

CHILDREN'S JUSTICE  
STATE SUMMIT 2009  
DISTRICT 7 TEAM REPORT  
APRIL 2009

1. District 7 Team Organization

The District 7 Summit Team has grown from 15 to a total of 29 members as of this date. In assembling our team for the 2009 State Summit we have just added several additional people to our ranks, three of whom are attending this event.

As we organized our district team after the 2007 State Summit, we initially expanded our membership to include the local coordinator for Elevate and several additional Juvenile Court prosecutors and attorneys for parents and children. Our new Chief of Juvenile Court Services has joined us on the team. For this 2009 State Summit we have invited a contract service provider, a chemical health treatment provider, and a mental health treatment provider to join us for this state meeting. We hope that the newest members of the District 7 Summit Team will join us for the regular meetings of the group.

The District 7 team has met monthly almost without fail since May of 2007. We meet in Scott County because it is centrally located among the five counties of the District. We usually meet on the second Monday of the month at 5:00 p.m. as that is the day and time when most of us are available. Because it is an evening meeting we do try to wrap up within 60 to 90 minutes.

2. 2007 Work Plan Accomplishments

At the 2007 State Summit the District 7 team participated in the creation of a "new normal." In order to create a "new normal" in District 7, we believed that we would have to move past the notion that no change is needed. Everyone likes to believe that we are already "good enough," but it is important to aspire to make positive changes to facilitate goals as envisioned. We hoped to work together in our "new normal" environment on generally improving children's safety in their birth home and in any foster family care home along with expediting permanency for all children.

As we put together our "new normal," we felt it would be important for the district team to meet, communicate, share, focus on the positive, and work on the problems we would identify as we exchanged ideas. We also believed that we would need to work to identify other potential problems and openly and honestly discuss resolutions or factors of importance in reaching resolutions of those problems before they occur. Our vision for the District 7 team was to build an established collaboration to address any pertinent issues with the goals of improving child safety and expediting the establishment of permanency.

Our regular meetings and the comfortable communication which we now share among our membership have helped us to openly discuss problems and to work on the resolution of those problems. The members of the team work together well to discuss issues and problems in a positive

and open fashion, putting aside any temptation to be confrontational or accusatory. A significant strength in the District 7 Summit Team has been the continuing and ongoing involvement of both Gary Lippe and Denise Gonzales who serve as Service Area Managers for the Department of Human Services in various counties of this judicial district. Their individual work assignments within the Iowa Department and in other agencies have offered them the opportunity to develop a global view of the problems rather than a local view of the problems, and to fashion resolutions based on their larger experience in our community and other communities facing these same issues. Denise and Gary play pivotal roles in helping to bring all of the team members along in addressing problems from a big-picture standpoint rather than from the narrow vision of our home-bases.

### 3. Mini-Grant Project and Materials

In the meetings of July, August and September of 2008, the team planned a one-day training session on the role of the guardian ad litem in Juvenile Court proceedings. Our focus was on improving the skills of attorneys who serve as the guardian ad litem in District 7 cases. Our goal was to expand their base of knowledge concerning available resources and programs that might be useful to them in fulfilling their obligations as a guardian ad litem in Juvenile Court proceedings. Several of our attorney members took the lead in making the contacts with speakers, setting up the location arrangements, and several of our other members provided technical and organizational assistance in putting together materials for distribution to those in attendance at the seminar.

We cleared our juvenile court schedules in the District and had an excellent turnout of attorneys and others we had invited to participate. We were fortunate enough to have Barbara Harre, M.D., serve as a presenter on medical issues relevant to Juvenile Court and Julie Jenks-Kettmann, Ph.D., presented a program on investigative techniques and interview techniques for attorneys. They are both professionals practicing in Davenport so they are locally available resources.

We also used the expertise of our Juvenile Court judges to present a panel discussion relating to their expectations of guardians ad litem in the Seventh Judicial District, both as outlined in the statutes and as dictated by local legal culture. The day's program provided both a session on ethics relating to Juvenile Court cases and a program specifically on the preparation of the guardian ad litem report. We even included discussion topics as a part of our lunch break, which was a nice way for the lawyers present to have an opportunity to visit with persons from DHS, service agencies, foster parents, the Elevate group, judges and others who were in attendance.

As part of the materials which were shared with the attorneys at the September 2009 training conference in Davenport, a guardian ad litem report form was distributed. We also shared a court order which appoints the child's guardian ad litem and provides authorization to the guardian ad litem to accomplish the required statutory duties. The Court's expectations are set forth in that same order concerning the responsibilities of the guardian ad litem. Copies of these documents have been included with this report.

### 4. District 7 Summit Team Successes

In an effort to receive feedback from the District 7 Team membership, at our March 2009

monthly meeting we discussed successes we have had as a team, and a summary of our discussion follows. First, the attorney report form is now widely used throughout District 7. Lawyers are preparing reports in connection with every hearing and it seems that the practice level of attorneys has been raised at least somewhat since this group began to meet in 2007. It is noted that most of the attorneys now attend either a team meeting or a foster care review board session and more of the attorneys have talked to their clients before a hearing is held. In the CASA program the volunteers have positively noted that they are receiving more feedback from the guardians in their cases. Children are asked if they wish to attend their court hearing and do attend if they so desire.

