

Uniform Statistical Reporting System
The 1996 Client Baseline Study
Court Professionals Survey



**Report 7:
Serving Families in the '90s**

**The Perspective of Direct Service
Providers in California's
Family Court Services**

Statewide Office of Family Court Services
Judicial Council of California
Administrative Office of the Courts

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Serving Families in the '90s: The Perspective of Direct Service Providers

Family court services in California have proliferated in an era of adversity for families and the courts that serve them. The majority of children born in this decade will live at some time in a single-parent household. Child-custody caseloads are burgeoning and the matters at issue are increasingly difficult to resolve. Responding to changing times, family court services have designed innovative programs and enjoy high marks from most court users. Nonetheless, severe funding constraints have, for many years, compelled courts to do more with less. How does all this affect the work of court professionals¹ who directly serve families on a daily basis? Standards of Practice,² designed by direct court service providers themselves, demand quality professional services that hold the interests of children paramount. What forces impede or facilitate this mission?

In a landmark effort to hear the views of direct service providers, California's Statewide Office of Family Court Services conducted the 1996 Court Professionals Survey, circulating questionnaires in September 1996 to all family court services providers across the state. Responses were returned by 323 individuals; 67 percent of the respondents were female and 82 percent described their ethnic background as "white."

Respondents to the survey provide direct services in mediation, evaluation, or investigation for a broad spectrum of cases, including child custody, guardianship, dependency cases, and stepparent adoption. They are seasoned professionals with a long record of service. Three-quarters (75 percent) of the respondents had more than 10 years of professional experience working with families. One-third (32 percent) had worked in the courts for a decade or more; two-thirds (67 percent) for at least five years.

The Growth of the Family Court Services Profession

Respondents were asked, "What are the most significant changes you have witnessed in family court services since you began working in this profession?" The length of service of respondents to the survey provided valuable historical perspective on the growth and professionalization of court-based services to families.

Conciliation, evaluation, and other family services have been in place in some courts for many years. Mediation of child custody and visitation disputes became a mandatory procedure in California courts in 1981. Court professionals report that they have striven to create "a highly competent interdisciplinary (mediators/evaluators/attorneys/family law judges/outside referral resource people)

¹ In this report, the term "court professionals" is used to refer to those who provide any of a wide range of family court services, including mediation, investigation, evaluation, early resolution, parent orientation, and education.

² Uniform Standards of Practice for Court Connected Child Custody Mediation for the State of California, adopted as a rule of court in 1991.

service that effectively helps families to negotiate this difficult transition in their lives.” Respondents to this survey say they have witnessed “acceptance of mediation by the legal profession.” Court professionals have forged professional alliances, noting the “development of respect and trust among mediators, attorneys and judges.” Respondents pointed to “the growing credibility of mediation among courts and the local bar association.” Those who make custody and access recommendations to the bench say that they find their professional input welcomed and respected.

“In the beginning, there were 58 counties..”

Like other court programs across California, family court services are struggling to maintain the local responsiveness of their programs while taking advantage of the efficiencies of statewide standard practices. The enabling statute gave each superior court discretion to design its own mandatory mediation program. Consequently, courts differ in the professional orientation, administration and the complement of services that they offer.³ The “development of organizations devoted to this area,” most notably the California Association of Family Court Directors, joined long-standing interdisciplinary professional organizations, such as the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, as vehicles for the exchange of information and viewpoints about rapid developments in the field.

According to court professionals, the interplay of regional diversity and statewide professional discourse accelerated and refined the development of the discipline of court-based family services. Further, through this discourse, the usefulness of a variety of service delivery models was recognized. With local rule offering the proving ground for innovation, the relative merits of different locally based programs became the topic of intense professional scrutiny and comparison by service providers across the state as they struggle to define and set standards for this relatively new profession. Like many services to families in California, family court services differ from county to county; yet respondents reported a relatively high level of professional scrutiny of these variations. In some circumstances, such scrutiny led to the conclusion that families were best served by efforts toward statewide standardization; in other circumstances, regional variation appeared preferable. One court professional aptly summarized this introspective process: “In the beginning, there were 58 counties in California and 58 different ways that mediation was handled. Today, there are still 58 counties in CA, but only about 40 different ways of handling mediation.”

The benefits of statewide coordination

³*Profile: Child Custody Mediation & Evaluation Services in California Superior Court* (1991), Statewide Office of Family Court Services, Administrative Office of the Courts, San Francisco.

