


NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JUVENILE AND FAMILY COURT JUDGES

# THE MODEL COURT EFFECT

Proven Strategies in Systems' Change





**“Model Court has given us a vehicle to create a team where each member has committed to creating a joint vision on how our system can best serve at-risk children and families in our jurisdiction.”**

**Judge Michael Nash, Los Angeles Model Court**

**“Model Court...expresses the collective belief among all participants in the court system that improvements are possible and that everyone will work to ensure that best practices are instituted so that clients will be better served.”**

**Judge Leonard Edwards (Retired)  
San Jose Model Court**

**“Being a Model Court takes best practices off the pages of books and breathes life into them.”**

**Judge Louis Trosch, Jr.  
Charlotte Model Court**

## **FEWER CHILDREN IN CARE**

**Model Courts can reduce the numbers of children in foster care.** Three of the largest jurisdictions in the nation have reduced the number of children in care by 50% since becoming Model Courts.

### **Cook County Juvenile Court, Child Protection Division (Chicago Model Court)**

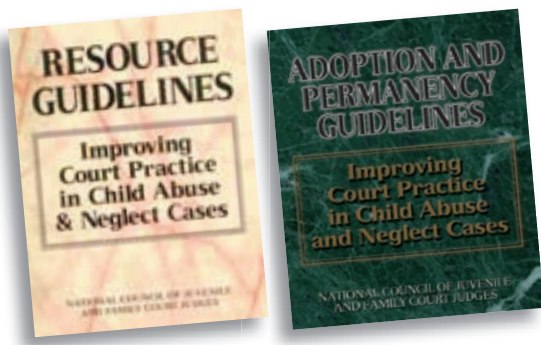
1998 – 31,534 children in out-of-home placement  
2007 – Less than 8,000 children in out-of-home care

### **Los Angeles County Juvenile Court (Los Angeles Model Court)**

1998 – 47,420 children under court jurisdiction  
2009 – 24,768 children under court jurisdiction

### **New York City Family Court (New York City Model Court)**

1998 – 40,909 children in out-of-home placement  
2007 – 17,005 children in foster care



“Model Courts use the *RESOURCE GUIDELINES* as a basis for changing court process, with a focus not just on innovative projects, but on building a strong court foundation upon which projects unique to each jurisdiction can be developed.”

Judge Deborah Schumacher, Reno Model Court

## MODEL COURTS

Alexandria, Virginia  
 Austin, Texas  
 Baltimore City, Maryland  
 Charlotte, North Carolina  
 Chicago, Illinois  
 Cleveland, Ohio  
 Concord, New Hampshire  
 Dallas, Georgia  
 Des Moines, Iowa  
 El Paso, Texas  
 Hattiesburg, Mississippi  
 Honolulu, Hawai'i  
 Howell, Michigan  
 Indianapolis, Indiana  
 La Plata, Maryland  
 Lake Charles, Louisiana  
 Las Vegas, Nevada  
 Los Angeles, California  
 Louisville, Kentucky  
 Miami, Florida  
 Nashville, Tennessee  
 Newark, New Jersey  
 New Orleans, Louisiana  
 New York City, New York  
 Omaha, Nebraska  
 Portland, Oregon  
 San Jose, California  
 Seattle, Washington  
 Toledo, Ohio  
 Washington, D.C.

## Senior Model Courts

Cincinnati, Ohio  
 Reno, Nevada  
 Salt Lake City, Utah  
 Tucson, Arizona

## Statewide Model Courts

Colorado  
 New York

## IMPROVING PRACTICE / RESOURCE GUIDELINES

### Improving court practice improves outcomes for children and families.

Model Courts strive to implement all the best practice recommendations of the *RESOURCE GUIDELINES*<sup>1</sup> and *ADOPTION AND PERMANENCY GUIDELINES*<sup>2</sup> to improve the safety, due process, permanency, timeliness, and well-being of children and families.

### INCREASED ADOPTIONS

- In 2007, the Baltimore City Model Court had a total of 254 new adoption petitions filed with 235 completed adoptions, for a clearance rate of 93%.
- Using the NCJFCJ'S *ADOPTION AND PERMANENCY GUIDELINES*, the Buffalo Model Court revised its adoption processing procedure and adoption finalizations increased by 20% (152 to 185) in 2006.
- The Newark Model Court established the Post-Termination Project to achieve timely permanency for children whose parental rights were terminated. As of 2007, the project had reviewed 1,969 cases and of those cases, 1,145 children were adopted.