It is the goal of the Department to get every family involved in a family team meeting. The Department tries to have that meeting at the beginning of the case, and thereafter hold a team meeting every six months. Some of the team meetings have become really intensive and have been held as often as monthly. While DHS staff members can call their own meetings as much as they want, it is important to the Department that every family be involved in the team meetings rather than a few families using all of the available resources. The family team meetings are well accepted.

We are following recommendations to hold meetings at regular intervals after a case is initiated. The target is to identify the key steps in the case plan and those who participate in the meeting actually assist in writing the case plan for the family. We believe that it is important to emphasize the presence of child abuse assessment workers at those meetings. We recognize that the leaders who facilitate the meetings need appropriate training to skillfully do so.

We also have learned the importance of getting a CASA involved with a child or family before an adjudication takes place. Involving CASAs, as well as holding meetings with the family, can help to identify possible placements for the child with a relative or other person, and sometimes helps in involving the parents who in turn become more cooperative with the juvenile court process.

We are aware that DHS is beginning training on family interaction. This will involve both families and children, and will include making recommendations on this issue and related matters. There will be focus on whether a visit may be supervised or unsupervised, and who might be appropriate to provide the supervision if required.

At our very first District 7 team meeting held on May 1, 2007, the group members had the opportunity to learn about the "child welfare digital dashboard" statistics for 2006 which had been made available to us at the State Summit. Our two SAMS walked us through each report in terms of the various measures which were being tracked; the federal and state targets; and the "detail" sheets for each measured standard. We learned that these reports might be useful for the team in some manner, but of real importance was the fact that these statistics are used for compliance purposes and actual performance is compared to the targeted goals. We were cautioned that when viewing measures at the county level, some of the percentages and percentage point changes are based on very small numbers and caution must be used in interpreting this information for a single period. Consistency or trends that may be spotted are really more meaningful. From the prospective of DHS we learned that the most important performance measures are really timely reunification, placement stability, and timely adoption or other permanent placement. Our discussion of these matters has helped us to understand that the Department, the service providers, the attorneys and the Court must all be working in a consistent fashion in order to reach the goals that are set with regard to each

family.

## 5. Barriers

Fortunately, no significant barriers were identified as preventing us from achieving the goals set by the team. An ongoing difficulty is finding a time, date and location which make the meetings convenient so that all members can attend. We work best when we have a cross-section of members present.

We have continued to benefit from very good communications among the team members. Any communications barriers that may have existed among us previously have certainly been diminished by our ongoing relationship and dialogue as team members who work to improve the family circumstances of children. We continue to work among our team members and others to develop common respect for the service providers, lawyers, family members, and all participants who must really be partners in this effort. Each of us tries to hold the other accountable, but to do so in a respectful way and in a way that furthers our relationship with each other rather than diminishing those relationships.

## 6. Progress on Supreme Court Goals

In District 7 we have long organized our judicial resources and assignments so that one judge who has experience in handling child welfare matters and who is committed to improving the outcomes for children in Juvenile Court presides over all of the family's proceedings. However, we now have so many child welfare cases to be addressed in our system that we have added three experienced judges who are dedicated to handling such child welfare cases one day each month, and a fourth judge will pick up a similar assignment as soon as possible.

Before we were organized as a team in 2007, one of the District 7 counties, Clinton County, had previously participated in an assessment conducted with the assistance of the court improvement project. Over the past two years Scott and Muscatine Counties have now also participated in an assessment which was conducted with the assistance of the court improvement project. We anticipate that the remaining two counties in this district will be assessed in the very near future. We are in the process of going over those assessments which were conducted in Muscatine and Scott Counties to discuss the outcomes and identify ways to improve where improvement is needed. We must focus on our original mission: to use the data to improve the judicial and welfare components of the system and achieve the best possible results.

As a team we will continue to work on the development and implementation of specific strategies to meet the performance measures which are required by the Adoption and Safe Families Act, along with the provisions of Iowa Code Chapter 232. We also acknowledge that we should more carefully address the ICWA requirements so that we are confident that we are appropriately meeting those requirements. This is an ongoing process and the District 7 Summit Team will more directly work on such goals in the upcoming months.

We have been fortunate enough to receive funding for two individual juvenile court improvement projects since the 2009 State Summit. In Scott County a Family Drug Court has been developed and implemented. This court meets weekly and works on safely reuniting families by

improving parenting through helping family members attain sobriety. In Muscatine County the Casey Family Program funds the Breakthrough Series Collaborative which seeks timely permanency through reunification of families. This project is in place in an effort to improve the opportunity to achieve parental reunification.

## 7. Closing Remarks

The members of the District 7 Summit Team are proud of the work that we have done to build a relationship among the team members and the agencies and individuals who are part of our team. We continue to value the work which is done in Juvenile Court and the importance of that work for the children. Even when finances are very difficult and the operational rules are changed, we continue to value the children, their families and the work required to reunite those children with their families in a safe and loving environment or to place the children in loving family foster or adoptive families. We believe that the work done in Juvenile Court is important work and that Juvenile Court should at all times be treated as an equal court rather than a lesser court.

