



# Unified Courts for Families Program: Mentor Court Project

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FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

JULY 2007



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE  
OF THE COURTS

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CENTER FOR FAMILIES, CHILDREN  
& THE COURTS

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## Executive Summary

### **Introduction**

In March 2000, the Judicial Council of California presented to the public a strategic plan that describes a long-range vision for the state court system.<sup>1</sup> A subsequent three-year operational plan identified the establishment of unified or coordinated family court systems as a high-priority project related to the accomplishment of strategic planning Goal I (access, fairness, and diversity) and Goal IV (quality of justice and service to the public).<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the operational plan mandated the establishment and evaluation of at least six mentor courts working toward the unification and coordination of proceedings in family, juvenile, and probate guardianship. The results of the evaluation were to be shared with courts statewide. In February 2003, the Judicial Council allocated funds to support this goal. This program is managed by the Center for Families, Children & the Courts, a division of the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), which is dedicated to improving the quality of justice and services to meet the diverse needs of children, youth, families, and self-represented litigants in the California courts.

This evaluation report provides a brief overview of the Unified Courts for Families Program: Mentor Court Project and describes its impact on the seven mentor court programs. It defines the research questions and objectives, documents successes and challenges realized by the programs, and describes the most successful program components identified by the courts. Program descriptions included in this report reflect program components in place during the time frame of the evaluations. Some of these components may have changed since the evaluation was completed.

### **The Need for Court Coordination**

Family-related issues involve a mix of social, medical, emotional, and legal matters that demand approaches and resolutions that are often different from those in many other legal arenas.<sup>3</sup> Such complexity is magnified when there are multiple cases involving the same family. In response to this complexity, many jurisdictions around the country have established “unified courts” for families. The various approaches these courts have implemented attempt to address the complex nature of family and juvenile matters by creating more effective strategies that allow for improved coordination among courts and between parties and community services. Unified courts around the nation and throughout California adjudicate a variety of case types, including dissolution, parentage, child support, child abuse and neglect, delinquency, probate guardianship, and both civil and criminal domestic violence. Such courts provide information on all relevant cases to judicial officers and facilitate access to community services for court users. This coordination has the potential to provide far-reaching and long-lasting benefits to the courts and the families they serve. Judicial officers with access to better, more accurate information, and who have the ability to more effectively coordinate with other judicial

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<sup>1</sup> Judicial Council of California, *Leading Justice Into the Future: Strategic Plan* (Mar. 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Judicial Council of California, *Leading Justice Into the Future: Operational Plan for California’s Judicial Branch: Fiscal Years 2003–2004 Through 2005–2006* (Dec. 2003).

<sup>3</sup> American Bar Association, “What Is a Unified Family Court?” [www.abanet.org/unifiedfamcrt/about.html](http://www.abanet.org/unifiedfamcrt/about.html) (accessed May 24, 2006).

officers and court staff, may find greater satisfaction in handling these difficult and often protracted cases. In turn, litigants who receive more-responsive court- and community-based services and who come to better understand the court process may be more likely to feel confidence in the judicial system.

### **Overview of California’s Unified Courts for Families Program**

The Judicial Council of California took an innovative approach to coordinating family and juvenile court proceedings by allowing the superior courts to design and implement their projects based on local needs and culture. A two-phase strategy for establishing unified family court programs was employed—planning and implementation. In the first phase, courts were given resources and technical assistance and encouraged to collaborate with justice system partners and service providers alike to design programs targeted at local needs and culture. Information gathered in the initial phase of the project resulted in the development of 10 unified court program objectives to guide the implementation portion of the project. These objectives were identified through needs assessments and in consultation with the Judicial Council’s Family and Juvenile Law Advisory Committee, and they provided the foundation for implementing the project’s mentor court phase.

In the implementation phase, several courts were selected and supported as they put their plans into effect. These courts become “mentor courts” to other jurisdictions interested in program replication. The courts in Butte, Glenn, Del Norte, Los Angeles, Napa, Placer, San Joaquin, and Yolo Counties were selected first to implement their mentor court proposals, addressing coordination and unification of family and juvenile proceedings, and then to mentor other counties wishing to do the same. The mentor courts have outlined differing approaches and staffing patterns in their efforts at unification and coordination. All the courts incorporated some type of information sharing and service components into the unified courts, but each did so in a different manner. The courts were required to address the 10 program objectives identified in the planning phase of the project. These objectives focused on the development of local rules and protocols to ensure that the unified court program would be institutionalized and would function beyond the three-year time frame of the grant funding.

### **Mentor Court Evaluation**

The mentor court programs implemented their plans for unification and coordination initially for a three-year period, during and after which they were evaluated to determine whether and how they are achieving the project’s 10 objectives and whether they are increasing positive outcomes for both the courts and the families they serve.

The evaluation focused on the steps taken by the participating courts to achieve the desired program objectives, lessons learned from the planning and implementation of the program, and the impact of the program in each locality. This report is designed to assist the courts in improving or creating programs that coordinate family, juvenile, and other related case types.

### **Achievement of Mentor Court Objectives**

By the end of the three-year program, the mentor courts were expected to meet the 10 objectives set forth by the Judicial Council. All the courts faced unique challenges in meeting each of the program objectives and approached every issue differently. As part of the mentor court program, the courts were provided with technical assistance and financial support from the Judicial Council. In addition, the mentor courts assisted each other by sharing their experiences, describing their program implementation and protocol development processes, and in some cases distributing sample protocols. Through these efforts all the mentor courts were able to address the 10 objectives of the Unified Courts for Families Program (UCF).

The key program objectives were achieved by all the courts within the project's time frame. These objectives centered around identifying families that had multiple cases, developing procedures for sharing appropriate case related information among relevant parties, and linking families to appropriate services.

Stakeholders in a few of the courts indicated that two objectives either had been achieved before the mentor court program was initiated or were being addressed outside the unified court forum. Several courts had already made efforts to reduce the number of times children testified. Others had made progress toward improving security for family and juvenile court users as part of larger efforts in improving court security. In addition, some of the judicial officers interviewed stated that unified court information sharing protocols had led to increased levels of safety for court users as a result of bench officers' improved ability to make informed orders, particularly in domestic violence cases.

Two other objectives may require additional time, effort, or resources for some courts, owing to technological challenges. Stakeholders in those courts indicated, however, that they could address these objectives informally in many cases. Many courts have multiple case management systems that contain information related only to specific case types and that do not communicate with each other. These technological challenges made it difficult to formally coordinate court appearances and to develop case tracking methods. Nevertheless, judicial officers and case managers who received information about existing cases and upcoming hearings through the information-sharing component of the unified courts program were able to coordinate future court appearances to allow families to consolidate their trips to court. Additional time and technological improvements are needed so that many of these courts can implement formal automated systems to coordinate and consolidate court hearings.

### **Program Challenges**

While all the courts were able to address the 10 program objectives, they identified several common challenges that they faced in doing so. Stakeholders in all the mentor courts encountered some obstacles when planning and implementing the Unified Courts for Families Program. The challenges most commonly identified in the interviews and surveys were:

- Technological difficulties in accessing related case information.

- Developing procedures proved to be more complicated and time consuming than anticipated.
- Creation of formal rules or protocols took more time and resources than expected.
- Collaboration with system partners affected project timelines.
- The original program design was modified.
- Coordinating family and juvenile proceedings required a significant amount of planning and effort for the courts.

### **Program Impact**

Program stakeholders identified multiple outcomes related to the Unified Courts for Families Project. A number of significant results were shared by many mentor courts:

- Increased levels of public trust and confidence in the courts.
- Greater access to the courts for litigants.
- Heightened safety for court users.
- Fewer conflicting orders.
- Increased service coordination and referrals.
- Less service duplication.
- Increase in the quality of dependency exit orders.
- Greater court-community collaboration.
- Enhanced intracourt communication.
- Case coordination and information affecting judicial decision making for the better.
- Judicial culture shifting toward a more user-friendly model.
- Judges reporting greater levels of satisfaction.
- Courts being more aware of legal issues related to case coordination.
- Mentor courts reporting learning from each other.

### **Promising Mentor Court Practices: Successful UCF Model Components**

Because of the diverse nature of the courts and the UCF programs involved in this project, no single program model can be identified as more successful than others. The information gathered during the interviews identifies the following program components and practices that were perceived to be most successful, as well as the lessons learned during program implementation:

- Establish judicial support and leadership early.
- Bring court and community stakeholders to the table during the planning phase.
- Assess technological capacity and address issues when possible.
- Allow sufficient time to implement the program.
- Address legal issues during the planning process.
- Identify and define relevant and appropriate case types and “family members” in advance.
- Dedicate staff to the project.
- Create a coordinated administrative structure that spans various case types.
- Educate or train court staff and judicial officers.
- Design a program that is based on local court needs and culture.

- Encourage and institutionalize methods for cross-communication between case types.
- Develop formal policies, rules, or protocols.
- Seek technical assistance from other UCFs, the AOC, or Unified Courts for Families Deskbook.<sup>4</sup>

## **Conclusion**

A 2005 judicial branch survey revealed that, with the exception of defendants in traffic cases, litigants and attorneys involved in family and juvenile law cases are less approving of the courts than are litigants and defendants in any other case type. They are also more likely to perceive the courts as lacking in procedural fairness.<sup>5</sup> Family and juvenile law cases are complex and ongoing, involve high stakes, and are historically under-resourced when compared to other case types. Family law cases often involve self-represented litigants. The courts' response to dealing with numerous families having multiple cases in both family law and juvenile courts may make a tremendous impact on the perception that court users have of the judicial system.

A recent survey of family law judicial officers in California revealed that the majority of respondents (nearly 81 percent) have some sort of process in place that informs them of the existence of related cases in which a litigant is involved. While this is an encouraging statistic, most respondents indicated that the process was an informal one, such as hearing about related cases from the litigant or their counsel. These same bench officers overwhelmingly agreed that having information about existing orders and case activity leads to reductions in the number of conflicting orders, improved coordination of court proceedings and hearings, and heightened levels of safety for court users.

Judicial officers and court staff who work in the Unified Courts for Families Program mentor courts believe that coordinating related family and juvenile court cases results in benefits for the court, the bench, and litigants alike. For judicial officers, these benefits include the ability to make better orders, increased levels of confidence in their decision, and higher levels of job satisfaction. For court administrators, more-informed orders lead to fewer conflicting orders, less service duplication, and possibly case processing efficiencies such as reduced continuances and hearings. For litigants, coordinating related cases may lead to enhanced levels of safety, less duplication of services, better understanding of what is required to expedite their cases, and greater levels of trust and confidence in the judicial system overall.

The *Unified Courts for Families Project Evaluation Report* illustrates program components that may be adopted by additional counties wishing to address the complex

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<sup>4</sup> Judicial Council of California, *Unified Courts for Families Deskbook: A Guide for Unifying and Coordinating Family and Juvenile Law Matters* (2004).

<sup>5</sup> David B. Rottman, *Trust and Confidence in the California Courts, A Survey of the Public and Attorneys, Part 1: Findings and Recommendations* (commissioned by the Administrative Office of the Courts on behalf of the Judicial Council of California, Sept. 2005), p. 6.

issues that arise for families involved in multiple court cases. Approaches to such case coordination vary, according to local needs, resources, and culture. Still, courts can benefit from the lessons learned by the mentor courts and can profit by applying these lessons in their own jurisdictions.

## Introduction

In March 2000, the Judicial Council of California presented to the public a strategic plan that describes a long-range vision for the state court system.<sup>6</sup> A subsequent three-year operational plan identified the establishment of unified or coordinated family court systems as a high-priority project related to the accomplishment of strategic planning Goal I (access, fairness, and diversity) and Goal IV (quality of justice and service to the public).<sup>7</sup> Specifically, the operational plan mandated the establishment and evaluation of at least six mentor courts working toward the unification and coordination of family, juvenile, and probate guardianship proceedings. The results of the evaluation were to be shared with courts statewide. In February 2003, the Judicial Council allocated funds to support this goal. This program is managed by the Center for Families, Children & the Courts, a division of the Administrative Office of the Courts that is dedicated to improving the quality of justice and services to meet the diverse needs of children, youth, families, and self-represented litigants in the California courts.

