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UNIVERSITY OF BALTIMORE SCHOOL OF LAW ■ SAYRA AND NEIL MEYERHOFF CENTER FOR FAMILIES, CHILDREN AND THE COURTS

A Tribute to the Honorable Robert M. Bell, the Leader of Maryland's Family Divisions

BY JUDGE CLAYTON GREENE JR.

Shortly after his appointment in 1996 as Chief Judge of the Maryland Judiciary, Robert M. Bell announced, as he described recently in an article marking his retirement in *The Judges' Journal*, "a set of fundamental guiding principles that [he] adopted as he began [his] service as chief judge in 1996." Those principles were: increased access to justice for all; improved case expedition and timeliness; equality, fairness and integrity in the judicial process; independence and accountability in the Judicial Branch; and restored public trust and confidence in the Judiciary.

In looking back over his tenure as Chief Judge, there are many specific accomplishments that were the byproducts of Chief Judge Bell's adherence to these guiding principles. One of his great accomplishments is the creation of Family Divisions in the Circuit Courts of Maryland. According to Chief Judge Bell, his achievements as Chief

Judge were in actuality "the accomplishments of many, many dedicated professionals in the third branch of government, serving the public, rather than any one individual."

Reflected in this quote is the essence of Chief Judge Bell's leadership. He is, and was, unselfish in his motives and committed deeply to building consensus among the bench and the Bar to work to improve the Judiciary. Through his leadership, professionals and nonprofessionals inside and outside of the judiciary were solicited to work together to implement Family Divisions in our state. With

the support of the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) and the Department of Family Administration, Judge Bell in 1998 oversaw the creation of Family Divisions in our Circuit Courts.

Judge Bell recognized that a new approach to solving family disputes was needed. In 1987, Professor David B. Wexler introduced the idea of *therapeutic jurisprudence* in the area of mental health law. *Therapeutic jurisprudence* emphasized the role of law as a therapeutic agent and the "law's impact on [the] emotional life and psychological well being of the individual," in addition to legal rights and interests. In 1996, Professor Barbara Babb applied this idea of therapeutic justice to family law, proposing a system to resolve a family's problems by offering services and programs to address the underlying issues of the conflict. Under Judge Bell's supervision, "the Maryland Judiciary created Circuit Court Family Divisions and family services programs" in 1998 when Maryland Rule 16-204 was implemented. The role of the judge

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Overview

In this issue of the Unified Family Court Connection, we celebrate the 15th anniversary of Family Divisions in Maryland. We take a look at the history of the Family Divisions and discuss the innovative and positive results of their implementation.

We hope you find the following articles informative and helpful:

- **The Honorable Clayton Greene, Jr.** of the Maryland Court of Appeals offers a tribute to Court of Appeals Chief Judge Robert Bell, now retired, for his dedication and insight in his creation of Family Divisions in the Circuit Courts of Maryland. He describes that initiative as one of Judge Bell's "greatest accomplishments."
- **The Honorable Cathy Hollenberg Serrette** celebrates the great strides that have been taken to implement Family Divisions in Maryland, which have promoted the well-being of families statewide.
- **Risa Garon**, executive director and co-founder of the National Family Resiliency Center, Inc., writes about how Unified Family Courts have provided families with a holistic means to focus on parenting and co-parenting through education and support.
- **Yolanda F. Sonnier** and **Kendra Randall Jolivet**, Maryland attorneys, offer their perspective on how Maryland's Family Divisions have offered a more efficient and better system for families, attorneys and the courts.

Through the vision and leadership of Chief Judge Bell, many talented individuals worked together in a collaborative effort to establish Family Divisions in this state.

changed from that of an arbiter of the family-related dispute “to a supervisor of the ongoing process of family reorganization.” [See *Highlights from Fifteen Years of Family Court Reform and Family Services in Maryland*, Connie Kratovil-Lavelle, Executive Director, Dept. of Family Administration, 1-12 (May 2013)].