Regarding questions & comments

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## District 7 Team Members

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JUDY SILVERMAN  
DIANE SONNEVILLE  
GARY STRAUSSER  
PHIL TABOR  
HOWARD THOMAS  
TIM TUPPER  
TRACEY WILLIAMS  
ARLEN VAN ZEE

IN THE IOWA JUVENILE COURT IN AND FOR \_\_\_\_\_ COUNTY

IN THE INTEREST OF

) Juvenile No(s). JVJV

)

)

) ORDER APPOINTING CHILD'S

) GUARDIAN AD LITEM AND

Child(ren).

) AUTHORIZATION

**BE IT REMEMBERED** on

that there came before the Court the appointment of a guardian ad litem for the child in interest. Pursuant to Iowa Code Section 232.2(22)(7)(c), the Court in the appointment of a guardian ad litem is to grant authorization to the guardian ad litem to accomplish certain of their statutory duties. The order is also to provide authorization to the guardian ad litem to attend such staffings, meetings, and conferences as deemed necessary by the guardian ad litem. Based upon a review of the application and the Court's review of the file, the Court finds that a guardian ad litem shall be appointed with the following statutory duties and authority.

**IT IS THEREFORE ORDERED** that

Attorney at Law, is appointed as attorney and guardian ad litem for the child in interest.

Unless hereafter enlarged or circumscribed, the duties of the guardian ad litem shall be as set forth in IOWA CODE SECTION 232.2(22), to wit:

1. Conducting in-person interviews with the child, if the child's age is appropriate for the interview, and interviewing each parent, guardian, or other person having custody of the child, if authorized by counsel.

2. Conducting interviews with the child, if the child's age is appropriate for

interview any relevant person and inspect and copy any records relevant to the proceedings if not prohibited by Federal law.

**IT IS FURTHER ORDERED** that the guardian ad litem is expected to attend any Department staff meetings, case conferences, or meetings with medical or mental health providers, service providers, organizations, or educational institutions regarding the child, unless excused by the Court, and may inspect and copy any records relevant to the proceedings.

**IT IS FURTHER ORDERED** that the Clerk shall distribute copies of this order as required by law.

**NOTICE:** The Court regards the function of the guardian ad litem to be vitally important to the effective administration of justice for the benefit of children. The Court expects attorneys filling that role to exercise the highest commitment to the children under their supervision. Failure to comply with the Court's order of appointment as guardian ad litem could result in discharge of the attorney as guardian ad litem.

**SO ORDERED** this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_.

Effective Date:

\_\_\_\_\_

Judge of the Juvenile Court

In the Iowa District Court in and for \_\_\_\_\_ County  
Juvenile Court

IN THE INTEREST OF

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JC JV \_\_\_\_\_

REPORT OF  
GUARDIAN AD LITEM

COMES NOW, the undersigned duly appointed guardian ad litem for the children, and pursuant to Iowa Code Section 232.2(22) makes the following report to the Court:

**I. BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION OF CHILD(REN)**

CHILD(REN)S NAME:

AGE(S) AND DATE(S) OF BIRTH:

NAME OF PARENTS OF CHILD(REN)

**II. PLACEMENT HISTORY OF CHILD(REN)**

DATE OF REMOVAL (if applicable):

CURRENT PLACEMENT OF CHILD(REN)/DATES:

PRIOR PLACEMENTS:

**III. RELEVANT COURT DATES:**

DATE OF ADJUDICATION:

ADJUDICATING UNDER SUBSECTIONS:

DATE OF DISPOSITION:

DATE OF REVIEW HEARING:

DATE OF PERMANENCY HEARING:

**IV. IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS WITH CHILD.**  
DATE(S) OF INTERVIEWS WITH NARRATIVE:

**V. IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS:**  
**PARENT/GUARDIAN/CUSTODIAN**  
DATE(S) OF INTERVIEWS WITH NARRATIVE:

**VI. VISITS TO CHILD'S HOME/PLACEMENTS**  
DATE(S) OF VISITS WITH NARRATIVE:

**VII. INTERVIEWS WITH MEDICAL, MENTAL HEALTH, SOCIAL, EDUCATIONAL PERSONS  
OR OTHER SERVICE RELATED PERSONS TO THE CHILD**  
NAME/DATES OF THOSE INTERVIEWED with narrative

**VIII. FIRSTHAND KNOWLEDGE OF FACTS, CIRCUMSTANCES AND PARTIES**

**IX. TRANSITIONAL/PERMANENCY PLANNING EFFORTS**

Describe meetings or staffing attended and the transitional or permanency planning efforts:

**X. STAFFINGS AND TEAM MEETINGS**

Describe staffing and meeting attended, your observations, and the outcome.

**XI. FOSTER CARE REVIEW BOARD MEETINGS**

Describe the foster care review board meetings attended, your observations and the outcome.

**XII. NARRATIVE.**

**XIII. RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Respectfully submitted,

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Guardian ad litem