This evaluation report provides a brief overview of the Unified Courts for Families Program: Mentor Court Project approaches, as well as their impact on the seven mentor court programs. It defines the research questions and objectives, documents successes and challenges realized by the programs, and describes the more successful program components identified by the courts.

## The Need for Court Coordination

In California, juvenile and family related cases constituted over 40 percent of all civil cases filed in superior courts during the 2004–2005 fiscal year.<sup>8</sup> These types of domestic cases are the fastest-growing area of civil litigation in the country.<sup>9</sup> A significant number of family and juvenile matters involved litigants who have multiple or crossover cases being handled in family, juvenile, and probate court. The National Center for State Courts conducted a survey of litigants in family law courts in three urban areas and found that about 34 percent of respondents were involved in more

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<sup>6</sup> *Strategic Plan*.

<sup>7</sup> *Operational Plan*.

<sup>8</sup> Judicial Council of California, Administrative Office of the Courts, 2006 *Court Statistics Report: Statewide Caseload Trends 1995–1996 through 2004–2005* (2006).

<sup>9</sup> American Institutes for Research, *Unified Family Court Evaluation Literature Review* (prepared for the Center for Families, Children & the Courts, Judicial Council of California, Administrative Office of the Courts, Nov. 4, 2002), p. 2.

than one family-related case.<sup>10</sup> In many jurisdictions, different matters involving the same family may be heard in different courts by different judges who may not always know that the family is involved in multiple cases.

Family-related issues involve a mix of social, medical, emotional, and legal matters that demand approaches and resolutions that often vary from those in many other legal arenas.<sup>11</sup> Such complexity is magnified when a single family is involved in multiple cases. In response to this complexity, many jurisdictions around the country have established “unified courts” for families. Such courts operate to coordinate the multiple cases of a family. They adjudicate a variety of case types, including dissolution, parentage, child support, child abuse and neglect, delinquency, probate guardianship, and both civil and criminal domestic violence. These courts also work to improve the way in which the court manages *all* cases involving children and families. They do so by providing information on all relevant cases to judicial officers and by facilitating or coordinating access to community services for the court users. The various approaches these courts have implemented attempt to address the complex nature of family and juvenile matters by creating more effective strategies that allow for improved coordination among courts and between parties and community services.

Such case coordination has the potential for both far-reaching and long-lasting benefits to the courts as well as the families they serve. For the courts, coordination can result in a more effective case processing system that may lead to fewer delays. Judicial officers with access to better, more accurate information, and who can more effectively coordinate with other judicial officers and court staff, may even find greater satisfaction in handling these difficult and often protracted cases. The courts further benefit through increased levels of public trust and confidence in the judicial system that may result as litigants experience fewer conflicting orders, gain a better understanding of court procedures, and receive more responsive court and community services. For those litigants involved with multiple family law and juvenile matters, improved coordination may mean that cases can be consolidated, resulting in fewer delays or court appearances. More-informed court orders may also lead to higher levels of safety for court users. These multiple benefits increase

*“Access [to the courts] has always been an issue. This program has improved access. Litigants now have meaningful encounters ... The court becomes more accessible through communications [between the bench and litigants].”*  
—**Unified Courts for Families**  
**Mentor Court Judge**

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<sup>10</sup> H. T. Rubin and V. E. Flango, *Court Coordination of Family Cases* (Williamsburg, VA: National Center for State Courts, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> American Bar Association.

the accessibility of the court to the court user by creating a safer environment that is more suited to their needs.

A recent California judicial branch survey revealed that, with the exception of defendants in traffic cases, litigants and attorneys involved in family and juvenile law cases are less approving of the courts than litigants or defendants in any other case type. They are also more likely to perceive the court as lacking in procedural fairness.<sup>12</sup> Implementing and evaluating innovative programs to address the needs of families in the judicial system is one way in which the Judicial Council of California is taking a proactive approach to changing these perceptions and improving the quality of justice for all Californians. The Unified Courts for Families program has provided responses to address conflicting court orders, duplication of services, and gaps in communication between court divisions—all issues that can contribute to negative public perceptions and decreased levels of trust and confidence in the courts.

#### Unified Courts for Families Models

Several approaches to unifying or coordinating juvenile and family law cases have been identified nationally.<sup>13</sup> The *one judge, one family model* assigns a specific judicial officer to hear all juvenile or family law cases involving the same family. The judicial officer is, therefore, knowledgeable about case activity related to all members of that family in the system. In the *one case manager, one family model*, all cases involving family members are managed and monitored by a single case manager, although the individual cases may be heard by different judges or at different locations. The case manager can be involved with the family by working directly with them to assist as they navigate the judicial system. They may coordinate or refer family members to court-connected services. The *information-sharing or case-bundling model* involves relaying relevant and appropriate information on all related cases of family members so that the judge hearing a particular case is fully informed about other court activity and court orders involving family members. Information-sharing models may rely on reports from case management systems, but in many instances they must depend on personnel physically bundling paper files or manually creating case summary sheets. Some courts have established unified family court divisions that unite all operations related to juvenile and family law matters. This allows for resources to be allocated

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<sup>12</sup> Rottman.

<sup>13</sup> American Institutes for Research.

across case types and facilitates identifying areas for improved coordination. No single approach to coordination, however, is likely to fit all courts, so many jurisdictions choose to incorporate components of multiple models to meet their needs.

## California's Unified Courts for Families Program Overview

The Judicial Council took an innovative approach to coordinating family and juvenile court proceedings by allowing the superior courts to design and implement their projects based on local needs, culture, and resources. California is the most populous and one of the more geographically and ethnically diverse states in the country. The structure of its judicial branch reflects such diversity, with county court systems' populations ranging in size from only 1,200 to nearly 10 million. With such disparate court system needs and resources, no specific model of unification can be effectively applied to all California courts. Therefore, to address the unique issues of the localities, the Judicial Council employed a two-phased approach for establishing unified family court programs. In the first phase, courts were given resources and technical assistance and encouraged to collaborate with both justice system partners and service providers to design and plan programs targeted toward local needs and culture. In the second phase, several courts were selected and supported during the implementation of their plans. These courts have become "mentor courts" to other jurisdictions interested in replicating the program.

### **Unified Courts for Families Program Phases**

The planning phase ran from June through November 2002. The implementation, or mentor court phase, began in February 2003 and ended in June 2006, with the expectation that by the end of the three-year funding, procedures would be in place to allow the unified courts to continue operating permanently. While this report focuses on the mentor court phase of the project, a brief description of both phases is provided below.

**Planning grant phase.** The first phase of the program was a statewide planning process in which the superior courts of 31 California counties received grants to develop strategies for unification or coordination of proceedings involving families and children. During the planning phase, these courts worked with the AOC to assess service and case coordination needs and to create comprehensive action plans for unified court projects.

Central to the planning phase were two comprehensive needs assessments conducted by all the courts in collaboration with stakeholders from the community or other relevant agencies. In addition, the Center for Families, Children & the Courts sponsored a Unified Courts for Families Symposium in September 2002 in San Jose. Its purpose was to bring together stakeholders and national experts to explore the various models for unification, to help formulate methods for addressing challenges raised by the lack of coordination, and to allow counties to collaborate with representatives from various agencies and the court within the same county.

Several important concepts emerged during the needs assessments and planning process: the necessity of addressing domestic violence issues in both family and juvenile matters; the value of cross-training for judicial officers and court staff in all divisions handling cases involving families and children; and the importance of implementing systems that allow for appropriate information sharing and coordination throughout the courts. CFCC staff considered these concepts and solicited additional input from the Family and Juvenile Law Advisory Committee to the Judicial Council as well as from other subject matter experts in family and juvenile law. These efforts led to the development of 10 Unified Courts for Families Program Objectives (see box below). The 10 objectives focused on the development of local rules and protocols to ensure that the unified court program was institutionalized and would function beyond the time frame of the grant funding. The objectives provided the foundation of the mentor court program. The 31 courts that participated in the planning grant process produced either an action plan or a proposal for a mentor court grant.<sup>14</sup>

**Unified Courts for Families: Mentor Court Program Objectives**

1. *Local rules and/or protocols for identifying families that have cases in more than one division or courtroom;*
2. *Local rules and/or protocols for sharing appropriate information so as to inform judicial officers about existing orders to avoid conflicting orders;*
3. *Local rules and/or protocols for notifying court-connected services such as family law facilitators, mediators, evaluators, attorneys, social workers, probation officers, and victim advocates that members of a family they are working with are involved in other related court matters;*
4. *Formal calendaring methods to coordinate multiple court appearances and improve access for litigants, such as establishment of time-certain hearings;*
5. *Case-tracking methods to expedite cases where appropriate and reduce unnecessary delays;*
6. *Local rules and/or protocols to coordinate or reduce the number of times children are required to testify about the same issue in different court matters;*
7. *Local rules and/or protocols addressing safety and security for family and juvenile court participants, domestic violence victims, and staff;*
8. *Local rules and/or protocols for providing services and making referrals for families with mental health and substance abuse concerns;*
9. *Local rules and/or protocols addressing how cases should be handled when a family has two or more case within the same division (i.e., two family court matters) or in multiple divisions (i.e., a family matter and a juvenile matter); and*
10. *Evidence of accessible services including programs for self-represented litigants, use of interpreters and volunteers, and facilities designed to meet the needs of families and children in the courts.*

<sup>14</sup> The 31 courts (out of a total of California's 58 county courts) are: Alameda, Butte, Contra Costa, Del Norte, El Dorado, Fresno, Glenn, Humboldt, Imperial, Lassen, Los Angeles, Mendocino, Napa, Nevada, Orange, Placer, Plumas, Riverside, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, San Joaquin, Santa Clara, Sierra, Siskiyou, Solano, Sonoma, Sutter, Ventura, Yolo, and Yuba.

**Implementation phase.** The implementation or mentor court phase, highlighted in this document, focused on seven Unified Courts for Families projects that were funded from 2003 through 2006. Efforts were made to select courts that represented diverse population and geographic sizes; differing court needs, culture, and resources; as well as various proposed approaches to coordination or unification of family and juvenile courts.

Each of the mentor courts was provided with technical assistance and given the discretion to design and execute programs tailored to local needs and culture. The mentor courts were required to participate in a program evaluation, share what they have learned with other courts, and assist other courts in creating similar projects. The term *mentor courts* is used to emphasize the idea that these courts implemented approaches that could be of interest and use to other California courts. Their potential to replicate their approaches was a key factor in their selection. It is hoped other courts will learn from their processes and will be able to implement well-informed approaches to unification or coordination over time. The courts in Butte, Glenn, Del Norte, Los Angeles, Napa, Placer, San Joaquin, and Yolo Counties were selected to implement their mentor court proposals addressing coordination and unification of family and juvenile proceedings and serve to mentor other counties wishing to do the same.<sup>15</sup>

### Mentor Court Project

The United Courts for Families: Mentor Court program involved a close collaboration between the Center for Families, Children & the Courts and the selected courts. The collaboration activities included:

- Annual mentor court meetings, bringing staff from all participating mentor courts together with AOC staff. The meetings focused on a variety of subjects, including determining and documenting promising practices, sharing information about case management system options, delineating legal and other obstacles and solutions, and developing means to share information with other courts around the state and to replicate successful projects;
- The project evaluation, which involved AOC staff and the mentor courts;

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<sup>15</sup> Butte and Glenn Counties are collaborating on their mentor court project. Six court programs (Butte/Glenn, Del Norte, Los Angeles, Napa, San Joaquin, and Yolo Counties) were initially selected in the program start-up year. After the first year of the program, an additional court (Placer County) was added to the project.

