

2010



PLAN FOR THE FUTURE OF THE NEW YORK CITY FAMILY COURT

NEW YORK STATE UNIFIED COURT SYSTEM

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PREFACE

THE NEW YORK CITY FAMILY COURT IS THE FACE OF JUSTICE FOR MANY CITIZENS OF OUR STATE. In 2008 alone, 54 judges, 41 court attorney referees and 39 magistrates presided over a quarter million petitions.¹ Improving the way the justice system responds to the many legal and social service needs of families and children is an enormous challenge. This strategic plan addresses the resources and support needed to meet the responsibilities and ever-expanding caseloads of the family court. The Plan represents a milestone in the long history of an under-resourced court by forging a collaboration among judicial and non-judicial personnel,² agencies and attorneys who work in the court and the community the court serves. The goal is to ensure the highest standard of justice for each and every litigant who enters the courthouse.

Modernization of the family court will be accomplished by a comprehensive assessment and analysis of court resources; streamlined and efficient case filing and management procedures; new and enhanced educational opportunities for judicial and non-judicial personnel; aggressive community outreach and education; implementation of new and upgraded technology features; improved records management and access; facility upgrades; and the implementation of a broad range of innovative pilot programs across the city.

To spearhead this systemic reform, a new team has been appointed to lead the New York City Family Court. The new Administrative Judge and Chief Clerk have begun an examination of the current operational and procedural practices of the court. Their goal is to improve efficiency and oversight in a manner that supports the needs of the court and creates an environment that continues to foster public trust and confidence from the point of a litigant's entry into the court through disposition and linkage to services.

The Administrative Judge has established various Advisory Committees to review existing family court operations and provide recommendations for systemic change.

¹The family court also employs 14 retired judges on a part-time basis as judicial hearing officers (JHO) to assist with adoptions and other matters.

²Non-judicial personnel includes court attorneys, support magistrates, court attorney referees, court clerks, court analysts, court assistants, court interpreters and court officers.

I. PETITION PROCESSING

A step-by-step review is underway to examine the process facing family court litigants from the point of entry into the court building to the resolution of their case. The goal is to redesign this process to ensure that litigants receive information and support from the moment they walk through the doors of the courthouse until they leave with an order in hand. This analysis will take into account the time that a litigant waits at every stage and the information the litigant receives to assist in the proceeding.

Petitions are currently processed in two ways depending on who is doing the filing. Petitions filed by individual litigants, the great majority of whom are unrepresented, include Custody/Visitation, Family Offense and Support petitions. Petitions filed by agencies include Child Protective, Juvenile Delinquency/Persons In Need of Supervision and other Support petitions.

Petitions filed by unrepresented litigants. The family court processes tens of thousands of petitions each year filed by unrepresented litigants. In New York City, a clerk helps with the preparation of these petitions. In order to minimize the amount of time that a litigant waits to file a petition, the court must make several changes to the petition processing unit. The court will develop a more efficient queuing system, continue to expand self-help computer programs that create petitions and provide clear information to litigants regarding the amount of time that they can expect to spend in the courthouse.

Currently, there are computer kiosks available to help an unrepresented litigant prepare three types of petitions: paternity, support modification and visitation. Soon, the paternity and support modification petitions, with appropriate instructions, will be available on the court Internet website where they can be accessed from a person's home or public library. Ultimately, these computer-based programs will be expanded to include all petitions filed by unrepresented litigants and will be available in Spanish.

The computer kiosks will be part of a Help Center. All counties within New York City will be equipped with such an office which, in addition to providing the tools (kiosks), also provides guidance and information to litigants for all types of cases heard in the family court. At a minimum, this information will include an explanation of the process, the types of petitions available for filing, the allegations needed to form the basis for these petitions and answers to questions about obtaining and serving court orders.

The petition processing unit will be designed in a way that meets the needs of the unrepresented litigants that it serves. To the extent possible, the court's intake part will be located near the petition processing unit so that litigants will have immediate access to an adjudicator.