The Statewide Office of Family Court Services was established by legislative mandate in 1986.⁴ Although without regulatory authority, this unit of California's Administrative Office of the Courts has since provided coordination and facilitation with what respondents viewed as "emphasis on quality of service." Court professionals acknowledged the Statewide Office for "cutting edge training," "written materials" and peer consultation that grappled with "constantly changing laws and social mores."

Intramural and extramural research efforts sponsored by the Statewide Office were designed to advance the knowledge base grounding all family court services. For example, respondents concluded that the potential for "fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants mediation" was countered with the "generation of research to back what mediators actually do." This research has enabled family court services to be "more focused, comprehensive and knowledge-based" as well as contributing to a "huge increase in knowledge, skill, and awareness of what children and families need."

The Statewide Office was also characterized as a driving force for professionalization. In this vein, it has drawn upon the collective expertise of service providers across the state to put forward uniform standards and practices. Minimum qualifications and standards for mediators were set forth in 1980, in the original statute. In 1991, the Statewide Office fulfilled a legislative mandate to develop additional uniform standards of mediation practice. The Uniform Standards of Mediation Practice were updated in 1996 by a statewide Effective Service Models Task Force, convened by the Statewide Office. This version has been proposed as rule of court 1257.5, chapter 2.6 of the California Rules of Court. Currently also under review are Uniform Standards of Practice for Court-Ordered Child Custody Evaluations, developed in collaboration with a statewide advisory task force and in consultation with various interest and advocacy groups. As a result of these efforts, one respondent concluded, "The confidence and expertise of mediators statewide has increased."

Dominant Forces Challenging Contemporary Family Court Services

According to respondents, family court services now stand at a critical juncture, invigorated by innovation but at the same time grappling with three serious threats to the quality of services that are reaching crisis proportion: (1) "growth in the number and intensity of cases"; (2) the high percentage of those cases complicated by serious social problems; and (3) unprecedented constraints in court resources.

1. "Growth in the numbers and intensity of cases"

⁴Under Fam. Code, §§ 1850-1852, the California Statewide Office of Family Court Services is mandated to (1) assist counties in implementing mediation and conciliation proceedings; (2) administer a program of grants for research, study, and demonstration projects in the area of family law; (3) administer a program for the training of court personnel involved in family law proceedings; (4) establish and implement a uniform statistical reporting system; and (5) conduct research on the effectiveness of current family law for the purpose of shaping future public policy.

Statistics from various sources document a disproportionate rise in the volume of family law cases. According to the National Center for State Courts, domestic relations is the fastest growing sector of court calendars.⁵ *California Trial Court Outlook* reports that the caseload category “other civil petitions,” most of which also involves family relations matters, has surged 179 percent in the past decade. Statistics from the Statewide Office of Family Court Services’ Uniform Statistical Reporting System (USRS) show that the caseload in child custody mediation, just one of the programs offered in family court, has skyrocketed in the last decade. In 1987, the estimated annual caseload was 49,500, increasing to 65,500 by 1991, and 73,250 by 1993. By 1996, family court services administrators estimate that mediation sessions approached 84,000.

The burgeoning family court calendar also demands a diversified case-processing approach, calling upon a broad repertoire of services that are designed to address a wide spectrum of issues. Recent years have marked the growth of early-resolution procedures, emergency assessments, dependency mediations, and alternative dispute resolution in guardianship and conservatorships. These are added to long-standing services such as child-custody evaluations, assessments of children, guardianship investigations, stepparent adoptions, pre-marital counseling, conservatorship investigations, settlement conferences, consultations, courtesy evaluations, conciliation and marriage counseling. By 1996, an estimated 18,500 cases required these services.

2. Cases complicated by serious social problems

The daily experience of service providers was best summed up with the comment, “Overall, families are in worse shape today.” Even as caseloads mount, services must adapt to “the realities of family disintegration” by making provisions for multi-problem families. One counselor’s observation that “allegations of serious problems have become the norm rather than the exception” is confirmed by USRS statistics. In 54 percent of all mediation cases, parents raised concerns about child abuse, neglect or abduction, substance abuse, domestic violence, or other criminal activities. In 32 percent of all cases, more than one such matter arose, usually in the form of counter allegations between parents. The implications for day-to-day services? “Clients are more difficult, dangerous, and issues are more complex, serious.”