- Site visits and technical assistance by AOC staff;
- Informal information sharing among mentor courts;
- The *Unified Courts for Families Deskbook*; and
- Mentoring activities in which mentor courts provide training and technical assistance to non-mentor courts, allowing all California courts to benefit from the lessons learned over the course of the project.

### **California’s Mentor Court Approaches**

The seven selected programs represent eight counties that vary in demographic characteristics, geography, and culture. The courts chosen for this project ranged in size from very small counties with only two judges, to the largest county in California, home to nearly a third of the state’s population. Allowing the courts to define the scope and design of their programs while establishing the same 10 objectives for all courts encouraged a wide range of program models, enabling other superior courts to choose to replicate models or program components from jurisdictions similar to their own.

The seven mentor courts have outlined a variety of approaches and staffing patterns in their unification and coordination efforts. All the courts incorporated some type of information sharing and service components into the unified courts, but each did so in a different manner. Table 1 provides an overview of the projects. Details on the programs can be found in Appendix A. Program Description

**Table 1. Unified Courts For Families Program**

<b>Table 1. Unified Courts For Families Program</b>				
	<b>Approach to Case Unification/Coordination</b>		<b>Staffing</b>	
	<b>Program Components</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Position (FTE)</b>	<b>Example of Duties</b>
Butte/Glenn	Two-county collaboration/ Information Sharing/ One case manager, one family (Coordinated Family Court–CFC)	Electronic “bundled” files provided to judicial officers containing summaries of court orders and court activity / CFC– Case management and coordination of services for dependency families with multiple cases.	1 CFC Manager	Manages, coordinates, and oversees UCF program. Guides the development of and implementation of procedures, protocols, and rules for the project. Coordinates services and provides case management services to CFC families. Acts as court liaison for court users and service providers.
			1.5 CFC Coordinators (1 Butte) (0.5 Glenn)	Screens cases, researches and compiles information on multiple cases, maintains bundled files, collects and enters data for program evaluation.
			1 Office Assistant	Provides administrative support for CFC Manager and Coordinators.
Del Norte	Information Sharing/ One case manager, one family/self-help center	Summary of court cases and court orders included in case file /Comprehensive case management services for family court litigants in high-conflict cases/Assistance for self-represented litigants through self-help center.	1 Case Manager	Provides case management and service referral for high-conflict families. Tracks information on families’ court activities and service referrals.
			0.75 Program Assistant	Researches and compiles information on multiple cases, creates information-sharing files. Staffs self-help center.
Los Angeles	Information Sharing/ Service Referral	Support for “Children’s Index” case management systems that identify children involved in more than one case/Process for referrals to services/Case management (identifying families with multiple cases, compiling information when requested by judicial officers); Paralegal services for families exiting the dependency system, and Resource specialist referral services for families with multiple cases.	1 Program Manager	Coordinates and oversees UCF program.
			1 Resource Specialist	Refers court users to services, follows up with families to ensure progress is made, acts as court liaison for community service providers.
			1 Paralegal/Family Law Facilitator	Provides assistance to families with crossover cases.
			1 Child Custody Evaluator	Coordinates cases with DCFS; develops training program for DCFS and performs expedited child custody evaluations for crossover cases.
			4 Office Assistants	Supports Program Manager.

	Approach to Case Unification/Coordination		Staffing	
	Approach	Description	Position (FTE)	Example of Duties
Napa	Information Sharing/ Service Referral	Information sharing via case management system research, creation of family trees and order summaries. Develop, maintain, and coordinate access to community-based services via NapaHelp.info Web site. Provide assistance with legal paperwork in self help center for UFC families.	1 Resource Specialist	Refers court users to services, acts as court liaison for community service providers, supports grant programs that provide services to families.
			1 Case Coordinator	Researches and compiles information on multiple cases, creates information-sharing files, creates and monitors workload reports, provides back-up coverage to resource specialist.
			.5 Legal Assistant	Coordinates completion of intake sheet to determine if UFC case, assists with legal paperwork, including guardianship, provides support to case coordinator.
Placer	One case manager, one family/ Service referral	Case management system and services California Law Enforcement Technology System (CLETS) Access	1 Case Coordinator	Screens cases, performs CLETS checks, researches and compiles information on multiple cases, acts as contact for unified family court users and county service providers.
			1 Court Services Clerk	Assists in researching and tracking UCF cases, maintains database.
San Joaquin	One case manager, one family/ Service referral	Case manager assists families as they navigate system and coordinates services with community providers/ information sharing	1 Case Coordinator	Coordinates program, coordinates services with community service provider, tracks cases.
			1 Case Coordinator Assistant	Researches and compiles information on multiple cases, creates information-sharing files.
Yolo	One judge, one family/ Service Referral	Intensive case coordination (one judge family, one family model). Assistance for self-represented litigants in family law and guardianship cases. Grant funded mental health services available at no cost to client.	1 Program Coordinator	Manages, coordinates, and oversees program; contracts with consultants; facilitates and supports court-community collaboration; and implements new programs to enhance UFC.
			0.5 Attorney	Assists self-represented litigants through workshops and one-on-one assistance, supports the unified family court in development of local rules and protocols.
			2 Case Coordinators <sup>16</sup>	Reviews case management system and compile information on multiple cases, create information-sharing files.
			.5 Legal Process Clerk	Processes unified family court cases and provides backup to case coordinators

<sup>16</sup> Only one case coordinator is funded through the mentor court grant.

## Mentor Court Evaluation

The mentor court programs implemented their plans for unification and coordination for a three-year period, during and after which they were evaluated to determine whether and how they are achieving the project's 10 objectives and whether they are increasing positive outcomes for both the courts and the families they serve.

The mentor court evaluation focused on the steps taken by the participating courts to achieve the desired program objectives, on lessons learned from the planning and implementation of the program, and on the program's impact in each locality. The evaluation reports will assist the courts in improving or creating programs that coordinate family, juvenile, and other related case types.

### **Research Questions and Evaluation Objectives**

The evaluation component of the Unified Courts for Families mentor court program seeks to answer the following research questions:

- How do courts implementing unified or coordinated approaches in working with families handle cases differently than they did before they began implementing these approaches?
- How have the mentor courts met the key UCF program objectives and locally defined objectives?
- What is the impact of these approaches on the courts, judges, and litigants?
- What lessons have been learned from the development and implementation of the mentor court program?

In the process of answering these questions, three main evaluation objectives will be met:

- Aid participating courts in improving their programs by documenting their progress toward meeting program objectives;
- Develop promising practices;<sup>17</sup> and
- Assist non-mentor courts in program replication.

These objectives are achieved through documenting the planning and implementation processes and the perceived program impact in all the mentor courts, presented in these evaluation reports. Several key issues and unique challenges related to the design and execution of the mentor court project affected how the project could be evaluated. These include the diversity of program designs, scopes, implementation timelines, and local objectives among the seven mentor courts; changes made to program design that affected the potential to measure outcomes; technology issues at the local and state levels; and the

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<sup>17</sup> Given the innovative nature of these mentor court projects, defining evidence-based and tested “best practices” lies outside the scope of this evaluation. Instead, some “promising practices” in the form of successful program components have been identified and are presented here. For the purpose of this report, “promising practices” are defined as strategies, procedures, or approaches to unified court coordination that have been identified by more than one program as contributing to the success of the project. Subsequent evaluations of these program components are needed before definitive statements can be made regarding potential outcomes related to the practices; however, it is important to present some of the more promising ideas for courts that may be more immediately interested in replicating the program.

lack of quantifiable, universal outcome measures. Like the mentor court programs themselves, the research design required modifications during the span of the project in order to accommodate these methodological challenges. Appendix B: Evaluation Approach documents these issues as well as the approach taken to address the challenges. The following section describes the data sources used in the project evaluation.

### **Data Sources**

The following data sources were used to inform this evaluation:

**Interviews with key program stakeholders.** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key program stakeholders in each county, including court and program staff, judicial officers, and stakeholders from outside agencies involved with the project. The purpose of the interviews was to collect qualitative information about baseline court operations, program planning and implementation processes, procedures to address the 10 program objectives and locally defined objectives, changes in court operations, strengths and weaknesses of their approach, and program impact.

The evaluation included two sets of interviews. The first set focused on identifying program goals and processes, describing project implementation, and assessing early progress toward desired objectives. The second set concentrated on program impact and lessons learned. In addition to the structured interviews, information obtained informally during site visits is included in the evaluation. A total of 80 stakeholders were interviewed—14 judicial officers, 31 court administrators (including mentor court program staff and court executive officers), and 35 other program stakeholders (such as attorneys or service providers).

**Progress reports and online survey updates.** Mentor court program managers completed two surveys during the span of the project. The surveys collected information related to progress toward the 10 program objectives as well as program challenges and potential resources. In addition to the surveys, mentor court staff also sent in progress reports. These reports described progress toward addressing needs identified in the planning phase of the UCF program, local rules and protocol development, case management activities, and the identification of procedures related to information sharing and case files.

**Rule and protocol submission.** Several objectives of the mentor court program involve the creation of rules and protocols to address issues of case coordination, information sharing, and services for families. The submission of these written protocols to the AOC is a significant source of process information for the evaluation.

**Locally collected case and outcome information.** Although the mentor courts lacked a uniform method for collecting quantifiable information on their projects, each court used some type of information tracking. The specific data elements varied by court and ranged from counts of case filings obtained through the court's case management system or systems to specific information on case activity and services rendered on an individual level. Appendix A. County Descriptions provides site-specific outputs and presents

descriptive and workload-related information provided by the courts. The information provided varies, depending on the court, and may include the number of filings, cases, and families involved in the mentor court, as well as referrals to services.

### Achievement of Mentor Court Objectives

By the end of the three-year program, the mentor courts were expected to meet the 10 objectives set forth by the Judicial Council. The courts were predominately able to accomplish this goal; however, a few courts struggled with some program objectives or found certain objectives to be more difficult and time consuming than others to achieve. This section describes the success the courts had in meeting the objectives and provides examples of the way in which some of them accomplished these tasks. In addition, it documents a number of the more commonly cited challenges that the courts faced in accomplishing certain goals. For additional information on the specific program approaches, see Appendix A.

All the courts faced unique challenges in meeting each of the program objectives, and therefore approached each issue differently. Meeting each objective required a significant amount of planning and collaboration, both within the court and with justice system partners. As part of the mentor court program, the courts were provided with technical assistance and financial support from the Center for Families, Children & the Courts. In addition, the mentor courts assisted each other by sharing their experiences, describing their program implementation and protocol development processes, and in some cases distributing sample protocols.

Through these efforts, all the mentor courts were able to address the 10 objectives of the Unified Courts for Families Program. The most important program objectives were achieved by all the courts within the time frame of the project. Stakeholders in a few of the courts indicated that two objectives had been achieved prior to the mentor court program or were being addressed outside the unified court forum. Two additional objectives may require additional time, effort, or resources for some of the courts, because of technological challenges.

The following objectives were achieved by *all* the mentor courts and reflect the key elements of coordination between family and juvenile courts:

- **Objective 1.** *Local rules and/or protocols for identifying families who have cases in more than one division or courtroom.*

All the mentor courts developed local protocols for identifying families with multiple cases. Most of the courts needed to devote significant staff time to the process. The court's technological capacity had a significant impact on the amount of staff time needed. In general, the courts designated a particular filing (e.g., a dependency case opening or a domestic violence restraining order petition file) to be the "trigger case." That case signaled unified court staff to look into the court's case management system or systems to determine whether there were other related cases for any parties involved. Courts with a single case

management system could identify related cases and create reports more easily than courts with multiple case management systems, but all the courts designated staff to assist in case identification.

- **Objective 2.** *Local rules and/or protocols for sharing appropriate information so as to inform judicial officers about existing orders to avoid conflicting orders.*

The courts took several different approaches to information sharing. Nearly all of them created some type of summary sheets or files that provided judicial officers with appropriate information on related cases. Some courts created a visual “family diagram” that included relevant cases. Some used electronic imaging to provide information that can be accessed on the judicial officer’s computer. All the courts put a significant amount of effort into defining “appropriate” information for sharing and had to address legal issues related to the topic. The Program Challenges section of this document provides more detail on the legal issues related to this objective.