Petitions filed by presentment agencies.³ The family court has recently implemented electronic filing of support and abuse/neglect petitions. Electronic filing of petitions saves data entry time, reduces data entry error and speeds up the time from filing to the initial hearing. It also enhances the electronic case file by making a digitally signed petition available for viewing by the court, reducing reliance on the paper file and speeding file retrieval. Litigants will benefit by having attorneys assigned to their cases earlier than with paper filings, allowing attorneys to spend more time with their clients prior to the initial appearance. The technology for these electronic filings, provided by the New York City Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications, will also be suited to the electronic filing of delinquency petitions, a critical step in reaching the goal of creating a paperless court.

Petition and waiting room facilities. Television monitors will be available in courthouse waiting rooms to provide information on the petition filing process and general information about the family court. To the extent possible, petition rooms will be located on the first floor of the family court buildings and be open for business at 8:00 A.M. This will ensure that cases that require judicial or referee intervention are ready to be heard at the earliest possible time.

II. CASE AND COURTROOM MANAGEMENT

An analysis of the number of cases filed in New York City Family Court and the number of judges assigned to preside over these cases indicates that any plan for reform requires a system of support that allows judges to focus on their judicial responsibilities and delegates clerical functions to non-judicial support staff. In addition, functions which are appropriately within the power and authority of court attorneys and court attorney referees should be assigned to them. Providing additional resources and implementing efficiency measures where needed will benefit the court in several ways and improve the practice in all specialties.

Times Certain. Time-certain calendaring is a critical piece in effective calendar management. In addition to a paucity of judicial resources in the family court, there is an insufficient number of attorneys to handle the caseload. Accordingly, uniform adherence to beginning and ending times will permit all parties to manage their schedules more effectively. Litigants will gain a better sense of certainty as to when their cases will be heard and spend less time waiting in court.

³In New York City, abuse/neglect petitions are presented by NYC Children's Services (formerly the Administration for Children's Services) and juvenile delinquency petitions are presented by the Office of the Corporation Counsel.

Case Conferencing. The establishment of case conferences in all cases will ensure that court appearances are meaningful; that parties are prepared to proceed with their cases in a timely manner; and that adjournments are fewer and for shorter periods of time.

Alternative Dispute Resolution. The use of alternative dispute resolution in certain cases is a valuable tool which can reduce burgeoning judicial caseloads. Research has shown that in a majority of cases, alternative dispute resolution results in agreements that satisfy the litigants. This, in turn, leads to greater compliance with court orders and fewer supplemental filings.

In appropriate cases, parties can work with neutral mediators to resolve differences. The goal is to increase the use of alternative dispute resolution at the earliest possible stage in the proceedings. Too often, alternative dispute resolution is overlooked as a viable option. As a first step toward accomplishing this goal, after an initial screening to ensure that designated cases, such as those involving allegations of domestic violence, are flagged for judicial intervention, appropriate matters will be made returnable in the first instance before a mediator for possible resolution.

Use of Social Workers and Other Mental Health Professionals. Recognizing that many cases come before the court because of unmet social service and mental health needs of a family, the court employs several social workers and mental health professionals to assist in the proper identification of services and to provide referrals to appropriate agencies. These professionals are available for consultation with judges and have been trained to participate in or conduct conferences with litigants. In Kings County, where a custody and visitation pilot (see section III, *infra*, Custody and Visitation Cases) has two mental health professionals on staff, cases have moved expeditiously and families have been linked to appropriate services. The use of similar professionals should be expanded citywide.

Case Coordinators. These valuable employees are an integral part of the “courtroom team” that provides day-to-day support to the presiding judge. This team is generally comprised of the court attorney, the court attorney referee, the court clerk, the court officers and the case coordinator. Over time, the case coordinators were assigned other tasks that removed them from the courtrooms and their intended functions. Currently, steps are underway to return the case coordinators to the courtrooms. The goal of this reassignment is to assist the judge with scheduling adjournments, determining the status of cases in advance of the court date, ensuring that necessary reports are filed in a timely fashion, confirming the availability of the attorneys and other necessary parties to the litigation and providing general support to the judge. By handling these matters in advance, valuable court time can be spent on substantive, not ministerial matters.

The long-term plan is to expand the use of case coordinators to each of the specialties practiced in the court. This assignment will permit the court to formulate a comprehensive plan to identify and coordinate case processing and information sharing in situations where children have multiple cases involving different specialties. Many young people who experience neglect and/or abuse in their homes, enter and remain involved in the child welfare system, with judicial oversight. Some of these young people “cross over” into the juvenile justice system while still in foster care and, as a result, become involved in different proceedings. Case coordinators can assist in the coordination of information relating to educational, medical, mental health and psychiatric issues and the establishment of comprehensive plans to ensure positive and appropriate permanent placement for youth.