Sparked by the idea of therapeutic justice, the debate in Maryland among family law judges, practitioners, and administrators was whether to create separate family courts or Family Divisions within the Circuit Courts. An important focus of that debate was the 1996 final report of the Commission on the Future of the Courts (Chapter 561, Acts of 1995.) The Commission was charged with the responsibility to examine the existing court system to determine what, if any, changes should be made to ensure the courts’ ability to fulfill their mission of administering justice wisely, fairly, and efficiently in the future. (*Final Report of the Commission on the Future of Maryland Courts*, Dec. 15, 1996.) The Chairman of the Commission reported, in part, that “a separate court would be unnecessary, unduly expensive and administratively burdensome.” Instead, the Commission recommended, among other proposals, that “[i]n those counties in which a sufficient number of judges exist to make it feasible, a family division should be established within the Circuit Court, to handle, in a coordinated and efficient fashion, family-related and juvenile cases.”

With the support of the Commission’s recommendation, in 1998 and after the signing of Rule 16-204, Chief Judge Bell formed an Ad Hoc Committee to develop a plan to implement Family Divisions in the circuit courts. The mission was to develop a system that would work efficiently and effectively, taking into consideration initiatives that had been tried and tested in order to determine the best practices. Chief Judge Bell chose two Circuit Court Administrative Judges to co-chair the Ad Hoc Committee - the Honorable Paul H. Weinstein, chair of the Conference of Circuit Court Judges, and myself, as Vice Chair of the Conference. Working with the Conference of Circuit Court Judges, the Committee on Family Law, the Department of Family Administration, and consultants, Professor Barbara Babb and Jeffrey A Kuhn, Esq., the Ad Hoc Committee recommended to Chief Judge Bell to first focus on implementation of Family Divisions in the five largest Circuits of Baltimore City, Montgomery County, Prince George’s County, Baltimore County, and Anne Arundel County. Once the committee agreed which practices were best to be duplicated in each Family Division, Chief Judge Bell approved the Committee’s recommendation that every effort be made to duplicate those best practices within each Circuit to ensure uniformity of services throughout those jurisdictions. The idea was to create a uniform court system, but without creating new courts. Some of the best practices recommended and implemented were:

1. The creation and implementation of Differentiated Case Management Plans (DCM), with a focus on resolving a family’s legal problems in as few appearances as necessary;
2. Employment of case managers to coordinate and consolidate all legal matters involving the same family to increase efficiency and effectiveness in the judicial process;

3. Implementation of alternative dispute resolution programs in each circuit;
4. Provide, through the Department of Family Services Administration, for custody evaluations, parenting classes, and psychological and psychiatric evaluations and treatment, where needed; and
5. Assign cases according to the one-judge, one-case model, wherever practical. Thus, any court-related issues in a particular case would be scheduled before the same judge.

With the implementation of these practices and services, and numerous others, the Family Divisions in the Circuit Courts of this state efficiently and effectively have served many families involved in the judicial process. Through the vision and leadership of Chief Judge Bell, many talented individuals worked together in a collaborative effort to establish Family Divisions in this state. In the past 15 years since the creation of Family Divisions, countless families and individuals have benefitted from the services offered by our respective courts. From their inception, those services and programs were designed to treat the family as a whole and to reduce the number of court visits.

The judiciary owes a tremendous debt of gratitude to Chief Judge Bell for his vision and guiding principles. In addition, I wish to acknowledge those many men and women for their diligence and perseverance in pursuing that vision for Maryland Family Divisions. Although the focus of this article is on the contributions of Chief Judge Bell and his leadership, I believe it is important to also acknowledge the contributions of the AOC and the Department of Family Administration, the Ad Hoc Committee for devising the plan for implementation, the Rules Committee for drafting Rules for the Court of Appeals to implement Family Divisions (Rule 16-204 of the Maryland Rules of Procedure), the Committee on Family Law of the Maryland Judicial Conference, and its chair, the Honorable Larnzell Martin, Jr., for seeing the implementation of Family Divisions through to completion.



The Honorable Clayton Greene, Jr. has been on the Maryland Court of Appeals since 2004. He is one of only four judges in the history of the Maryland Judiciary to have served at each level of the Maryland Judiciary. He was appointed to the District Court of Maryland in Anne Arundel County in 1988, the Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County in 1995, and the Court of Special Appeals in 2002. He has served as Administrative Judge of the District Court for Anne Arundel County and the Circuit Administrative Judge for the 5th Judicial Circuit.

Family Divisions Have Flourished in Fifteen Years and Have More to Accomplish

BY JUDGE CATHY HOLLENBERG SERRETTE

On the 15th anniversary of Maryland's Family Divisions, we celebrate the enormous strides that have been taken to implement a jurisprudence that focuses on the rights of the parties in Maryland and also promotes the well-being of families and family members.