- **Objective 3.** *Local rules and/or protocols for notifying court-connected services such as family law facilitators, mediators, evaluators, attorneys, social workers, probation officers, and victim advocates that members of a family they are working with are involved in other related court matters.*

All the courts devised procedures to notify court-connected service providers when members of a family that they were working with were involved in related court matters. The courts collaborated with their service-related partners to develop letters to inform service providers and the families they work with that they were involved in related matters and that their information may be shared. The courts also developed releases for information sharing and procedures for ensuring confidentiality.

- **Objective 8.** *Local rules and/or protocols for providing services and making referrals for families with mental health and substance abuse concerns.*

The courts generally took either of two approaches to achieve this objective: direct referral for services, or coordination of services with community service providers. Some courts used mentor court funds to contract with local mental health care providers. This enabled the courts to directly refer court users to services. Other courts had staff coordinate available services. In some courts, service coordination entailed bringing together court-connected service providers to discuss specific cases. In other courts, coordination involved researching and providing information to the court users on available community services, or networking with local agencies to increase their involvement with the court users.

- **Objective 9.** *Local rules and/or protocols addressing how cases should be handled when a family has two or more cases within the same division (e.g., two family court matters) or in multiple divisions (e.g., a family matter and a juvenile matter).*

The increased communication between the court divisions facilitated a collaborative approach to achieving this objective. The courts took differing approaches when addressing this issue. Some courts transferred appropriate cases

to other divisions. For example, a domestic violence restraining order case may get transferred to dependency court when there is a related dependency case. In the court that employed a *one judge, one family model*, the bench officer hearing the case was determined by the types of multiple cases that the family had, and that officer heard all the related cases.

- **Objective 10.** *Evidence of accessible services including programs for self-represented litigants, use of interpreters and volunteers, and facilities designed to meet the needs of families and children in the courts.*

Several mentor courts used their resources to support centers to aid self-represented litigants. This support came in the form of staffing and equipment. Some courts instituted regular guardianship clinics as a result of the grant. Others created family-friendly rooms or spaces, such as multipurpose rooms or children's waiting rooms, to achieve this objective. Most of the courts created or updated service referral resources such as Web sites, telephone information lines, or booklets that describe and provide contact information for local services. In most cases these resources were made available in more than one language.

While objectives 6 and 7 initially called for the development of local unified court rules or protocols, mentor court program stakeholders indicated that these objectives were addressed either before the unified court program came into being or outside its scope.

- **Objective 6.** *Local rules and/or protocols to coordinate or reduce the number of times children are required to testify about the same issue in different court matters.*

Representatives from several of the mentor courts stated that they had existing procedures in place to address objective 6 before putting the program into effect. These courts indicated that reducing the number of times children testify was an established practice that was applied in multiple court settings.

- **Objective 7.** *Local rules and/or protocols addressing safety and security for family and juvenile court participants, domestic violence victims, and staff.*

The courts employed a variety of approaches in meeting objective 7. Some stakeholders met it by establishing or using specific areas in the court as children's waiting rooms. Others felt that that this objective was being addressed through safety measures that were applied throughout the entire court system and was not specifically attributed to changes related to the mentor court project. Other program stakeholders believed that the information-sharing component of the mentor court program, in itself, led to increased safety and security for the unified court families. Most judicial officers thought that they could make more-informed decisions when they knew of cases related to one family. They believed that such decisions led to increased levels of safety for the court user.

Some courts had difficulty achieving mentor court program objectives 4 and 5 because of issues related to the courts' case management systems; however, in many cases the courts could address these objectives informally.

- **Objective 4.** *Formal calendaring methods to coordinate multiple court appearances and improve access for litigants, such as establishment of time-certain hearings.*

Some stakeholders cited technological difficulties related to realizing objective 4. This objective was found to be particularly challenging for courts with multiple case management systems that did not communicate, leaving no automated options for coordinating calendars or identifying upcoming case activity across case types. A few stakeholders felt that they did not receive enough support from bench officers to change the calendaring methods already in place. Several courts reported that they used informal methods to achieve this objective. For example, bench officers with knowledge of impending court activity through information sharing, tried to coordinate the schedule of new hearings.

- **Objective 5.** *Case-tracking methods to expedite cases where appropriate and reduce unnecessary delays.*

Some interview respondents also cited technological challenges as reasons that they were unable to formally address objective 5. As with objective 4, many stakeholders developed informal procedures to deal with these issues. Some procedures involved working directly with the families or judicial officers to determine recent case activity and expedite cases. Assisting and educating the families as they navigate the system was cited as a way to reduce case delays. Some stakeholders stated that assisting the highest-conflict families created a positive impact throughout the system.

Additional technological resources may need to be devoted for some of the courts to formally achieve these objectives. The following section on Program Challenges will discuss the impact of technological issues on the unified courts in more detail.

## Program Challenges

As is expected when implementing any innovative program, stakeholders in all the mentor courts encountered several program challenges as they were planning and implementing the Unified Courts for Families Program. The challenges most commonly identified in the interviews and surveys are presented below.

**Technological difficulties arose in accessing related case information.** The most commonly cited challenge for the programs related to technological difficulties. Most mentor courts must operate with more than one case management system, few of which can communicate with other systems. In the Superior Court of Los Angeles County, for example, each division—whether juvenile dependency, juvenile delinquency, family law, or probate—runs its own case management system. Identifying crossover cases meant conducting a labor-intensive process of looking in each system for the same families. Many of these case management systems do not share the same techniques for identifying individuals. For example, some systems may track court users by their names and dates of birth; others will supply court-specific identification numbers; still others may use social security numbers. As a result, researching case activity is highly labor intensive.

*“It is often hard to determine if it is a crossover case, without asking people. Adequate technology would give us that information automatically. Issues of coordination and communication have been hampered by current technology.”*

—**Court Administrator**

All mentor court projects involve some sort of case research component to identify the existence of crossover cases. Estimates of the time needed to conduct research on the cases vary widely, both among the courts and within each individual court. Depending on the number and capability of case management systems as well as the number of individuals and cases in the unified family court, it can take anywhere from a few minutes to an hour and a half, or longer, to research a single case as it comes into the system.

The technological challenges facing the courts are not unique to the mentor court program. The lack of standard case management systems has long been an issue for the California judicial branch. The branch has several initiatives to facilitate information exchange and standardize the courts’ case management systems. Courts were unable to make major modifications to their existing case management systems because of the impending changes related to these initiatives; nevertheless, some mentor courts were able to address a number of the technology deficiencies. Los Angeles, for example, was able to fully implement its newly developed Children’s Index, which identified children involved in

multiple court cases. Other courts created new reports that documented case activity information on some related cases in their existing case management systems. Some courts created standalone databases that tracked UCF families' case activity. However, interview respondents indicated that all these activities were labor intensive, and none was perceived as being able to fully address the existing technological deficiencies.

**Developing procedures including those designed to ensure due process protections and protect confidential information proved to be more complicated and time consuming than anticipated.** The courts had to address several legal considerations, before and during program implementation, that specifically related to unified courts. Unified courts must guard against the possibility that a judicial officer will acquire information and base a decision on it without informing the litigants or their attorneys about its existence or its role in the decision-making process. Litigants have the right to address the court and respond to information provided to the judicial officer. In addition, the courts need to make sure that the information provided to the judicial officer is appropriate and relevant to his or her decision-making process and that confidential information remains confidential.<sup>18</sup>

These legal considerations were not unanticipated; however, the level of detailed discussion needed to develop procedures related to these issues was time consuming. The mentor courts needed to clearly identify the type of information shared with the judicial officer, as well as define what constitutes a "related" case and which "family" member's information to include. Procedures for giving timely legal notice to court litigants had to be devised. Some courts reported having to revamp many of their procedures after the first CFCC-sponsored mentor court meeting during which some of the issues were identified and discussed. Other courts had to expand their collaboration efforts and invited additional stakeholders, such as members of the defense bar, to advise them on protocol development in order to ensure that such issues were addressed.

**Creating formal rules or protocols was more time consuming and resource intensive than anticipated.** Many courts reported

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<sup>18</sup> For more information on legal considerations related to establishing Unified Courts for Families, see *Unified Courts for Families Deskbook: A Guide for California Courts on Unifying and Coordinating Family and Juvenile Law Matters* (Administrative Office of the Courts, 2004).

that the process of formalizing their procedures was more labor intensive than expected. For many, the process involved both high-level discussions and collaboration with program stakeholders and detailed, specific discussions regarding minute program logistics. Some interview respondents stated that the protocol development process led the courts and their system partners to scrutinize current procedures. While this led to the development of more effective processes over time, multiple meetings were needed to formalize mentor court procedures.

**Collaborating with system partners affected project timelines.**

Although collaboration with system partners is key to the success of the mentor court programs, many courts reported that the collaboration caused delays in meeting project timelines. The courts say that identifying the key program stakeholders may also be problematic. Judicial officers, court staff, court administration, defense bar, county counsel, child protective services, private attorneys, probation, prosecution, and service providers—these are only some of the potential program stakeholders. As the number of stakeholders increases, so does the complexity of including them in the process of writing protocols and addressing legal issues. Bringing them into the project as early in the process as possible may help mitigate some problems.

**The original program design was modified.** Every court needed to deviate somewhat from the original project plan, as laid out in its grant proposal. Several reasons for modification were noted. Many changes were the result of legal concerns that arose during program planning and implementation. Other changes were made because courts lacked the resources to make significant changes to their case management systems. In some courts, proposed staffing patterns required modification, in the form of either changing position classifications or modifying assignments to require higher- or lower-level positions or to add or reduce hours related to certain positions. Many courts explained that these modifications strengthened their efforts and that, by pilot-testing their procedures, reevaluating their process and results, and fine-tuning their programs, they have been able to effectively meet their objectives.

**Coordinating family and juvenile proceedings required a significant amount of planning and effort for the courts.** All seven mentor courts are committed to the unified court program and will be continuing their coordination efforts beyond the three-year mentor court grant program period. While all the courts place a high value on the program, they also indicated that putting the

programs into place required a great deal of work. Stakeholders identified several areas that required significant effort on the part of the courts—in particular, developing protocols and procedures; hiring qualified staff who could begin program implementation quickly and were undeterred by working on a limited-term grant funded project; addressing deficiencies in technology; and identifying the correct program stakeholders, collaborating with them, and coordinating their work on the project. Even smaller courts that were accustomed to some degree of informal coordination reported that the project required a significant amount of staff time.

## Program Impact

Program stakeholders identified multiple program effects related to the Unified Courts for Families Program. Several outcomes that were shared by many of the mentor courts are described in the following section.

### **Increased levels of public trust and confidence in the courts.**

A number of judicial officers interviewed stated that they felt the project led to increased levels of trust and confidence in the courts. One judge stated that litigants may find it difficult to take the court process seriously when multiple or conflicting orders are issued or when it is obvious that the judge has no knowledge of proceedings related to additional cases.

*“It [lack of case coordination] can diminish respect and confidence for the orders...[Coordination] increases their confidence in the court process.”*

**—Judicial Officer**

**Greater access to the courts for litigants.** Interview respondents commented that the UCF program increased access to the courts in various ways. Some mentioned greater levels of services available to litigants because of the grant. Such services included assistance provided through centers for self-represented litigants as well as assistance for non-English speakers. Others felt that assisting families as they navigate the complex judicial system made the courts more accessible. Such assistance included explaining court procedures and requirements to the litigants, as well as coordinating hearing dates.

*“Coordinating [cases] increases belief and respect for the order.”*

**—Judicial Officer**

**Heightened safety for court users.** Many stakeholders said that the unified court program increased levels of safety for the court user in different ways. One judicial officer stated that safety levels improved when judges had access to related case information. Information on prior incidences of violence, for example, allows judicial officers to make orders protecting the safety of the court user and also enables bailiffs to go on increased alert during hearings. Modifications made to court facilities were cited by some stakeholders as increasing security levels. Child waiting rooms or interview rooms created for the UCF program were viewed by some as important steps toward increasing security for court users.