Continuous Trials. One of the intended results of this shifting of resources to judges is to give them more time to spend on substantive matters and to conduct trials in a continuous manner. The advantage of holding trials on consecutive days is obvious. Not only are the facts and issues at the forefront of the minds of the judges and attorneys, but the sense of finality for the litigants is invaluable. Each county will develop a local plan to promote the implementation of continuous trials.

Expanded Use of Video Conferences. Currently, video-conferencing equipment is available to facilitate the appearance of certain incarcerated litigants. In addition to the increased use of video conferencing for incarcerated litigants, the court will explore other uses for this technology. For example, the court will pilot the use of video appearances with agency workers in the Child Protective parts. This pilot will permit the workers to remain in their offices and appear in a more timely and efficient manner. A secure location will also be available for agency attorneys to confer by video with caseworkers and interview litigants in advance of court appearances. These secure locations will also be available to attorneys who have incarcerated clients appearing by video. If successful, the pilot will be replicated citywide.

III. CASE PROCESSING BY SPECIALTY

Custody and Visitation Cases. Traditionally, custody and visitation (CV) cases have been assigned to judges on a rotational basis with the first appearance weeks after filing. Many judges carry a thousand or more CV cases. Settlement is attempted and, if unsuccessful, the case is scheduled for trial. Investigation and Reports (I & R) and Court Ordered Investigations (COI) are ordered, and little occurs for the first few months of the case. The most hotly contested cases can take years to resolve.

The Kings County Family Court has introduced a new streamlined process for adjudicating CV cases. In Kings County, most new cases, with a few limited

exceptions,⁴ are heard by a court attorney referee intensively for 10 weeks with the goal of settling the case. Cases not resolved at the end of this period are sent to a judge for trial.

As part of the Kings County model, two mental health professionals are assigned to these referee parts. Based upon their training and expertise, they are able to determine at the outset the level of conflict and whether a case should be heard by the referee or a judge or referred to a mediator for alternative dispute resolution. The mental health professionals determine whether services are needed and, if so, immediate referrals are made. In addition to their initial intake screening, these professionals often schedule follow-up conferences with litigants during which the conflicts are addressed at length and the importance of the needs of the children are stressed.

Early results have shown that the vast majority of CV cases are appropriate for referral to the court attorney referee and are disposed of without the need for a trial or, for that matter, judicial intervention.

This model should be considered for replication on a pilot basis in other counties. However, recognizing the difference in caseloads, available resources and community needs in other counties, replication should proceed carefully and involve the agencies and attorneys who work in the court, the presiding judges and the non-judicial personnel.

Juvenile Delinquency Cases. In juvenile delinquency (JD) cases, information regarding viable and safe options for detention and placement is limited. The goal of this strategic plan is to provide judges in JD parts with a resource coordinator to research, gather and provide current information regarding alternative-to-detention (ATD) and alternative-to-placement (ATP) programs and facilities.

Providing additional ATP program options for family court judges is particularly urgent in light of the August 2009 report published by the Department of Justice (DOJ) regarding the conditions at four Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) youth placement facilities. The DOJ reported many troubling findings including the use of excessive force and inappropriate restraints, failure to properly investigate use of force allegations, failure to take corrective action and failure to provide adequate mental health care and drug treatment.

As part of this plan and our commitment to improving outcomes for youth, the court

⁴For example, cases involving allegations of domestic assault and/or menacing are sent directly to a judge.

system, in collaboration with the Center for Court Innovation (CCI), will implement a community-based placement alternative for adjudicated youth with mental health disorders. The pilot, the Juvenile Mental Health Alternative-to-Placement (JMHATP) Program in Queens County, will provide a comprehensive, coordinated response for affected young men and women in the juvenile justice system who are at risk of being placed in confinement facilities upon disposition of their cases. The JMHATP program will be coordinated with QUEST Futures, an existing Queens County ATD program that is currently providing linkages to community-based treatment, case management and family support services for young people with mental health problems.