The creation of Family Divisions in 1998, pursuant to Maryland Rule 16-204, came in the wake of a growing national awareness of the need to reform the manner in which family law matters were handled. As was intuitively obvious, members of an imploding family, each losing the foundation upon which she or he stood, economically, emotionally and otherwise stressed, and destined to remain in each other's lives for a lifetime, were unlikely to be rendered functional by the adversarial system. Not surprisingly, studies revealed that traditional adversarial court processes escalated, rather than alleviated, the level of conflict for families and the emotional toll on children.

Consistent with the then-burgeoning concept of therapeutic jurisprudence, Family Divisions were mandated for each Maryland Circuit Court with more than seven judges and were tasked with handling, among other causes of action, divorce, annulment, property distribution, custody, support, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect (CINA), termination of parental rights, juvenile guardianship, involuntary admissions to health and mental health facilities, family legal-medical issues and juvenile delinquency. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, Rule 16-204 provided for family support services, subject to the availability of funds, to provide, when appropriate, mediation; custody investigations; mental health, alcohol and drug evaluations; procedural assistance to self-represented litigants; parenting coordination services; parenting seminars; information regarding lawyer referral services and such other services for which funding was provided. Subject to availability of funds, courts without Family Divisions also were directed to provide family support consistent with that provided by the Family Divisions.

In short, the mandate called for the adoption of a multidisciplinary approach that would marshal comprehensive services designed, among other things, to alleviate the underlying causes of conflict that brought families and children to court.

To bolster the progress of the Family Divisions, the Maryland Judiciary created the Ad Hoc Committee on the Implementation of Family Divisions, which, in 2003, issued "Performance Standards and Measures for Maryland's Family Divisions." This comprehensive tool set forth standards for achieving:

- access to justice
- expedition and timeliness
- fairness and integrity
- independence and accountability; and
- public trust and confidence.

As then-Chief Judge Robert Bell noted in the preface to the docu-

ment, the standards adopted: "represent the values which inspired the creation of Maryland's Family Divisions, and offer a blueprint for future development. They represent the high standards to which we hold ourselves in serving Maryland's families, and the standard to which we expect others to hold us."

Additional rules and guidelines in support of family services followed. Maryland Rule 9-205 required that promptly after the filing of an action to establish or modify custody, courts must determine whether mediation would be beneficial to the parties or children. Mediation for property disputes, though not universal, also was promoted. Maryland Rule 9-205.1 provided for the appointment of children's attorneys, when appropriate, and Rule 9-205.2 set forth standards for parent co-coordinators. *Guidelines for Practice for Court-Appointed Lawyers Representing Children in Cases Involving Child Custody or Child Access* were added in the Appendix to Title 9 of the Rules.

Since then the Family Divisions have flourished. Form pleadings are available online and in courthouses for most, if not all, family law matters. A Judicare program was established to provide reduced fee representation for low-income families, and centers to assist self-represented litigants have been located in all circuit courthouses. Parenting classes, custody evaluations, domestic violence advocates and monitors, anger management courses, counseling services, and substance abuse evaluations and treatment referrals are provided routinely. Systemic structures to protect victims of domestic violence and treat abusers have been implemented. Many courts have established pilot problem-solving courts, such as juvenile drug courts and truancy courts. Courts have contracted with employment programs in various jurisdictions to assist in child support matters.

The Family Law Committee of the Maryland Judicial Conference, with its Juvenile Law, Custody, Domestic Violence and Child Support subcommittees, constantly reviews, evaluates and initiates practices, programs, guidelines and rules to improve the quality of services provided by the courts.

Yet many of the hopes for the Family Divisions have not yet been realized. The goal of one judge-one family has not been fully attained.

BENCHBOOK ON SUBSTANCE ABUSE IS NOW AVAILABLE

While substance abuse and addiction are pervasive throughout the family court system, few resources are available for family law attorneys and members of the judiciary who want information specifically geared to parents and children in the family justice system.

In order to meet this need, the University of Baltimore School of Law Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts has published the *Benchbook on Substance Abuse and Addiction for Family Courts*. The long-awaited publication provides clear and concise information about the range of substance abuse and addiction issues affecting families and children in family courts.