*“A wealth of information comes in about a minute. It enhances our credibility with customers and might make it easier to follow orders. DV [domestic violence] information is a great help in custody decisions.”*

**—Judicial Officer**

**Fewer conflicting orders.** Nearly all interview respondents believed that the program reduced the number of conflicting court orders. Reduction in conflicting orders has several impacts on the court and litigants. One judicial officer interviewed stated that conflicting orders compromise the safety of family members, particularly related to child custody orders in cases in which domestic violence is present. Another said that reducing the number of conflicting orders may lead to increased compliance with existing orders:

**Increased service coordination and referrals.** Several stakeholders stated that the UCF program increased service coordination and referrals. While this may be an obvious outcome for service referral components of the program, information sharing was also viewed as contributing to this result. Court staff or judicial officers could refer litigants to services when they had additional information regarding all related court cases involving the litigant or family members. In addition, judicial officers stated that receiving information back from the service providers, such as progress being made in treatment programs, was helpful when they made decisions related to the case.

**Decreased service duplication.** Many stakeholders interviewed stated that they believed that the program resulted in less duplication of services. This was particularly true of courts that employed a service coordination model.

**Better quality of dependency exit orders.** Under California law, when a dependency case is closed, the juvenile court issues a custody order requiring a family law case file to be opened (if one does not already exist) in the family law department of the county where the children live. Some interview respondents indicated that the increased communication between family and juvenile law departments that resulted from the UCF program led to improvements related to dependency exit orders. Some respondents stated that exit orders became much more comprehensive and provided more useful information as result of the program.

**Improved court-community collaboration.** Representatives from nearly all the courts reported increased levels of collaboration between the court and community. The process of producing agreed-on rules or protocols, or both, was cited as playing a key role in enhanced levels of communication and collaboration. Partners from many systems attended meetings

*“The biggest thing [has been] the coordination of services. It has eliminated some of our most time-consuming cases.”*

**–Judicial Officer**

*“[Before the program, we could] find out perhaps one family has five different mental health counselors. When you bring everyone to the table, you become aware of how ridiculous that is.”*

**–Judicial Officer**

*“Through our coordination effort, there is a much greater likelihood that when we do an exit order here, it’s going to wind up in the right place.”*

**–Judicial Officer**

*“[We have] better communication so that everybody is on the same page as to how to best serve the family.”*

**–Court Administrator**

during the planning and implementation stages of the projects in some courts, and they continue their involvement by assisting in developing rules and protocols. Enhanced service referral or coordination was also identified as contributing to increased levels of court-community collaboration. Stakeholders in several mentor courts stated that service providers became more aware of the resources the courts had to offer as a result of the project and began referring people to those courts. In turn, some judicial officers and mentor court staff reported increased awareness of community services in their area.

**Increased intracourt communication.** Better levels of communication within the court was a commonly cited result of the project. Family law courts became more familiar with juvenile courts’ policies and procedures, and vice versa. Some courts reported a greater use of restraining orders in juvenile court as the court staff and the bench became more accustomed to intracourt interaction. The mentor courts established regular meetings to address unified court issues. Several stakeholders in those courts called those meetings an important way to increase communication among people involved in the different case types.

**Case coordination and information sharing positively affecting judicial decision making.** Nearly all the judicial officers interviewed stated that they believed that the information they received as a result of the Unified Courts for Families program enables them to make more-informed decisions and avoid issuing conflicting orders because of the program.

**Judicial culture shifting toward a more user-friendly model.** Several program stakeholders reported that the unified court project encouraged a shift in the judicial system culture toward a system that more effectively meets the needs of litigants. For some courts, this meant reevaluating their systems from the perspective of the court user.

**Judges report increased levels of satisfaction.** Many bench officers interviewed stated that they were more satisfied with the work that they were doing as a result of the mentor court program. One judicial officer said that the added information she now receives made her realize how little information she received before the program began.

**Courts becoming more experienced in addressing of legal issues related to case coordination.** Some program stakeholders reported that they did not anticipate the far-reaching effects of the

*“[T]he biggest benefit is...having more information. I think having information is power, and we [now] have the ability to have more information and make better decisions. You make better decisions when you get more information.”*

**–Judicial Officer**

*“[Coordination] removes obstacles from the families. The court is working more with the families, not against them.”*

**–Judicial Officer**

*“We can’t do our jobs without [case coordination], because too much of what we do crosses over.”*

**–Judicial Officer**

legal considerations that needed to be addressed during program implementation, yet their increased awareness of these issues has led to the creation of a better program that is more likely to be embraced by justice system partners. Developing finalized rules and protocols to address due process and confidentiality issues provides valuable experience to other courts seeking to create unified courts.

**Mentor courts learned from each other.** In addition to talking with each other at AOC-sponsored mentor court meetings, many mentor courts communicated frequently. Several intercourt site visits have occurred, and draft protocols and procedures have been developed and shared. The participating courts also took the initiative to mentor each other. Their experience will assist them in mentoring other courts interested in program replication. Several interview respondents indicated that the assistance they received from other mentor courts was one of the keys to creating a successful program.

## Promising Mentor Court Practices: Successful UCF Model Components

Because the courts and the UCF programs involved in this project are so diverse, no single program model can be identified as the most successful. The information gathered during the interviews, however, identifies the following program components and practices, as well as lessons learned, as having been perceived to be the most successful during program implementation.

### **Establish judicial support and leadership early.**

The interviews consistently emphasized the importance of judicial leadership. Several stakeholders stated that they could not have fully implemented their unified courts without receiving strong judicial leadership and guidance. Such leadership and support for the program was cited as a critical factor in reducing delays in program implementation and in assisting in collaboration between the court and its justice system partners.

*“Judicial leadership and support is crucial to the success of the program.”*

**–Court Administrator**

Some courts experienced mixed levels of enthusiasm for the UCF program among certain judicial officers, particularly in the early stages. Reasons varied widely among judicial officers who were not entirely supportive of all aspects of the programs, and generally related to county size and case type. Some judges believed their counties were small enough that formalizing information-sharing procedures was simply not necessary. Others felt that their counties were so large that it was not always practical to coordinate different cases types. In general, courts that began their programs with high levels of judicial support achieved the program objectives in a more timely manner than did courts with less judicial support; however, many mentor courts could modify their programs at the request of the judges and stated that support from the bench grew over time as a result of such modifications.

### **Bring stakeholders from the court and the community to the table during the planning phase.**

As previously stated, the majority of stakeholders interviewed believed that the Unified Courts for Families Project resulted in increased court-community collaboration. The courts in which this collaboration was most commonly cited by stakeholders tended to have programs that invited participation from representatives of community organizations during the planning stage. Some courts involved community stakeholders in

both planning and creation of unified court protocols. While having multiple players involved in formalizing protocols was viewed as affecting project timelines, it was also perceived to be an important step in increasing levels of collaboration and strengthening relationships between the court and its community partners.

One of the more commonly cited barriers to program success was failing to have the appropriate stakeholders participate in the project's planning phase. Several interview respondents stressed the importance of having the support of court partners at the beginning stages. This was perceived as leading to program buy-in from essential stakeholders such as defense counsel. Some courts could not identify those stakeholders in advance. For example, part of the program design in one county involved conducting criminal background checks on parties involved in domestic violence restraining orders. UCF funding was used to set up a California Law Enforcement Telecommunications System (CLETS) terminal in the court. The California Department of Justice When asked what advice should be given to courts interested in program replication, one court administrator responded: "Create an inclusive planning committee to ensure sufficient communication, buy-in, issue identification, effective protocols, etc. In addition, a smaller working group or subcommittee is needed to act on the decisions coming out of the larger group."

The California Department of Justice has established security regulations related to the location of CLETS terminals that need to be met before a system is put into place. Meeting the CLETS requirements had an impact on workload and personnel assignment and resulted in programmatic delays until the issues were resolved. Bringing in those court administrators who are responsible for security in the project planning phase may have avoided significant project delays. One court administrator realized after some time that involving technology experts in the planning process would have facilitated aspects of project implementation related to creating electronically bundled case files. Another court neglected to ask defense counsel to join project planning meetings, which resulted in delays during program implementation.

**Assess technological capacity, and address issues when possible.**

Most stakeholders who were interviewed stated that the lack of adequate technology was a major impediment to progress for the

unified court when searching for related cases for unified court families. No court had the capacity to automatically search for related cases in its databases. While some courts created programs that allowed for case status reports to be made, once related cases were identified, they nevertheless usually had to search manually. For most courts, this labor-intensive system meant that the UCF clerk had to search multiple case management systems to identify parties involved in multiple cases. These case management systems often had different search criteria, further increasing the workload for the UCF clerk.

*“The better the technology, the better your program will work.”*

**–Court Administrator**

Interviewees also identified technological deficiencies related to sharing information among numerous files. Several programs created bundled paper files that eventually became so cumbersome that judicial officers were reluctant to use them. Some courts developed electronically bundled case files that could be accessed via a computer on the judicial officer’s desk. Preliminary feedback indicates that such electronic bundling systems have been well received.

The courts identified several technological needs, some of which went unmet throughout the duration of the project. Some of these needs are automatic identification of related cases for new filings, and automatic updates to existing cases with relevant and appropriate information on related cases. Courts hearing matters involving families should have CLETS information to immediately access existing protective orders. And courts hearing *any* matter affecting custody, visitation, or protective orders should be able to immediately access the files of related cases through use of electronically imaged documents.

Some courts created standalone databases to track case activity and status, service referral, and usage for the benefit of UCF family members. While this proved to be advantageous to some courts, others found them overly labor intensive, with benefits that did not outweigh the time and effort that went into data entry. Information needed to be continually updated manually, since the systems did not interact with the courts’ case management system. Several stakeholders stated that having a database that could interact with the courts’ case management systems and automatically track and download information would be an enormous benefit to the unified court program.

**Allow sufficient time to implement the program.**

At least one representative from each of the court programs emphasized the importance of allowing enough time to implement

*“Our weakness was the time...If you do it right, it takes a lot of time.”*

**–Court Administrator**

the program and make needed modifications. Several interview respondents indicated that their greatest programmatic challenge related to underestimating the amount of time involved. Some courts reported significant delays in program start, as a result of difficulties finding qualified staff to run the project. Others underestimated how collaborating with multiple players within the court and community would lengthen project timelines. As would be expected in new projects such as this, modifications and improvements were made to all the court programs. These modifications affected project timelines. Even courts with relatively few modifications to the program design found that they needed more time to implement the program than they originally projected. While all the courts established a series of formal protocols and procedures related to the project by the end of the three-year grant period, some were not able to do so until well into the second year.

**Address the legal issues during the planning process through collaboration with system partners.**

As mentioned previously, numerous legal issues will arise that relate to unified courts. Courts that addressed these issues in consultation with system partners during the project's planning phases did not experience the significant delays that the other courts reported. Like many other challenges related to implementing the UCF program, one key component of successfully addressing the legal issues involves bringing the appropriate stakeholders to the planning table. Representation from the defense bar is essential when developing policies and procedures related to due process rights and confidentiality. Some mentor court stakeholders identified other, less obvious, players such as information technology personnel who could provide valuable contributions when devising procedures to provide notice to litigants. Some stakeholders interviewed stated that understanding the legal issues related to due process and confidentiality was one of the more important components of project implementation.

**Identify and define relevant and appropriate case types and "family members" in advance.**

Some courts found that defining the types of cases and which individual "family members" to include in the unified court was an important undertaking that required a surprising amount of advance planning. Some mentor courts intended to adjudicate criminal cases through the unified court program, but encountered resistance from justice system partners such as defense attorneys

and prosecutors. The reasons offered for such resistance varied from workload issues to concerns of due process. Some courts coordinated cases with their collaborative justice courts, since these courts generally relied on information-sharing practices. Some interview respondents also stated that merely defining “family member” required a good deal of discussion and forethought, and were concerned that overly inclusive definitions had legal and workload implications.