Child Protective Cases. The outstanding concerns and difficulties encountered in the management of child protective (CP) proceedings are being addressed in the implementation of the New York City Family Court Child Protective Plan.

While many of the case processing reforms were implemented in the Best Practice parts beginning in 2001, the new plan standardizes and expands those practices to all parts handling CP cases.

The plan remains intrinsically linked to the Resource Guidelines: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse & Neglect Cases published by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. Through their promotion of front loading services, enriched case information, case conferencing and adherence to strict time frames with sufficient time allotted to complete preliminary and adjudicatory proceedings in a meaningful way, these guidelines have as their ultimate goal to “ensure that as many children as possible have stable, caring, and supportive families, not only during their early years, but for a lifetime.”

Building on the original intent of the Best Practice parts, case coordinators, as members of the courtroom team, will work to expedite cases and conserve valuable court time through careful calendar preparation. In addition, there is a renewed emphasis on case conferencing and mediation as alternative dispute resolution processes which can help settle specific case issues.

This uniform method of enhancing case conferencing and managing CP cases will improve the timeliness of CP court proceedings, decrease the time to disposition in CP cases and more fully utilize resources to enable children to achieve permanency sooner. County and citywide meetings will continue to be held with the various interested entities and the court in order to monitor and assess the success of the enhanced conferencing and case management methods as well as other issues which have an impact upon the timeliness of the management of CP proceedings.

The work in New York City is part of a statewide effort undertaken by the Office of Child

Welfare Court Improvement Project (CWCIP) to enhance case processing and improve permanency outcomes for children. The goal of this plan is to make the New York City Family Court deserving of its designation as a Model Court.

IV. DISPROPORTIONATE MINORITY REPRESENTATION

One of the goals of the New York City Family Court in its role as a national Model Court is to address the disproportionate number of children of color that enter and remain in the foster care system and that are part of JD/PINS population. This will be accomplished by incorporating the ideas of the Courts Catalyzing Change program of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges in its training and its practice. A citywide interagency committee and a judicial leadership council will be meeting to consider and address these issues and make recommendations.

The efforts of New York City, as well as other jurisdictions within the state, are being coordinated through the CWCIP Advisory Committee as the family courts statewide seek to address this nationwide issue.

V. EDUCATION, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

The goal of this strategic plan is to improve the court experience from the time a litigant enters the courthouse until he or she leaves. To do this, there needs to be coordination among the court staff who interact with litigants. This includes the petition clerk who prepares the petition, the court attorney who conferences the case, the case coordinator who ensures efficient scheduling and the judge, referee or support magistrate who hears the case. By training staff in each role, both separately and together, the family court will focus on making this a seamless, professional experience for the litigant. Training of all court staff will seek to accomplish this goal.

Judges. The family court is committed to providing judges with comprehensive education programs. In collaboration with the Judicial Institute, an enhanced program for new family court judges will be implemented. This program will focus on a broad range of substantive legal and procedural issues, case and calendar management, the use of available technologies and include a mentoring program for new judges.

Additionally, the Judicial Institute will institute a continuing professional development plan for all judges and offer ongoing peer support to deal with the difficult issues facing family court judges. These new programs will be accomplished by pursuing grant opportunities that support the work of the family court and by utilizing the resources of the Court Improvement Project and the Center for Court Innovation as well as technical assistance from the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

Referees, Court Attorneys, Support Magistrates and Judicial Hearing Officers. The family court is committed to providing its referees, court attorneys, support magistrates and judicial hearing officers with continuing education and training programs. The Judicial Institute and the family court administration will work together to develop an enhanced program that will provide comprehensive basic training for new referees, court attorneys and support magistrates as well as advanced legal and case management training for existing personnel. This program will focus on a broad range of substantive legal and procedural issues, as well as calendar management, mentoring and the use of available technologies. The program will utilize outside speakers and resources and will draw heavily from the family court's wealth of experienced judges, referees, support magistrates and administrators.

Non-judicial Personnel. In addition to the importance of a well-informed bench, educational opportunities for non-judicial personnel are essential to the effective operation of the family court. To accomplish this goal, the Chief Clerk will work with the Judicial Institute to devise and implement a formal education program for new court employees. The program will include substantive and procedural issues, case and courtroom management skills, as well as instruction in the use of available technologies and the enhancement of data entry skills. Additionally, like the judicial education program, this program will include cross-training among the specialties and an in-depth look at the integration of the judicial and non-judicial roles in the court.

