety of research methods, including surveys of judicial officers, court administrators, attorneys, and child welfare department administrators; focus groups of parents, children, Court Appointed Special Advocates, social workers, and foster parents; and a reanalysis of secondary data from a variety of sources. The report contains recommendations for continued system improvements, which will be implemented by Court Improvement Program staff in the coming years. *California Juvenile Dependency Court Improvement Program Reassessment*, November 2005, can be found at:

www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc/pdffiles/CIPReassessmentReport.pdf.

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The views in this research summary are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the Judicial Council of California.