**Dedicate staff to the project.**

All the judicial officers and court administrators interviewed reported that the success of the UCF program depended on having sufficient staff dedicated to the project. While the various programs used staff in different ways, most stakeholders employed both managerial and entry-level positions to support the project. Many programs felt that at least one management position was essential to assist in policy development, particularly in a project’s early years. A Case coordinator or case managers were also identified as key to project success. All the courts dedicated some staff time to researching related cases for litigants involved in UCF proceedings. Other duties of UCF staff included: guiding the development and implementation of procedures, protocols, and rules for the project; notifying parties, judicial officers, and agency representatives of coordinated cases; coordinating the exchange of information or cases between courts or locations; developing and participating in training for judicial officers, court staff, and appropriate agency representatives; performing criminal background checks; supervising staff assigned to perform coordination duties; developing and maintaining statistical data; identifying and assessing available services; and referring families to appropriate services.

*“I think there are ways to integrate [some of] the process into existing staffing levels, but there clearly are some additional staff that are needed to pull this off. [You] might need to look at the staffing ramifications and make some decisions about what your priorities are.”*  
–Court Administrator

**Create a coordinated administrative structure that spans different case types.**

Devising a central administrative structure for the unified court avoids overidentification with a particular case type and facilitates case type cross-training for judicial officers and court staff. One administrative structure encourages court staff to become familiar with both the legal and procedural issues related to multiple case types. Courts that operated with a coordinated administrative structure were able to more quickly identify and address issues related to personnel and the development of procedures and protocols.

*“An organizational structure that had [the relevant] staff reporting to one manager facilitated communication and coordination efforts.”*  
–Court Administrator

**Educate or train court staff and judicial officers.**

Training court staff and judicial officers was cited by some judicial officers and court administrators as being a key step in institutionalizing the unified court program. Several types of educational or training opportunities were mentioned as contributing to the success of the project. These included cross-training related to specific case type laws that may benefit both staff and judicial officers; education and training in issues of confidentiality and due process and in information-sharing protocols for both staff and judicial officers; and training in specific UCF procedures and processes for non-UCF staff. Some interview respondents reported that their programs would have been more successful if they had conducted more training and education of court staff. Several programs relied on general court clerks to flag potential related cases, yet the clerks were often unaware of unified court practices and failed to identify the cases. One UCF case manager began training new clerks at the job orientation and believed that that led to increased referrals to the program.

**Design the program to suit local court needs and culture.**

Flexibility was key to developing of the Unified Courts for Families Program. The Judicial Council did not want to prescribe specific models of court unification to be employed by each jurisdiction. Rather, it invited the courts to develop various approaches toward unification and coordination that suited their particular needs and culture. The local courts are aware of their own unique issues, requirements, and resources, so they customized their programs to meet them. Stakeholders in the smallest courts believed that, owing to their size, they were already familiar with the families with multiple cases and their issues. Therefore, they chose to focus most of their resources on providing a case manager to assist frequent court users in adjudicating their cases. One court was located in the midst of a cluster of several counties in which court litigants were known to often cross county lines. The court utilized CLETS reports as a way to identify cases that crossed over county lines. Two courts with a history of collaboration partnered to create a cross-county model, in order to share resources. Several stakeholders emphasized the importance of designing unified courts based on local needs and culture. They believed that applying a particular model of unified family court, such as *one judge/one family*, would not have been successful in their counties.

*“[You] have to build within your own culture and the value system within your court. [It] has to be sustainable, whichever model or methodology the court chooses to undertake with that long-term, and not just a special project.”*

**–Court Administrator**

**Encourage and institutionalize methods for cross communication between case types.**

Some interview respondents stated that cross communication between case type had a profound impact on project success. One court administrator said that before program implementation, judicial officers and court staff working in the court’s family law division rarely communicated with judicial officers and court staff in the juvenile division, even though the courtrooms were near one another. After the unified court program was launched, the two divisions began communicating regularly and even initiated monthly meetings. Several unified courts stated that regular unified court meetings were important components of the program. In many courts, such meetings are attended by judicial officers, court staff and administrators, and community service providers.

**Develop formal policies, rules, or protocols.**

The courts’ approaches to formalizing policies and procedures governing the unified program varied from creating formal local rules of court to simply documenting the program procedures. Regardless of the level of formalization, however, judicial officers and court administrators alike agreed that developing formal policies and protocols was an important element in the project’s success. One court administrator cited it as the most essential step toward institutionalizing the program and sustaining it after grant funding ended. Another stated that the process of formalizing the UCF procedures led the court to assess the effectiveness of each procedure and modify them as appropriate. Yet another stated that the process of formalizing rules and procedures forced relevant stakeholders to think through, discuss, and gain consensus on pertinent legal issues related to the project.

*“I think if you don’t make formalized processes for all the world to see and for all the world to comment on, you really risk crossing over into some areas that are not legally very defensible...Developing policy is crucial to a formalized policy.”*  
–Court Administrator

Some respondents reported that the process of creating formal processes itself increased court-community collaboration, since various stakeholders became involved in the effort. Because the courts modified and improved their programs over time, some interview respondents stated that the level of formality of established rules and protocols should depend on the length of time they were in use. While the level of formality varied, the stakeholders interviewed felt that having some degree of formal process that could be shared was a crucial element of program success.

Some of the protocols created by the courts are:

- Types of related cases being researched;
- Procedures for gathering information;

- Information included in summary reports (if prepared);
- Procedures for storing information;
- Ways of inspecting the information;
- Procedures for informing parties that the court has the information, and whether the court has relied on it in making a decision;
- Procedures for referring or connecting litigants to services; and
- Procedures for disputes about information.

**Seek technical assistance from other unified courts for families, the AOC, or a deskbook.**

Mentor courts were required to guide and assist other courts interested in coordinating family and juvenile cases, and they frequently communicated with them throughout the project. The courts shared draft protocols, conducted site visits to observe the other mentor courts, and regularly consulted with each other. They assisted each other with program modifications and improvements by sharing their own experiences with the other mentor courts. Several program stakeholders identified this communication as one of the key components of program success.

*“When asked what advice should be given to courts interested in program replication, one court administrator responded: “Create an inclusive planning committee to ensure sufficient communication, buy-in, issue identification, effective protocols, etc. In addition, a smaller working group or subcommittee is needed to act on the decisions coming out of the larger group.”*”

In addition to communication among the mentor courts, the Center for Families, Children & the Courts made technical assistance available. The CFCC Mentor Court Program sponsored several forums for such assistance throughout the term of the project. These included the *Unified Courts for Families Deskbook Guide* and annual mentor court meetings. Regular site visits were conducted to gather information on the program implementation process as well as to provide direct technical assistance. Although such a high level of assistance may not be available to all courts interested in creating or improving their unified courts, CFCC and the mentor courts themselves are committed to supporting the development of unified courts throughout California.

**Conclusion**

A 2005 judicial branch survey revealed that, with the exception of defendants in traffic cases, litigants and attorneys involved in family and juvenile law cases are less approving of the courts than litigants or defendants in any other case type. They are also more likely to perceive the courts as lacking in procedural fairness.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Rottman.

Family and juvenile law cases are complex, often take a long time to settle, involve high stakes, and are historically under-resourced in comparison to other case types. They often involve self-represented litigants. The court's response to dealing with the numerous families involved in multiple cases in family law and juvenile courts may have a tremendous impact on the perception court users have of the judicial system.

A recent survey of family law judicial officers in California indicated that the majority of respondents (nearly 81 percent) have some sort of process in place that informs them of the existence of related cases in which a litigant is involved. While this is an encouraging statistic, most respondents indicated that the process was an informal one, such as hearing about related cases from the litigant or their counsel. These same bench officers overwhelmingly agree that having information about existing orders and case activity leads to fewer conflicting orders, improved coordination of court proceedings and hearings, and increased levels of safety for the court user.

Judicial officers and court staff who work in the Unified Courts for Families mentor courts believe that coordinating related family and juvenile court cases results in a variety of benefits for the court, the bench, and litigants. For the *judicial officers*, these benefits include the ability to make better orders, increased levels of confidence in their decision, and higher levels of job satisfaction. For the *court*, more-informed orders lead to fewer conflicting orders, less service duplication, and possibly also case processing efficiencies such as reduced continuances and hearings. For the *litigants*, coordinating related cases may lead to heightened levels of safety, less duplication of services, better understanding of what is required to expedite their cases, and improved levels of trust and confidence in the judicial system.

The *Unified Courts for Families Project Evaluation Report* illustrates program components that may be adopted by other counties wishing to address the complex issues that arise for families involved in multiple courts cases. Approaches to such case coordination vary according to local needs, resources, and cultures; however, courts can benefit greatly from the lessons learned by the mentor courts and can apply these lessons in their own jurisdictions.

## Appendix A. County Descriptions

The following section provides a description of the coordination approach and program scope of the Mentor Courts.

## **Butte and Glenn Counties**

### **Coordination Approach**

Butte and Glenn formed a regional collaboration to (1) locate and provide information to judges about families with multiple cases and (2) coordinate the services that families need. A collaboration design was implemented to address issues involving litigants who lived and worked between the two counties. In the coordinated family court (CFC), Butte took a two fold approach to coordination: utilizing a coordination of services track and an electronic “bundled” file designed to provide judicial officers with summaries of appropriate and relevant court orders. A coordinated services manager was shared by the two courts to assure that services needed by families are offered within an effective system of collaboration among local service providers. Two case coordinators, one in each county, were assigned to launch the coordination of the cases as they are identified.

### **Case Types**

Cases eligible for the electronic bundled reports included domestic violence cases (heard in the Butte domestic violence court and family law court) involving children and having at least one other open case with a restraining order, stay away order, child custody order, or dependency case plan. The coordinated family court focused on dependency cases involving children living with domestic violence or child endangerment issues. Juvenile dependency cases were screened for project eligibility, and cases involving domestic violence were given priority for eligibility. In addition to the dependency matter, families had to have at least one other case open to be selected for the coordinated family court. The court was also especially interested in cases involving mental health and substance abuse issues.

### **Definition of Family**

“Family” was defined by the parties involved in the cases. In interviews, the mothers, children, and fathers were asked to identify those that they considered to be important people in their family units. Service providers also gave information about the family members who were important in the creation of a safe environment in which children could thrive. At a minimum, the coordinated family court project cases included children and the adults who play a significant role in those children’s lives. Bundled cases included the mothers of the children in the case, the biological fathers, stepfathers), and other adult companions who participated significantly in the lives of the children. Family Advocate Coordination Team (FACT) meetings included guardians, grandparents, aunts, uncles, stepmothers, foster parents, domestic partners, friends, teachers, or religious advisors.

### **Program Scope**

By June 2006 Glenn County had screened 57 dependency cases and discovered 41 families with multiple cases. The 41 families had an average of 8 cases per family in any of the following case types: juvenile, criminal, family law, traffic, and civil. The 41 families required 320 case summaries (reports to be bundled). Nearly 20 percent of the multiple-case families had cases in Butte, Tehama, or Shasta Counties.

By June 2006 Butte County had scanned 1,296 documents containing appropriate and relevant orders for judges to view.

FACT meetings in Butte County were held with 31 families, which yielded 169 referrals to a variety of services, including housing, medical, transportation, education, employment, financial, safety, legal, counseling, and social or family support.

## **Del Norte County**

### **Coordination Approach**

Del Norte County's unification project employed a one-family/one-case manager model and consisted of three main components: case management for families with multiple cases, coordination of wraparound services for families with multiple or related cases, and the creation of a center to assist self-represented litigants. Wraparound is a program designed to help address high-risk family issues in a very intensive manner. Community resources are applied to the family situation in creative and dynamic ways, and a conscious decision is made by the service team to apply whatever resources are deemed necessary to ensure success. Wraparound involves a planning process that helps the family identify needs and gives them the ability to create unique methods and plans to meet those needs. The goal of providing intensive, individualized response to families is to enable children to live and grow up in a safe, stable, permanent family environment. The case manager assigned to these families aided the referral process for families seeking services. The case management consisted of identifying families with multiple cases, conducting facilitated meetings with all parties in the cases during which service needs and case-related issues were discussed, and summarizing relevant and appropriate case information for judicial officers. One part-time (0.75 FTE) program assistant researched and compiled information on multiple-case families. The program assistant also staffed the self-help center on a part-time basis.