To learn more, visit: <http://law.ubalt.edu/centers/cfcc/publications/index.cfm> or email cfcc@ubalt.edu.

For the most part, once a judge hears a custody or divorce matter on the merits, the family will continue to appear before that judge for future modification or enforcement actions in those cases. Increasingly, the same judge will hear related petitions for protective orders at the final protective order stage and actions for modification and enforcement of those orders. Related matters, such as foreclosures or juvenile actions, however, typically are not set before the same judge.

Estimates indicate that over 80 percent of family law cases, which comprise the largest number of cases filed in the Circuit Courts, have at least one party without legal representation. Mediation is widespread for those deemed suitable and collaborative law is on the rise, but the most troubled families typically end up in the most adversarial trials, often without counsel. Services are subject to the availability of funds, and funds are severely limited. Thus, services, particularly for non-English speakers, are not universal.

When it comes to juvenile justice, we have a long way to go. The ratio of minority to white youth in residential correctional placement in Maryland in 2010 was five to one. Sixty-seven percent of Maryland juveniles who were placed in corrections were placed for nonperson offenses, defined as those crimes committed against property instead of people. The *Baltimore Sun*, in its Mar. 20, 2012 edition, reported that about 80 percent of the girls committed to residential treatment centers in Maryland were accused of nothing more serious than a misdemeanor. For boys, the figure was approximately 50 percent. (On May 16, 2013, Governor Martin O'Malley signed House Bill 916 into law, a bill aimed at decreasing the arbitrary reliance on detention for offending children who pose little risk. HB 916 was codified in Md. Code Ann., Courts and Judicial Proceedings, § 3-8A-19.) While some jurisdictions have begun to work on the issue of crossover youth, i.e. those children in both the Child in Need of Assistance (CINA) and delinquency systems, most have no coordinated treatment planning by the Departments of Social Services and Juvenile Services, nor, for the most part, has the one judge/one child model been adopted for Child in Need of Assistance (CINA) and delinquency cases, let alone juvenile and other family law matters.

Thus, while much has been accomplished since the creation of Family Divisions, much remains to be done. To be sure, the courts alone cannot ensure the well-being of families. With the rapid growth and popularity of problem-solving courts, competent research must carefully analyze the context in which limited resources most effectively promote family well-being. Many of the problems facing families that come before the court and youth in the juvenile systems are a reflection of unaddressed systemic social and economic inequality for which a far broader response is required. The courts, however, play an important role in the broad-based collaboration required to create communities in which families and children can thrive safely, and we are committed to the continued development of policies, programs and services to improve the lives and minimize the trauma, pain, and suffering of those who come before us.



The Honorable Cathy Hollenberg Serrette, a Circuit Court Judge for the 7th Judicial Circuit of Maryland, is chair of the Family Law Committee of the Maryland Judicial Conference and is the Family Division Coordinating Judge for the Circuit Court for Prince George's County, Maryland.

Unified Family Courts Offer a Healthy Roadmap for Families

BY RISA GARON

Unified Family Courts (UFCs) provide families the opportunity to build a healthier roadmap for their transition during divorce and help parents focus on parenting and co-parenting by offering education, legal choices, and support.

Before the development of UFCs, parents in courts were lost in a sea of unknowns. Most parents are not trained formally to be parents and are not aware of the specific developmental stages of children. Because parents are confused, lack knowledge and are anxious, they often react in fear, anger and desperation. Similarly, prior to UFCs, many professionals were not aware of child development, the impact of transition on families, and what parents need to accomplish to foster healthy growth and development.

Fearful of losing their children to the other parent and stressed by social, legal, financial and psychological factors, parents turned courts into a boxing ring to fight it out.

UFCs changed that by integrating services for the family, training judges to be appropriately involved, and utilizing one judge to hear the case. Families no longer have to go from one court to another in order to resolve multiple issues, and the UFC supports families in a more holistic manner than was the case in the past. There has been greater collaboration among professionals, judges, lawyers, mediators and mental health professionals working with families. Service providers in a UFC now work with parents before separation and during times of transition.

Education and training programs and services have been created to further help families. The concept of therapeutic jurisprudence and implementation of its objectives have been instrumental in establishing purposeful, helpful, and supportive services for families.

Legislation that enabled judges to require parents to attend co-parenting education and two mandatory mediation sessions was a huge step in helping parents and children.