### ADOPTION SATURDAY

- In Los Angeles, the leadership of the Model Court Lead Judge and team achieved significant improvements in timely permanency for children through the Adoption Saturday program, which has since become a national model. As of December 2008, 7,700 adoptions have been finalized in the Los Angeles Model Court since implementing Adoption Saturdays.

### TIMELY HEARINGS

- According to Oregon Judicial Department statistics, the Portland Model Court permanency hearings are compliant with timelines between 95% and 97% of the time.

### REDUCED COSTS

- Between 1996 and 1999, the Tucson Model Court implemented improved practices utilizing the *RESOURCE GUIDELINES*, reducing the length of time a child remained under the jurisdiction of the court by 50%, and reducing the time children remained in out-of-home care from 400 days to 178 days, for an estimated savings of \$5 million.

### INCREASED REPRESENTATION

- After becoming a Model Court, the El Paso Model Court reduced the time it took for all parties to be appointed counsel (7 days vs. 41 days for the mother, 10 days vs. 42 days for the father, and 3 days compared to 15 days for the child).





The NCJFCJ publications, *Technical Assistance Brief: Asking The Right Questions II: Judicial Checklists to Meet the Educational Needs of Children And Youth in Foster Care*, and the *Technical Assistance Bulletin: Building a Better Collaboration: Facilitating Change in the Court and Child Welfare System*, were developed in response to identified informational needs of the Model Courts.

**“The Model Court project has given me the opportunity to come together with a group of committed and dedicated people to share frustration and to learn. It provides a source of support and numerous resources that can assist in problem-solving and developing new ideas and programs.”**

**Judge Ernestine Gray  
New Orleans Model Court**

## EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

**Strong and stable education can determine the success of foster children.**

Model Courts strongly focus on the educational needs of foster children.

- The Des Moines Model Court created an Education Advocate Program. The court worked with PACE (Orchard Place’s Porter Avenue Center for Education) which offered space and clerical help for tutoring services.
- In September 2007, the Washington D.C. Model Court judicial officers, attorneys and social workers were trained on the use of the NCJFCJ Technical Assistance Brief, *Asking the Right Questions: A Judicial Checklist to Ensure that the Educational Needs of Children and Youth in Foster Care are Being Addressed*. By November 2007, four family court judges had implemented regular use of the education checklist in their courtrooms.
- The Tucson Model Court began efforts to enhance educational outcomes for children in 2003 by identifying areas in need of improvement, providing training on educational advocacy, and increasing collaboration efforts between child protective services, probation, and the schools. A follow-up assessment in 2006 revealed that the educational needs of the child were routinely addressed in the preliminary hearing in 92% of cases. Overall, 82% of cases reviewed had seen progress or resolution of educational issues by the permanency hearing stage.

## COLLABORATION

**Eliminating barriers between systems and agencies works for children and families.** The child welfare agency, attorneys, CASA, and others are all at the table as part of the Model Court team, collaboratively improving outcomes for children and families.

- The Tucson Model Court Permanency Subcommittee, formed in 2005 with members from the court, CPS, and the Foster Care Review Board (FCRB), retrieved information in their respective databases regarding children in care longer than two years. A workgroup developed a court hearing called the Permanency Collaborative Review (PCRVR) to specifically improve the status of children in care two years or more. As of 2007, there was a 33% decrease in children growing up in foster care from a decade earlier.
- The San Jose Model Court’s partnership with FIRST 5 resulted in a 25% reduction in child abuse and neglect petitions filed from 2006-2008. FIRST 5 Santa Clara County was formed when voters approved Proposition 10 in November 1998 to focus on early childhood development.

**“Nothing has been more beneficial in maintaining an unwavering focus and effectively pursuing permanency and the best interest of children in the dependency system than the serious commitment to implement Model Court best practice initiatives.”**  
Judge Oscar Gabaldon, Jr., El Paso Model Court

## FRONT-LOADING OF SERVICES

**Getting services to children and families as soon as possible helps them exit the system sooner.** Model Courts work to streamline the process.