Painful dilemmas: “Which of the two are worse?” “The cases just keep getting tougher,” concluded one mediator, describing the dysfunctional, often chaotic situations his clients face. “Complicated, convoluted cases are more the rule than the exception,” observed another. “Most cases are very difficult to resolve,” added a veteran mediator. “When I began this work, some were very difficult, but most were workable.” There are no easy answers for many of today’s clients. According to court professionals, increasing numbers of custody outcomes are based on considerations of “least detriment.” Mediators report more third-party placements and a rise in petitions for probate guardianships. Drugs were frequently cited as a factor in such cases. USRS statistics show that one-fourth (24 percent) of all mothers and 15 percent of all fathers who come to mediation say that the other party has a problem with drugs and/or alcohol.

⁵ Ostrom, B.J. and Kauder, N.B. *Examining the Work of State Court* (1994). A joint project of the Conference of State Court Administrators, the State Justice Institute, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, and the National Center for State Courts’ Court Statistics Project.

“Family courts have become the most hazardous places in the court system” In many family law cases, the level of conflict between parties has escalated to what one mediator termed “open warfare.” Referring to the demeanor of parties returning to court for modifications of previous orders, a counselor observed, “The level of high conflict seems unabated for years and years.” Concluded one administrator, “The fight has become more important than the children.”

Violent clients are a source of serious concern, particularly in offices without court security. “We have an increasing number of people who have warrants out for their arrests, have recently gotten out of jail for drugs or violence,” reports one mediator. “Cases are more dangerous,” concludes another who sees a “significant increase in the risk level for parents, children and court personnel.”

Pervasive community violence is a fact of life and is reflected in today’s family court calendar. One family court investigator estimated that he was seeing 10 cases per month involving teenage gang fathers and mothers or second generation gang members.

Standards of Practice for mediators dictate that mediation be practiced in a physically safe and nonthreatening environment. In light of the pervasiveness of violence described above, court personnel report “more focus on the safety of children and families” as well as increased attention to safety and security in court environments overall.

“Parenting with complicated issues” Court professionals observed that more custody and visitation plans must accommodate children with extremely problematic histories. By 1993, one custody case in three had been investigated by Child Protective Services. “There seems to be more serious allegations ... such as sexual molestation, inappropriate exposure to sexual behavior,” said one respondent, who summarized the concerns of many. Commenting on the scope of the problem, another remarked, “I sometimes feel like I’m back at Child Protective Services, doing assessments of risk, rather than mediation.”

Another theme was that “increased attention must be paid to juvenile drug and alcohol problems.” Some observed “an increase of clients from juvenile dependency court (after termination of jurisdiction).”

“The realization that children can be manipulated, and how their statements must be received in context” Today’s family law case commands a sophisticated ability to work with children who may have often been caught in the middle of the family conflict, neglected, or victims of abuse. How is the child’s perspective to be factored into the case? Court professionals point to the complexities of interviews with children, the awareness of parental alienation, and the advent of attorneys for the child.

“Clients are having a harder time financially.” Nearly half (47 percent) of all mediation clients are either unemployed or below the poverty line. Court professionals cite a number of ways in which the financial hardships of one or more parties make child custody cases more difficult to resolve. Economic circumstances often contribute directly to family functioning, affecting parents’ ability to provide for their children’s subsistence or basic needs for housing or transportation.

According to court professionals, parties also have fewer resources to devote to child custody decision-making. Many cannot afford legal representation. It is so difficult for some to take time off work to come to court that “longer sessions and more sessions are often needed, but not feasible.” Resources to finance custody evaluations are scarce. Supervised visitation is often financially prohibitive.

3. Unprecedented constraints in court resources

Courts are finding it difficult to keep pace with the growing demand for family court services. “In 1988 our county had only one court responsible for Family Law and Family Court Services had ten mediators,” recalled one respondent, adding, “Now in 1996, it has four courts responsible for Family Law and another court will open in July 1997. Unfortunately, Family Court Services still has ten mediators.” Another facet of the current crisis is the limited number of facilities. In some places, court space filled to capacity imposes another constraint on the number of clients that can be served.

An uncoordinated system of state and county funding has resulted in what Chief Justice Ronald M. George deems “insufficient, inconsistent, and uncertain funding for our courts.” State contributions have declined even as courts face heightened competition for scarce county funds. Responses to this survey resonate with the Chief Justice’s concern that “a justice system that must focus *not* on what is deserved and required by the people we serve, but simply on keeping its doors open day-to-day, cannot effectively perform its functions.”⁶

“Will we be funded? Contracted out?”

At all levels of the court, from administrative to line staff, there is anxiety about the fate of programs and positions. Some described ongoing stress over “a sense of instability in the court system” spurred by unrelenting threats to the financial viability of programs. “Staff morale is greatly diminished,” conceded one respondent.