The co-parent education program, pioneered by the National Family Resiliency Center, Inc. (NFRC) in the 1980's and later utilized throughout the state of Maryland, allowed for mental health professionals to teach these classes. For jurisdictions with a Family Division in Maryland, funding was made available to provide a no-cost program to parents. Some were taught by court staff while others contracted with NFRC to provide the program.

Initially, there was hesitancy. Certain lawyers insisted that they needed to attend the co-parenting seminar with their clients, and some clients said they would not learn anything, did not want to be there, and were advised by their attorneys not to say a word.

The UFC shift gradually moved parents from an adversarial litigation route to one in which they learned about their grief and that of their children, the choices in the legal process, ways to be constructive co-parents, communication techniques, anger management methods, and innovative problem-solving skills to resolve conflict while focusing on their children. These programs always have stressed the importance

Of the 1.2 million children and teens a year whose parents make a decision not to be together, too many survive with minimal attention, unaddressed medical needs, and with parents telling them that “their college education funding has been spent on court and lawyers.”

of putting aside adult relationship issues to work together to help the children. At the same time, a shift occurred among judges and attorneys—away from an attitude of “we don’t need this touchy, feely stuff” to one that identified with the needs of the children.

In the past, court served, and still does, as a battle ground between parents who feared losing their children and wanted to “get even” with the other parent by hiring attorneys to help fuel the fight. Family Divisions and most courts in the state of Maryland subsequently have made it far more difficult for parents to wage that kind of destructive battle. There is increased understanding and awareness of children’s and adults’ grief, child development, and the impact that professionals have on parents’ behavior, particularly decision-making about children. Most professionals have encouraged parents to adapt a more child-centered approach to their decision-making as co-parents.

More professionals are able to support this approach and work cooperatively and there are more court resources in place. What difference does this make? It makes a huge difference. All it takes is one professional to zealously advocate for a client without considering the impact of legal advice on his or her client and other family members. Judges and masters realize that they have a brief period of time to digest and process a family’s lifetime of facts, challenges and accusations. The opportunity to offer alternative dispute resolution and the ability to refer to appropriate resources in the community reinforce judicial decision-making and help hold parents accountable for their behavior. This occurs in UFCs, and in other courts as well.

Recently, a judge asked me to work with a family about to go to trial. Rather than issue a trial date, the judge asked the parents to consent to co-parent sessions to assist them in learning to communicate with each other, to develop a child-centered perspective, and to make joint decisions about their children. With the lawyers’ and parents’ consent, a therapist at NFRC worked with the parents, met with the children, served as the children’s voice with the parents, and helped the parents communicate for the first time. Rather than going to trial, which promotes a “winner/loser” mentality, the parents learned to discuss important information about their children. They agreed to therapy for one child, activities for all the children, and, most importantly, instituted weekly phone calls to discuss pertinent information about the children.

Realistically speaking, the greatest problem with Unified Family Courts is the lack of accountability and follow-through once decisions are made. As Emily Douglas wrote in “*Mending Broken Families: Social Policies for Divorced Families, How Effective Are They?*” (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, USA 2006), parents need to be held more accountable for how they will work together to address the needs of each child in their family. The courts and professionals involved with the family work very hard to resolve conflicts. Sometimes, in doing so, the most vocal or the most dysfunctional parent slips under the radar screen and children’s needs are overlooked and not addressed.

Having worked with more than ten thousand children and teens, NFRC staff have great concern about the children who continue to drive with intoxicated parents; about children who “have to spend time with a parent” who does not allow them to live healthy lives, such as being with peers in age appropriate ways because it is “the parent’s time;” and about the lawyers who belittle children’s and teens’ needs and finesse their cases so that these needs are never brought to the surface.

Of the 1.2 million children and teens a year whose parents make a decision to not be together, too many survive with minimal attention, with unaddressed medical needs, and with parents telling them that “their college education funding has been spent on court and lawyers.” Judges have made great strides in focusing on the needs of children, as have the majority of lawyers and mental health professionals. While they all need and deserve support, the reality is they cannot go home with families. What then can be done? Perhaps the next step for proponents of therapeutic jurisprudence is to study and incorporate accountability—a multi-disciplinary approach that requires families to follow a judge’s orders.

Mental health, unless there is, sadly, a Newtown tragedy or other catastrophe, remains underfunded and underused. Judges are leaders in communities and their voices need to become louder, along with those who care about families, to insist on accountability standards being built into the law. Finally, there must be the realization that the support of relationship education, parent education, marital education and other supports will prevent problems and save money.