- The Baltimore City Model Court reduced the number of Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) cases not disposed of within the statutory 180 days by introducing parent locator and parent identification forms at every hearing. Parents were found earlier and engaged in the court process sooner, resulting in postponements being reduced by 34% in 2007 compared to fiscal year 2006. The total number of TPR cases in June 2007, was 367. Sixty percent (60%) of those cases were within the statutory 180-day timeframe.
- Since becoming a Model Court in 1996, the Chicago Model Court has reduced the number of children in foster care by almost 75% by utilizing the best practice recommendations for front-loading services contained within the *RESOURCE GUIDELINES*.
- The Honolulu Model Court created the Ho’olokahi Program to recruit volunteer parent facilitators to meet with parents at the very first court hearing. In the 2004-2005 fiscal year, there were 973 new CPS petitions filed, of which 675 were facilitated by parent facilitator volunteers saving court costs and hearing time.
- The Portland Model Court added an expanded second shelter care hearing in 1998 held one to two weeks following the initial hearing. Evaluation results conducted in 2001 indicated there was an increase in judicial continuity (61% had the same judge compared to 27% pre-implementation).
- The El Paso Model Court reduced the average number of days from removal to review hearing from 84 days to 46 days. Removal to permanency hearing was reduced from 519 to 301 days, at which point the permanency plan was already established and the hearing was used to formally adopt the plan.





## ALTERNATIVE DISPUTE RESOLUTION AND MEDIATION

**Best practice decision-making programs have successfully enhanced outcomes for families.** Model Courts have implemented mediation, family group conferencing, and other programs.

- **The Charlotte Model Court** implemented a grant-funded pilot mediation project in 2001. The financial savings for Mecklenburg County was \$88,340 per year in case processing costs, and \$269,220 per year in foster care costs. Mediated cases more frequently resulted in permanent placements at one-year review; children returned home sooner; spent less time in agency custody (14 months compared to 20 months); and had higher rates of reunification than did comparison cases.
- In May 2006, the **Reno Model Court** instituted its Juvenile Dependency Mediation Program. Within a year of program implementation, 58 cases were mediated with 46 (or 79.3%) resolved.
- Through the utilization of mediation programs in the **Des Moines Model Court**, the number of contested removal hearings was reduced by more than 50%.
- The **Washington D.C. Model Court** implemented a Family Court Child Mediation Program in 2002. Comparisons between mediated and non-mediated cases revealed that children in the mediated group experienced significantly less repeated maltreatment (7%) compared to the non-mediated comparison group (21%). Results also indicated that mediated cases reached adjudication faster (49 vs. 86 days), disposition (69 vs. 132 days), and permanency quicker (210 days compared to 258) than the non-mediated group.
- The **San Jose Model Court** implemented Family Group Conferencing (FGC) in 1996 and found that FGC was associated with several positive permanency outcomes. Nearly 37% of the children in the FGC group left foster care within one year, compared to 32% of the comparison group. Further, 97% of those in the FGC program had stable placements, compared to 84% of children in the comparison group. The FGC group also had a 4.5% less likelihood of recurrence of maltreatment.
- The **Miami Model Court's** Family Group Decision Making program resulted in 92% of the children finding stable placements.
- The 'Ohana Conferencing Program established in the **Honolulu Model Court**, resulted in no new reports of harm within one year of the conference, and 62% of the families involved no longer required court intervention.





**“The Lead Judge has acted as a convener to bring a variety of court participants together to commit to improved court practice. The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, with the Permanency Planning for Children Department, has provided training, technical assistance, resources, guidance, and support to identify and implement best practices.”**

**Judge Douglas Johnson  
Omaha Model Court**

The purpose of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges’ (NCJFCJ) Victims Act Model Courts Project is to improve court practice in child abuse and neglect cases and improve outcomes for children and families. The Victims Act Model Courts utilize best practices outlined in the NCJFCJ groundbreaking publications, *RESOURCE GUIDELINES: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse & Neglect Cases* and the *ADOPTION AND PERMANENCY GUIDELINES* to inform and improve court practice across the nation.

For more information on the Victims Act Model Courts Project, please contact Nancy B. Miller, Director, Permanency Planning for Children Department of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges at (775) 327-5300.

For more information on publications referenced within this document please visit the NCJFCJ website, Child Abuse and Neglect section at: [www.ncjfcj.org](http://www.ncjfcj.org).

<sup>1</sup>*RESOURCE GUIDELINES: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse & Neglect Cases* (1995). National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, Reno, Nevada.

<sup>2</sup>*ADOPTION AND PERMANENCY GUIDELINES: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse and Neglect Cases* (2000). National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, Reno, Nevada.



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*est. 1937*

University of Nevada, Reno  
Permanency Planning for Children Department  
P.O. Box 8970  
Reno, Nevada 89507  
775.327.5300  
[www.ncjfcj.org](http://www.ncjfcj.org)