VI. COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND EDUCATION

In view of the large number of unrepresented litigants in the family court, there needs to be a coordinated effort to make the court user friendly to the community it serves. In collaboration with the Access to Justice Office of the Deputy Chief Administrative Judge, the New York City Family Court will designate a liaison to assist in educating the community about the resources available in the court. This will include an array of services from informational seminars to linkages to services both in and outside of the courthouse.

The court will establish a New York City Family Court Office of Public Affairs. This office will be responsible for public outreach. Outreach efforts will include public service announcements and other methods of disseminating information about the family court and its services to the general public. There should be a focus on night court availability, engaging young people to participate in their family court cases and the availability of filings via the Internet and alternate venues.

Night court was originally conceived, under the Family Justice Program,⁵ to expand access for litigants seeking the services of the family court and to accommodate their employment and/or child care responsibilities. While it has been successful, community outreach and education could further enhance its utility.

In a similar way, while the family court encourages participation of youth in court proceedings, their attendance at permanency hearings remains low. Increasing public awareness regarding this opportunity to participate may encourage youth to attend these proceedings. The family court will disseminate informational literature at the speaking engagements to which the judiciary is often invited and will begin to identify groups who are interested in hearing about how the family court serves the community.

Volunteer Attorneys Program. The New York City Access to Justice Family Court Volunteer Attorneys Program currently provides assistance to unrepresented litigants by permitting them to consult with an attorney before a petition is filed.⁶ A majority of the consultations have been in support and paternity cases and the rest in custody, visitation, guardianship and family offense matters. The volunteer attorneys are trained and receive ongoing support and assistance from a courthouse-based court attorney employed by the family court. The program currently operates in Kings, New York and Bronx Counties. These attorneys will be conveniently located in the Help Centers.

Volunteer independent counsel, trained through the New York State Access to Justice Program, are asked to commit to twelve hours of volunteer legal assistance per year in a court of their choice. Many have assisted in family court. Law firms and corporate legal departments are asked to commit to working in the court one day per month for one year.

The Court will continue its current recruitment efforts aimed at increasing participation in the Volunteer Attorneys Program by law firms, in-house counsel and independent counsel. Efforts will also be made to recruit paralegals. The court plans to expand this program into all counties.

Harlem Justice Center. The Harlem Justice Center will be expanded to allow unrepresented individuals to file petitions, and a trial part will be opened for support cases and applications for temporary orders of protection. Litigants who do not wish to travel to Lower Manhattan simply to file a petition or to obtain an emergency temporary

⁵In 1997, in response to a record number of family court and matrimonial filings, the Unified Court System launched the Family Justice Program, which was designed to make the courts more open, more accessible and more effective.

⁶The NYC Family Court has plans to expand the role of the Volunteer Attorneys from consultation to actual representation in designated matters.

order of protection will be able to do so at the courthouse located at 121st Street in East Harlem. The support part will hear cases involving children who are on Public Assistance, as well as some private support cases.

Redhook Justice Center. The courthouse located in Red Hook, Brooklyn will also be available for litigants to request emergency orders of protection and file custody, visitation and support applications. An assessment will be conducted to see if community demands require these justice centers to open for business at 8:00 A.M. or if night court hours are needed.

VII. TECHNOLOGY AND DATA

Enhanced Technology. To improve the support provided to the judges and litigants, it is necessary to enhance the current information system, UCMS-Family, to include more efficient calendar management tools. As an initial step, it is critical that technology provide enhanced access to the individual judges' court calendars. The use of this shared calendar system will enable non-judicial support staff to assist in the selection of court dates with attorneys, agency representatives and litigants. This will also further the goal of shifting clerical tasks from judges to non-judicial personnel and create a more efficient way to manage a court calendar. This calendar system is essential to the integration of case coordinators into the courtroom.

Data Collection and Analysis. To measure the efficacy of many of the proposed pilot projects, case assignments and general operational improvement efforts, it is necessary to collect and analyze data. For projects aimed at improving case processing time frames, baselines have been developed using data routinely collected in UCMS-Family. Progress toward goals will be monitored through periodic reporting on such measures as times from petition filing to fact-finding and disposition.