### **Case Types**

Case types included domestic violence, dissolution (with child involved), guardianship, juvenile dependency, and juvenile delinquency cases; family support orders; and petitions to establish parental rights.

### **Definition of Family**

The Del Norte unified court's definition of "family" pivoted on the children. If a case involved a child either directly or indirectly, all people related to the child were identified using the following criteria: blood relation, relation by marriage (e.g., stepparent), relation by guardianship, and relation due to living in the same household.

### **Program Scope**

As of April 2006, 81 summarized files had been created and maintained. The average number of cases per summarized file has been 4.5. The top three family law case types represented are family support, domestic violence, and civil petitions/dissolution.

As of April 2006, the Wraparound program had served about 100 individuals with cases in family and criminal law. Many families involved in wraparound also had combined cases in family and criminal law.

Data on customer usage of the self-help center for the period from August 2005 through January 2006 noted that the number of self-help center users was 152 (averaging 27 per month). Reasons cited for using the self-help center included the following: research/general information, family law, small claims, landlord/tenant, and guardianships.

## Los Angeles County

### Coordination Approach

Los Angeles utilized a judicial/administrative team approach to coordinate multiple or crossover cases and improve information sharing across litigation areas. Central to these efforts, was the development of an automated search process called the “Children’s Index.” Specifically, the index searches the case management systems for dependency, delinquency, family law, child support, and probate guardianship for multiple cases based on a child’s name and birthdate. The Children’s Index has become the mechanism by which the superior court identifies crossover cases and has enhanced the coordination of cases in which any child is involved. The system is used on a daily basis by many judicial officers, managers, and staff throughout Los Angeles County. Additionally, the Unified Courts for Families (UCF) staff searches all dependency and probate filings and all family law cases with children filed in the central court and flags those cases as crossover cases, so this information is available to anyone handling that case.

Each family identified by UCF staff as a multiple-case family was then offered direct services. These services included help with filings stemming from dependency court actions (and moved into family law) and referral to “211 L.A.” “211 L.A.” (formerly known as “Info Line”) is an easy-to-use, professional source of individualized referrals to an extensive range of services. The service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Litigants can dial “211” on any telephone to access over 28,000 health and human service programs throughout Los Angeles County. The UCF grant enabled the court to fund a bilingual staff person in the court who met with families with crossover cases and connected them with resources. A special outreach was made to families with dependency court exit orders. Additionally, two dedicated “211” telephones were installed in the central courthouse.

Through the funding provided by the UCF grant, the court was able to significantly improve coordination with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). Trainings on domestic violence restraining orders were held with DCFS administrators. Upcoming trainings will include probate and dependency guardianship matters. Additionally, all probate guardianship and family law expedited child custody evaluations have been screened for prior DCFS involvement.

All of Los Angeles’s unification and coordination initiatives were implemented through local rules and protocols. The UCF program employed a staff of eight for the unification and coordination efforts. One program manager coordinated and oversaw the program. A resource specialist (a contract employee) referred UCF court users to services and followed up with the families to ensure progress. A paralegal who also worked with the family law facilitator worked with crossover cases that included child support. The child custody evaluator coordinated cases with DCFS, developed a training program for DCFS, and performed expedited child custody evaluations for crossover cases. The four office assistants performed searches for crossover cases in the Children’s Index and related case management systems and provided general data entry support for the program.

**Case Types**

The court focused on the coordination of dissolution, Domestic Violence Prevention Act (DVPA), dependency, delinquency, probate guardianship, and Title IV-D child support cases.

**Definition of Family**

For the purposes of this grant, a family was defined as a child or children and the (1) biological parents, (2) adoptive parents, (3) stepparents, (4) legal guardian, or (5) relative or other person with custody. The definition did not include extended family such as grandparents or aunts and uncles, unless they were the legal guardians or had custody. Boyfriends or girlfriends of the parents also were excluded from the definition of “family.”

**Program Scope**

For calendar year 2005, Los Angeles County identified 4,220 families with crossover cases. Those 4,220 families represented 10,192 cases in family law, child support, domestic violence, dependency, delinquency, and probate guardianship.

## Napa County

### **Coordination Approach**

Napa's unified court program included a resource specialist and a case management coordinator. The court also initially had a half-time attorney and, later, a legal assistant in the self-help center to assist UCF families with guardianship and other UCF case types. The coordinator conducted searches in the court's automated system to identify families with more than one case in the court system and presented that information to the court. When needed to facilitate a referral, appropriate information sharing with court-connected services and the resource specialist occurred via a "Consent to Release Information" form. The resource specialist created a network of community liaisons at each agency that supports an efficient and effective referral process for families. Relationships are maintained through the court's active participation in the Napa Valley Association of Nonprofit Agencies. Further, the community referrals are enhanced by the NapaHelp interactive database of services ([www.napahelp.info](http://www.napahelp.info)) as the service data is accurate and comprehensive, and the litigant can leave the court with a printout containing essential information about the referral.

### **Case Types**

The project included family, delinquency, dependency, child support, paternity, guardianship, adoptions, domestic violence, and related criminal proceedings as deemed appropriate.

### **Definition of Family**

The core definition of "family" included blood relationships and all adults who were either married or had bonds of voluntary affection and children in common. This definition included the parents or those who acted as parents under a court order or other agreement and encompassed extended family or nonrelatives who had a preexisting relationship with the child. As each case is different, the definition needed to effectively account for individual characteristics of a particular child's family at the time the family approached the court for resolution of their legal issues. Underlying this definition is the foundational principle and statutory requirement to address the best interests of the child. It had to take into account legal parameters as well as dynamic, real-world family circumstances that may have included foster parents, stepparents, and various relatives providing care or other nurturing to children.

### **Program Scope**

A little over 300 cases were researched since the start of the project for the presence of more than one case per family. Approximately 90 cases became unified court cases, meaning that 90 cases had at least one party with more than one active case. A huge portion of the unified court cases (approximately 90 percent) contained at least one self-represented party.

The resource specialist worked with 133 families (potentially 266 individuals if both parents were assisted) to help them identify community services that address various social needs ranging from homelessness to substance abuse. Over 360 referrals to community services were accomplished, many involving multiple contacts. By helping

one or both parents represented by the 133 families connect to community services to address their needs, the 210 children involved also benefited.

## **Placer County**

### **Coordination Approach**

Placer's unified court program included a case manager and a court services clerk who aided with researching and tracking of UCF cases and with maintaining a database of these cases. One of the unique elements that Placer's UCF model incorporated was the use of the California Law Enforcement Telecommunications System (CLETS). Since that court is located in the midst of a cluster of several counties where court litigants are known to often cross over county lines, CLETS reports served as a way to identify cases that crossed over county lines and to inform the court about family law cases that had existing protective orders. The case coordinator screened cases for multiple-case families, performed CLETS checks, and researched and compiled information on these cases. The case coordinator also acted as a liaison between the unified family court users, county service providers, and the court. UCF families were eligible for referrals to services in the county, which included services like emergency mediation programs, coordination with drug testing centers, and help crafting visitation plans, etc.

### **Case Types**

The project included cases from various jurisdictions, including family law, Uniform Parentage Act (UPA), child support, and criminal or juvenile law cases. The "trigger" cases stemmed from domestic violence restraining order petitions.

### **Definition of Family**

When a case involves children, either directly or indirectly, the court considers all of the people related to the children first by parentage, then by marriage or guardianship, and finally due to living arrangements, i.e., residing in the same household.

### **Program Scope**

A total of 2,468 domestic violence petitions (928 of which involved children) have been reviewed since the start of the project. Over 1,000 crossover cases have been identified. The case types are as follows: 210 juvenile dependency cases, 862 family law cases, 74 probate cases.

## San Joaquin County

### Coordination Approach

San Joaquin used an information-sharing approach to coordinate a set of cases included into their unified family court project. Cases were coordinated by a case manager who was supported by an assistant case coordinator. Aside from coordinating cases and helping bridge appropriate information to the different courts, the case manager assisted families as they navigated through the system. The case coordinator worked with community providers.

### Case Types

The Superior Court of San Joaquin County focused on family law, domestic violence, dependency, delinquency, guardianship, and adult drug court matters. Families were identified each year for inclusion in the project. The criteria were defined so that the family had to have at least one active juvenile proceeding and an additional case or cases involving family members.

### Definition of Family

For the purpose of this project, only those family members that were no more distantly related than the second degree of consanguinity were considered for project inclusion. For example, grandparents, parents, and children could be included in that category. Half-blood relationships such as half-siblings by the same mother and a different father also were included, but no relationship more than two generations distant.

### Program Scope

In its first year of the program, the San Joaquin Unified Family Court (SJUFC) coordinated cases for 30 families. In year two, SJUFC added another 131 families, and in its final year added 239. The table below represents the number of cases and case types coordinated by SJUFC.

UCF Year	# of Families	Number of Cases by Type						
		Family	Criminal	Dependency	Delinquency	Probate & Mental Health	Civil	Total
Year One	30	121	181	40	10	5	0	357
Year Two	131	317	371	31	15	3	1	738
Year Three	30	106	116	16	0	0	1	239
Total	191	544	498	87	25	4	2	1,334

## **Yolo County**

### **Coordination Approach**

The Superior Court of Yolo County uses the one-judge/one-family approach. All Unified Family Court Yolo cases that do not involve juvenile dependency or delinquency are heard by the family law judge. All juvenile dependency and delinquency cases are heard by the juvenile judge. Should a child who is the subject of a juvenile proceeding also be involved in a pending family law, domestic violence, or probate guardianship case, the coordinator will transfer those cases to the juvenile court judge, who has the discretion to hear all UFCY case types simultaneously to a final conclusion.

Two case coordinators review all UFCY cases on the calendar and create a “yellow file,” which contains a summary sheet of related cases; an “alert list” that makes special note of any serious issues such as child abuse, domestic violence, or threat of abduction; and copies of any outstanding warrants. The yellow file is confidential and is lodged within the case file.

For example, in domestic violence prevention cases, the case coordinator searches the case management system to see if there are any prior or pending related cases and notes them on the summary sheet. Criminal cases and unlawful detainers are listed for informational purposes only. If there is a related criminal domestic violence case, the “alert list” will also be used to notify the judge. If there is a criminal protective order, the case coordinator will pull the criminal file so that the judge will be able to review the existing order. If there is a bench warrant, the case coordinator confirms that the warrant is still active and places a copy of it in the yellow file. When possible, UFCY case types for one family are calendared at the same time to reduce the number of times the parties must appear in court.

### **Case Types**

Case types include all family law matters, including filings for dissolution, annulment, separation, termination of parental rights, adoption, paternity, and domestic violence prevention, as well as all juvenile dependency, juvenile delinquency, and probate guardianship cases.

### **Definition of Family**

The maternal grandparents and all children of the mother are defined as “family.” Subsequently included are all fathers, including presumed and alleged fathers, all children of the fathers, all paternal grandparents, and all individuals who reside in the household of the mother or father, whether or not they are blood related, and any other resident of the household where the child is living. As a practical matter, there has to be an inquiry for each case because of the frequent changes in family composition, including changes that take place as the case progresses.

### **Program Scope**

In 2006, the unified court attorney assisted in an average of 125 cases a month with issues of dissolution, parental rights, custody, guardianships, and domestic violence. The entire UFCY calendar is reviewed by a case coordinator in order to provide the judge with as much information as possible to enhance the court’s decision making, coordinate

hearing dates, and avoid making conflicting orders. One hundred and fifty-one referrals were made to the mental health clinician program in 2005, and clinicians provided about 942 hours of service. By mid-December 2006, 59 referrals have been made to the program, and the clinicians have provided about 407 hours of service.