“More pressure, less pay!”

In an effort to streamline, courts are cutting corners wherever they can. Court professionals report that they have fewer support staff than ever before. Positions have been cut or frozen. New responsibilities (e.g., coordinating groups, educating interns) have been added to already heavy work loads “that include conducting sessions, investigations, assessments and recommendations, filing detailed reports and giving testimony.” One mediator summed it up as, “fewer mediators doing more work.” For most, court fiscal constraints brought lower compensation, the absence of cost-of-living increases and, what one respondent termed, “no acknowledgment of work through pay raises.”

The pro per crisis

⁶ Hon. Ronald M. George, *State of the Judiciary Address to a Joint Session of the California Legislature*. Sacramento, CA, Jan. 14, 1997.

Increasing numbers of families appear in mediation with at least one client in pro per (50 percent in 1991; 55 percent in 1993). “More and more clients are entering the system without a basic understanding of how it works,” concluded one counselor. Among the many ramifications of this trend is the need for courts to take up the basic functions of orientation to court services and procedures. Family court services in California courts provided nearly 5,700 group orientation and parent education sessions in 1996 alone.

“Children at the bottom of the ladder”

Even as resources dwindle, respondents to this survey exhorted the courts to assign higher priority to services for children and families. Among other things, they saw this as a means of counteracting powerful social forces that already put future generations at risk: “The current culture via media and Hollywood and sports ‘models’ encourages drugs, irresponsible sex, teen pregnancies and general denial of personal responsibility.” Who will look after the best interests of the child?

Changing Perspectives: “How We Think About These Cases”

Social attitudes and professional perspectives on family court issues exert a profound influence on the delivery of family court services. Court professionals report that highly charged political debates about parental rights and responsibilities subject family court services to “more scrutiny by special interest groups.” Strong advocacy efforts on behalf of both mothers and fathers have sought legislative changes in child-custody standards as well as the operations of the family courts. Caught in this crossfire, family court services providers have been roundly criticized by advocates on both sides as biased in favor of one parent or the other; in addition, service providers have been inaccurately characterized as underqualified or poorly trained. Widespread frustration with such allegations came through candidly in a comment from one court professional who wrote, “Services are not run by best interest of families, but by politics in Sacramento.”

At least equally influential, according to respondents, are the insights that the profession has gained from a decade and a half of delivering family court services. Recognizing that there is no consensus on many of these issues, respondents to the survey reflected on several prevailing themes that have dominated the debate about how best to meet the needs of children and their families.

Wider acceptance of appropriate dispute resolution

A major ideological shift cited by court professionals is the move away from exclusive adherence to an adversarial model to consideration of a wider range of appropriate dispute resolution methods. At the same time courts are introducing “non-adversarial proceedings,” court professionals note (1) mounting skepticism about “the suitability of the adversarial system for disputes involving children” and (2) growing recognition of the “damaging effects of traditional litigation on children and families.” In fact, this is a dominant theme of *Family Court 2000*, the Judicial Council Family Law Subcommittee’s proposal for renovating the state’s family court system. The document advocates approaches that avoid the exacerbation of family tensions as well as exposure of children to unnecessarily protracted conflict.

Recognition of diversity

Courts are coming to terms with increasing diversity among clients involved in family disputes. There is no one “typical” case. Certainly, ethnic diversity compels courts to be aware of cultural variations in notions about parental rights and responsibilities. The need to better serve non-English speakers was also underscored by many court professionals.

The heterogeneity of family court clients is not limited to ethnic diversity. In addition, court professionals point to the variations across cases in the kinds of relationships between parents. “Parents who are barely acquainted with each other” was how one mediator described the growing number of child-custody cases linked to paternity establishment. By 1993, never-married parents accounted for nearly one-quarter (22 percent) of the mediation caseload. Many of these parents had shared a household; but others had not established a relationship with each other or with their children.

“Family definitions have changed”

For many children, the adults responsible for their well-being are outside the confines of the nuclear family. “Family definitions have changed to increasingly include extended relatives, multiple partners of parents, and stepchildren.” Access and custody considerations incorporate grandparents, stepparents and other kin. “There is an increase in the number of grandparents raising grandchildren,” noted one mediator, pointing to parental incapacitation and substance abuse. “We are seeing a dramatic increase in guardianship filings and related evaluation.”