Much work has already been accomplished in collecting and assessing very specific court metrics data, particularly in the child protective practice. Ongoing efforts among the Divisions of Court Operations and Technology, the CWCIP, the court, the Permanency Planning Committee,⁷ CCI and other groups involved in this arena are yielding substantial progress toward the goal of utilizing data to support the work of best practice models and efficient and effective case management.

⁷This committee is comprised of representatives from the Divisions of Technology and Court Operations, CWCIP, NYC Family Court and court attorney referees and clerks outside the City. It was formed in 2005 to design a new permanency module in UCMS-Family following the sweeping legislative reforms to the permanency law. The group still meets annually to prioritize changes to UCMS.

For new and redefined positions, such as the social workers, mental health professionals and case coordinators, key measures such as the number and outcome of conferences and the number and outcome of cases prepared for trial readiness will be identified and collected to track workload volume as well as the impact these resources are having on caseload management.

In addition, the family court will publish an annual report regarding these measures so that progress can be shared with the family court community.

VIII. RECORDS MANAGEMENT AND ACCESS

In consultation with the Office of Records Management, the Chief Clerk will develop and implement a policy and process for adherence to retention schedules and file purging. Quality control measures will be put in place to ensure compliance with all stated procedures.

As a related project, the court will develop strategies for file organization and institute policies and train staff regarding public access to court files.

Currently, in addition to information that may be obtained at the courthouse, litigants can access information regarding when their cases are scheduled from the court's website.

IX. FACILITIES

The family court is dedicated to maintaining facilities that are friendly and inviting to the young people who are the subjects of family court proceedings. The court is committed to the meaningful participation of youth in the court proceedings that have such a profound impact on their lives.

Courtrooms should have a raised bench, adequate room for litigants who are appearing before the judge (litigants should not be close together) and adequate space for public viewing and for court staff working in the part.

Having established that case conferencing makes a significant contribution to both the substantive and procedural outcomes of virtually all family court proceedings, the family court is committed to providing easily accessible, secure, adequately sized and technologically efficient conferencing facilities in each of its courthouses. The family court will work with the Office of Court Administration and the City of New York to identify, refurbish and outfit suitable office space in all five counties.

Petition rooms should be large, easily accessible and contain information about the petition process. Public waiting areas should be clean, have adequate seating and

provide information about the court process to waiting litigants. Petition rooms and waiting areas should have information about the expected waiting times.

The Richmond County Family Court has been housed in an inadequate facility for many years. Feasible options for expansion and enhancement of the current facility have been exhausted, and the court's functioning is constrained as a result. Office of Court Administration and the City of New York have identified the current Supreme Court building located at 18 Richmond Terrace as the future home of the Richmond County Family Court. A new Supreme and Criminal Court building is currently under construction and due to be completed in 2012. Once vacated by the supreme court, the historic court building will be renovated to allow for significant expansion of the family court's operations.

After many years of sharing a courthouse with the criminal court and some criminal term parts, the Bronx County Family Court acquired additional space when most of these parts moved to the new Bronx Hall of Justice in 2008. A major renovation project of the vacant space and common areas is underway at 215 East 161st Street. The result will enable the family court to decompress its operations by providing modernized courtrooms, petition rooms, related agency offices and judges' chambers. In addition, an expanded, user-friendly lobby is planned with ample space for queuing inside of the building. The many phases of this renovation are scheduled for completion in 2013.

The court will make ongoing assessments of its facilities and will work with the Office of Court Administration and the relevant government agencies to refurbish and reorganize existing space and acquire additional needed space.

CONCLUSION

EVERY COURT, EVERY CASE AND EVERY LITIGANT COUNTS. In one of the State's busiest courts, there is no shortage of important issues for the administration of the New York City Family Court to manage each and every day. With the vast array of cases and litigants and the numerous agencies and attorneys that have a stake in this Court, collaboration is the key to reform.

Implementing the aggressive and comprehensive steps outlined in this plan is both a challenge and an opportunity. As part of this collaborative effort, the court system will take this opportunity to focus needed attention and resources on the family court. The result will be a modernized court that will carry out its duty to ensure the highest standard of justice with a sensitivity toward the community it serves.