## Appendix B: Evaluation Approach

The Judicial Council took an innovative approach in its coordination of family and juvenile court proceedings by allowing the courts to design their programs based on local needs and culture. This program design is the most effective method by which such a project could be implemented and institutionalized, given the enormous diversity of the state of California and its large judicial system. The innovative nature of the project required an equally innovative evaluation design that would accurately identify the program impact.

CFCC employed an evaluation approach that relied on both qualitative data and collaborative evaluation techniques. This approach allowed researchers to accurately analyze the impact of the Unified Courts for Families Project and to identify promising practices while addressing the multiple issues that affected how the project, taken as a whole, could be evaluated. This section describes the evaluation approach employed by researchers at the Center for Families, Children & the Courts, as well as the reasons for choosing that approach.

### **Collaborative Evaluation**

Collaborative evaluation is an evaluation technique that actively engages key program stakeholders in the evaluation process. This approach enables researchers to benefit from the subject matter expertise of program stakeholders, encourages local stakeholders to engage in ongoing self-assessment, and enhances the usefulness of the evaluation findings.<sup>20</sup> It also helps researchers enlist the help of local program staff in order to accurately document program processes and procedures and the context in which they were implemented. In collaborative evaluations, researchers often work with program staff to identify local program objectives and the methods they will use to measure success in meeting them. They may also collaborate on the analysis and presentation of their findings.

Mentor court project staff in each of the local courts provided input into the design of the project evaluation. During the early stages of this evaluation, CFCC conducted site visits of the mentor courts. During the visits, CFCC staff presented each court with a plan that identified the evaluation methods and the means for tracking progress made in achieving both locally defined and general program objectives. Researchers and local program staff discussed the methods for operationalizing each objective and then measuring its achievement. In addition, local program stakeholders identified quantitative data that could be tracked to measure program outputs. Researchers and program staff collaborated in creating an interim evaluation report and presented it to all the courts during a mentor court meeting in June 2005. Program staff provided comments, direction, and revisions to the report as well as an analysis of the quantitative data gathered during the site visits.

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Brandon, "Stakeholder Participation for the Purpose of Helping Ensure Evaluation Validity: Bridging the Gap Between Collaborative and Non-collaborative Evaluations" (Fall 1998) 19(3) *American Journal of Evaluation* 325.

Employing a collaborative evaluation approach that relies on qualitative data ensures that universal program impacts can be identified while taking into account the program designs' diversity. It allows program design changes to be tracked without penalizing programs for not adhering to original objectives. The evaluation is strengthened by subject matter expertise, while the usefulness of evaluation reports is enhanced locally when participants use collaborative techniques. Collaborative evaluation is also a useful technique when limited evaluation resources do not provide for extensive, rigorous data collection methods.

While collaborative approaches provide some distinct benefits in evaluating programs, several concerns relating to this research strategy require consideration. These include the need to ensure the objective integrity of the evaluation and the need to verify that the program effects seen actually derive from the program itself and are not the residual impact of the evaluation. Both these concerns should be addressed, regardless of the type of evaluation conducted; they are particularly important for collaborative evaluation.

These issues are partially dealt with through the development of two evaluation reports—an interim report and the evaluation report. The interim report was written after the completion of the second program year and focused on each local court's specific processes and findings. It was developed with input from the courts. It provides details of the planning and implementation processes that the court undertook, and it documents the quantitative output measures the court provided. It describes the specific procedures the court employed in its approach to coordinating family and juvenile court proceedings. The interim report is intended to provide feedback to the mentor courts themselves, and to be used as a guide for courts interested in program replication. Courts interested in the latter are encouraged to read sections in the report that apply to similar counties or to counties that are trying out models that they may wish to replicate.

This present report, the evaluation report, concentrates on global findings common to all or the majority of the courts. It was developed with little comment from the mentor courts. The main audience for this report is policymakers and other stakeholders who may be interested in or are considering implementing a program for coordinating family and juvenile courts. This evaluation report provides evidence of program effectiveness and offers some preliminary guidelines for program implementation that can be useful for program replication. It is intended to be user-friendly and concise and to present only high-level findings and general descriptions of the court programs. The research reports can be viewed as either companion pieces or standalone documents, depending on the purposes of the audience. Creating two reports in this fashion allows researchers to tap into those subject matter resources that are available only through collaborative evaluation, while preserving the integrity of the overall research process.

### **Qualitative Data Collection**

The evaluation of the mentor court program relied heavily on qualitative data collection, because it allowed for a thick and accurate description of the program impact while taking into account diverse program designs as well as the courts' limited capacity to provide quantitative data to adequately measure program outcomes.

CFCC researchers investigated the possibility of identifying quantitative outcome measures to assess the impact of all the mentor court programs, but found that defining and collecting such information was problematic, chiefly for three reasons: (1) technological limitations; (2) a lack of valid, quantifiable outcome measures; and (3) great diversity in program design. The technological limitations discussed earlier in this report prohibited the collection of extensive quantitative data from courts' case management systems. Such data collection would have greatly burdened the courts and diverted precious staff time from larger aspects of implementing the program. Even if data extraction from the courts' case managements systems had been feasible, many desired programmatic outcomes—such as improved access to the courts for litigants—could not be measured quantitatively. The diversity in program design provided some unique challenges for the evaluation and will be addressed in more detail in the following section.

Despite the lack of valid measures for quantitative outcomes, some quantitative data were used in the research reports. Quantitative data, reported in the process report, are used to measure a program's *output* and should not be considered valid measures of program *outcomes*. Quantitative output data submitted by the court provide useful information that describes program workload and court user needs. For example, some courts identified the more common types of referrals to services, or mentioned the case types most often represented in the unified court. This information can be used by the mentor courts themselves when they need modifications to the program. The information can also assist other courts interested in establishing unified court programs, for it describes program usage. It is valuable to the courts, as it indicates where resources can be used most effectively and defines the needs of the court user.

### **Issues Affecting Evaluation**

Several issues related to the design and execution of the mentor court project affected its evaluation. These include the diversity of program designs, scopes, implementation timelines, and local objectives among the seven mentor courts, as well as changes made to program design that skewed the potential to measure outcomes. These issues are necessary byproducts of the unique program design in which courts were given discretion to implement programs tailored to their local needs and culture. The challenges that they provided to the evaluation, as described below, were addressed by employing a collaborative evaluation approach and by using qualitative data.

Disparate program designs. As previously noted, the courts had ample discretion when creating and executing their projects. This discretion led to a great deal of diversity between the courts in terms of program design. Each court agreed to meet the 10 defined program objectives, yet they came up with quite different strategies to reach their goals. In addition, most courts had locally defined objectives, based on local needs that were not necessarily shared by the other courts. The seven mentor courts did not define *family* in precisely the same manner, nor did they encompass the same case types. They had varying needs and therefore focused their resources differently. Understandably, it is difficult to design a single evaluation type that accurately assesses the universal effects of

a program while taking into account such diversity. The following variations in program design created the most challenges in terms of evaluation:

*Different program timelines.* The courts found themselves at different levels of readiness when they received the UCF funding. One court had an operating unified court in place, while others were in the early planning stages. Some courts were challenged by finding qualified employees and did not hire staff to implement the program until well into their first year of project funding. One court received no UCF funding in the first year of the project and needed to redesign its program to conform to a two-year timeline, as opposed to the three-year one originally proposed.

Impact on evaluation: It is difficult to measure the impact of programs that have varied timelines. Program components may be perceived to be extremely successful (or unsuccessful) in some courts when they have been in place for some time. Yet other courts may see no discernible effects of similar program components, merely because not enough time has passed for them to be evident.

*Different approaches to formalization of protocols.* The variation in the courts' levels of readiness for program implementation had an impact on their approaches to creating formal protocols for unified courts. Some programs collaborated with justice system partners and service providers to establish formal local rules of court. Other programs created less-formal protocols by merely documenting unified court procedures. Both strategies may require a good deal of collaborative effort among program stakeholders; the creation of local rules, however, is a more formal and time-consuming process that strongly supports institutionalizing the procedure. In general, courts in the nascent stages of implementation had less-formal approaches and were more likely to modify procedures—a natural component of program start-up. Courts were given the discretion to choose which method of protocol development was most appropriate for their program. While the benefits of such discretion are obvious from a programmatic point of view, it presents unique challenges for the evaluation.

Impact on evaluation: One key function of program evaluation is assessing its ability to meet stated objectives. Because the majority of the mentor court objectives focused on the creation of formal rules or protocols related to coordinating family and juvenile proceedings, the variation in approaches to protocol development had a significant impact on the evaluation. It is difficult to universally assess and compare progress in meeting program goals when the processes for achieving those goals vary so greatly. A program that documents its protocols without going through an official process to institutionalize them will seem to have “successfully” achieved the mentor court objective far sooner than a court that creates formal rules of court; yet the latter court may have a qualitative reason for choosing to use the more-formal process that will produce better results in the long run.

*Different program focuses: Variation in measurable impact.* The mentor courts had differing focuses. All the programs incorporated both information-sharing and service referral or coordination components, though they generally focused most of their resources on one of these components. Some emphasized improving judicial decision making through providing information on related cases, while others focused more on assisting families in obtaining needed services. While both information-sharing and

service-related components should ultimately lead to more positive outcomes for court users, the immediate impact of these components will vary.

Impact on evaluation: Variation in program design has created variation in measurable impact as well. Outcome measures for programs that emphasize service referral are different from indicators used for information-sharing models. In some courts, the impact of the project is most clearly evident from the point of view of the judicial officers involved, while in others the court users' own experiences mark the more discernible effects of the project. Ideally, in time the programs would have effects in multiple areas and ultimately lead to a measurable impact on the court, its judicial officers, and its court users. However, the current evaluation focuses on programs in their early stages, making it difficult to identify such long-term outcomes.

Changes in program design. All courts modified and improved their program designs in response to their assessment of particular program components. The scope and reasons for the modifications varied among them. Some changes were made to accommodate a truncated funding timeline;<sup>21</sup> others were made in response to bench officers' requests; still others were made after staff assessed program operations while formalizing their protocols. All the changes to the program design were made to improve operations or to address challenges that arose during program implementation. For example, one program found that the judicial officers were not using paper-bundled case files because they found them too cumbersome. In response, the mentor court switched to an electronic case-bundling system in the project's final year.

Impact on evaluation: Changing and improving program components are natural and desirable aspects of program implementation; however, it is difficult to assess the impact of specific components under changing circumstances. For instance, preliminary data collected in the court cited above indicated that information sharing had little impact on judicial decision making when using the paper files. Data collected during the last stages of the program indicated that that perception was changing, but the program evaluation timeline did not allow researchers to fully investigate the impact of the electronic case-bundling system.

### **Evaluation Approach Conclusion**

The issues outlined above are not unique to the mentor court project, and they affect many types of evaluations in the field of court research. They are described to give the consumer of the evaluation reports information related to the context in which the evaluation design was created. The evaluation approach employed in the Unified Courts for Families project adequately addresses these challenges; yet CFCC researchers believe that additional resources should be devoted to exploring longer-term solutions to the challenges facing program evaluations in California's courts. Such solutions must recognize the workload implications on the local courts. While the California Case Management System, when fully implemented, will be an enormous asset to researchers, more immediate steps can be taken. Such steps could include establishing ongoing forums for communication and data exchange between the AOC and local courts or other agencies that could assist in identifying baseline information; devising common

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<sup>21</sup> Placer County, for example, received funding one year after the rest of the mentor courts did.

definitions of desired program outcomes that can be universally applied; and initiating discussion related to the context in which evaluations are conducted and their results presented. The documentation of the research challenges and the evaluation approach presented in this appendix are preliminary steps toward initiating such a discussion. An evaluation working group has been formed by the Center for Families, Children & the Courts to discuss these and other issues facing researchers in the judicial branch.