Changing expectations for fathers and mothers

“Fathers are playing a more significant role in the parenting of their children,” observed survey respondents. One mediator cited the “higher expectations regarding fathers participating and mothers learning to share, and to separate as appropriate from children.” Another mediator noted an “increase in parents requesting ‘50/50’ custody,” while his colleague added that there are heightened expectations for mothers to assume more financial responsibility for children.

“What makes sense for the child?”

Professionals on the front lines return to this question with each new case. Policy changes introduce new considerations. Service adaptations to family violence, “move-away” issues, and child-support guidelines were seen as most dramatically “shaping what we do and how we think about it.”

Providing services to families in which violence is an issue

“The increase in domestic violence allegations has changed our way of working,” one counselor explained. Nearly half (48 percent) of all child custody mediation clients reported that a domestic violence restraining order is in place in their case. Since the inception of mandatory mediation, numerous adaptations to the service have been made in an attempt to ensure a safe and just disposition for children in families where violence has taken place. Counselors pointed out “more awareness of domestic violence” in the courts and greater sensitivity to the dangers and potential lethality in some parental relationships. Statewide Protocols for Domestic Violence Cases, recently developed by a statewide task force of court professionals, are under review at this writing.

Another development cited by court professionals is a pivotal “shift away from exclusive focus on victims” to acknowledging the batterer’s “responsibility regarding their own anger” and addressing the pernicious effects of violence on the children who witness it.

“The move-away pendulum”

Among the most intractable cases facing family court clients over the past decade are those involving parents who wish to relocate. “There is a lack of consensus about what kids need in these circumstances,” reported one administrator. “These are the hardest cases of all. Generally speaking, very young children may stand to effectively lose one parent if the move takes place.”

Helping parents to sort out competing considerations of access, child well-being and detriment, new relationships, and competing financial opportunities is difficult enough. But a complex sequence of appellate decisions each shifted attention to unique nuances of the problem, creating what one court professional dubbed “the move-away pendulum.” The *Burgess* decision in 1996 has intensified discussion between the bench and practitioners as to practical strategies for serving the best interest of the child. ⁷Reflecting on the diversity of public opinion on move-away cases, one court professional concluded, “Culturally, I don’t think we have settled on what needs to happen” in these cases.

Bargaining in the shadow of child-support guidelines

Despite the fact that family court mediation is restricted to custody and visitation matters, mediators report that “child support issues seem central for many cases.” Under California child support guidelines, the amount of the order is adjusted for the proportion of time that the child spends with each parent. For mediation clients, particularly the many living at or near the poverty level, the financial consequences of custody agreements take on powerful significance. Mediators reported a pervasive sense that “many parents seem more aware of what they want regarding a family share plan, custody and visitation for their minor children. Many parents are (or seem to be) financially driven for their plan.”

“We Have Changed Our Way of Working”

⁷ *In re Marriage of Burgess* (1996) 13 Cal.4th 35.

Maintaining quality service in the face of these challenges was the strongest imperative articulated by court professionals responding to this survey. Across the board, respondents voiced concerns about the pernicious implications of “more cases and much less time to adequately serve the clients.” One court professional spoke of “the unrealistic expectations” for mediation. An administrator added, “We have added issues, but not resources.”

In today's court, respondents reported, old ways of doing things are re-examined with an “utilitarian focus.” It is an era of cost consciousness where results matter. Whereas some respondents applauded this as “a greater emphasis on accountability” and say that their work benefits because “courts are better organized, with greater technological support for calendaring, access to records, and preparation of reports,” others say they have not experienced improvements in operations. For these latter respondents, the only change is that “deadlines exist; emphasis on closure exists, and [there is] more focus on numbers” without the infrastructure to support these goals.

A different complement of services

In the face of financial crisis, some courts have taken the controversial step of streamlining services. Some have cut back on the amount of time devoted to mediation before the case moves on to other court dispute resolution procedures such as assessment, settlement conferences, or judicial determination. Respondents worry. With more mediation, could parental consensus have been achieved in these cases? Professionals in courts that have continued full-scale mediation efforts reported that they retain only a very limited capacity for full scale evaluation. In these courts, the combination of “increased seriousness in allegations with decreased time to process reports” is driving comprehensive evaluations out of the courts.

Another trend in service development addresses the court's need for immediate information about a time-sensitive or emergency situation affecting access to the child. For example, there may be an urgent need to quickly assess the risk to the child of remaining in, or transferring to, the care of a particular parent. The labels for these services (e.g., emergency screenings, early resolutions, brief assessments, fast-tracks) differ from court to court, and the specific service model also varies; but what they share in common is gathering information pinpointed at a time-sensitive or emergency situation affecting access to the child. Depending on the service model it has adopted, a particular court may or may not follow up with a more thorough evaluation or investigation.

Even as comprehensive evaluation is waning in some courts, professionals reported that the bench is demanding focused investigation in a growing number of cases. When multiple dispute resolution attempts have failed to achieve lasting results, or when there are questions bearing on the best interest of the child or parental competence, the traditional facilitation role of the mediator must be supplemented with the fact-gathering acumen of the investigator. A mediator described the trend this way: “One must no longer hide the fact that they were once a probation officer.”

Court professionals agree that the pressure to “do the best for less” forces a rethinking of traditional ways of doing things. For example, despite firmly entrenched professional debates about the relative merits of “recommending” versus “non-recommending” models of mediation, hybrids of the

two models have developed in response to the circumstances of contemporary courts. In 33 of California's superior courts, mediators may make recommendations to the bench in the event that the parents reach impasse; 25 superior courts follow a "non-recommending" model. Responses to the survey pointed to the pragmatic amalgamation of the two models in some courts, implementing two separate but sequential procedures. Initial mediation services are devoted exclusively to self-determination, but if parties remain at an impasse after a set number of sessions, the case is referred on to a service involving investigation and/or evaluation.

Innovative programs have been developed, designed to improve the capabilities of courts to address a new constellation of issues presented in today's cases. Citing a "huge increase in knowledge, skill, and awareness of what children and families need," respondents pointed to new capabilities, such as emergency screenings, group mediation, special masters, parent education programs, attorneys for children, and assignment of one judge/commissioner for the life of the case.

The safety of children and families has been the focal point of many new initiatives, some prompted by Judicial Council activities, others the product of grass-roots efforts. Concerted effort has been devoted to education and training as courts develop domestic violence protocols and family courts join local teams to form a coordinated community response to family violence. Other services, such as parent education and child-custody counseling, may include modules specifically devoted to risk management and prevention.

"Coordinated services"

Respondents see the coordination of public services as a key step in more effectively serving families. They underscored limitations in the judicial system's capacity to adequately meet the needs of "gray-area" cases that no longer qualify for other public services. "Some of the families seen at Family Court Services, in my opinion, really should be active in Child Protective Services," observed one court professional, adding, "but somehow [the families] don't meet the criteria for Child Protective Services." Gray-area cases were particularly worrisome to respondents who recognized the court's "limited opportunity for follow-up" in cases that would have "serious repercussions if orders are not followed through."

Respondents also saw interagency coordination as a strategy for effective case management. "Juvenile court, Department of Social Services and Child Protective Services are repeating more and more cases for intervention by them and referring and expecting Family Court and Family Court Services to intervene." A case-management approach that prevents cases from "falling through the cracks" was a favored alternative.

Effective use of community resources

The dearth of resources to help families in trouble was a consistent theme in responses to the survey. Diminishing community resources make the job more difficult. However, some court professionals recognized a stronger spirit of collaboration between the courts and community service providers, with better awareness of and access to what is available.

“People who get it right and do it right despite the times and troubles they face.”

Despite the level of difficulty associated with a substantial proportion of cases they see, court professionals did not fail to acknowledge “the startling number of people who get it right and do it right despite the times and troubles they face.” Concluded another respondent, “Working with families over the last 15+ years has given me a keen appreciation of the effects of poverty, poor parenting skills, racism, drug/alcohol abuse, substandard housing, etc.” Despite the “grim social context for children,” court professionals expressed admiration for the many parents they see, who, despite family crisis and limited resources, manage to hold their children’s best interests in the forefront.” This, indeed, is the foundation to work from and, what one court professional aptly termed, “the most positive trend prevailing.”

Conclusion

The 1996 Survey of Family Court Services Professionals drew responses from direct service providers across California. The results of the survey illustrated not only a wealth of experience but a strong collective dedication to meeting the needs of children and families who are served by the family courts. Respondents comments graphically illustrate a crisis in the courts’ ability to serve families, one brought about by the dynamic interplay of increasing caseloads, case difficulty, and insufficient funding. According to respondents, the profession of family court services has launched numerous countervailing efforts: adoption of standards, coordinated initiatives to exchange information and examine alternatives, as well as substantial innovation. Meanwhile, courts have changed the profile of services to families in a concerted attempt to “do more with less.” On balance, however, court professionals could not see any way around the fundamental deficiency in funding. Their message was clear: There is an imperative need for adequate resources to meet the pressing demands of today’s family court calendar.