Like a wedding or graduation, the anniversary of Maryland’s Family Divisions deserves to be celebrated, and those who worked so hard and stood up for therapeutic jurisprudence deserve to be acknowledged. Like a wedding, however, it is just an event. It is the rest of the process and the commitment to support the ongoing implementation and further elaboration of UFC concepts and processes that need further study, support and expansion.



Risa Garon, executive director and co-founder of the National Family Resiliency Center, Inc., developed the Child and Family Focused Model of Decision Making® that supports the best interest of the child and is utilized by judges, lawyers, mediators and mental health professionals nationwide. This model forms the basis for the co-parent work Ms. Garon and NFRC staff use in their work with parents and children in transition as well as training programs for judges and best interest attorneys.

Celebrating the Evolution of the Family Divisions in Maryland

By YOLANDA F. SONNIER AND KENDRA RANDALL JOLIVET

As family law practitioners, we remember when there were no separate Family Divisions in the Circuit Courts in Maryland. Attorneys and parties would arrive and their case could be scheduled and heard anywhere in the Circuit Court. In some jurisdictions, paternity matters were filed in a different clerk's office than divorce, child support and custody cases. The services offered to the parties also would depend on the judge who heard the matter. There was no uniformity in the treatment of family law cases.

The current Family Divisions in Maryland, however, address family matters with a focus on improving the lives of families and children. The court must also address non-legal issues such as poverty, mental health challenges, substance abuse, and other family stressors. The Family Divisions in Maryland operate under the Unified Family Court model, which allows courts to become more efficient and offers a better system for attorneys, parties, and the entire family unit.

The creation of Family Divisions in Maryland has been a positive change for both attorneys and parties alike. There has been uniformity in the handling of family law cases, document filing procedures, hearing locations, mediations, settlement conferences, and services provided to families.

The following are some of the benefits of Maryland's Family Divisions:

HEARING LOCATION:

The Circuit Court in each county has adopted a specific location where family law hearings are held. This is comforting to parties and attorneys because they know exactly where their hearing will be held. Prior to this change, parties awaiting their cases often witnessed shackled criminal suspects being escorted through the hallways – not a conducive environment for families, especially when children were present. Further, attorneys, who may have more than one family law matter scheduled, can maximize their time with each client because hearings are either in the same location or in close proximity.

CLERK'S OFFICE:

The central location of the family law clerk's office is extremely important, especially given the high number of self-represented litigants in family law cases. The clerk's office can focus on family law questions without being forced to distinguish if the filing should be in a different office because all family law matters are filed in the same location. The clerk's office should have a system where motions are forwarded to the court in a timely manner and consistent with the rules of procedure and prompt scheduling of hearings.

JUDGES:

One of the greatest changes resulting from the creation of Family Divisions is that judges can serve for a longer term in these courts. Typically, a judge who wants to sit in the Family Division will demonstrate understanding of sensitive family issues and respect for attorneys and parties. The judges become familiar with cases and do not transfer out of the Family Division during the period between the scheduling of the hearing and the trial. Attorneys also become familiar with the expectations of the judges. In addition, judges receive extensive training on issues relevant to family law cases, which has a positive effect on the parties and their families.

SUPPORT CFCC'S VITAL WORK

The Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC), a non-profit organization, offers strategic planning and technical assistance to structure Unified Family Courts (UFCs), as well as evaluations of the effectiveness of these courts and their related programs.

Other CFCC services include compiling surveys and reports, formulating performance standards and measures, providing training and workshops, and organizing conferences for the judicial, legal and court communities. CFCC relies on the support of foundations, grants and partners to fulfill its mission to improve the lives of families and children and the health of communities through family court reform.

Visit <http://law.ubalt.edu/centers/cfcc> for additional information. See also: <http://www.facebook.com/CFCCatUBaltLaw>.

IMPROVE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Do you want to keep more students in school and help them re-engage and get excited about learning again? The University of Baltimore School of Law Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC) Truancy Court Program has a solid track record with proven results: nearly three-fourths of participating students during the 2013–2014 academic year reduced their unexcused absences and tardies by at least 65 percent. CFCC's early intervention program leverages the stature and authority of volunteer judges to help students substantially increase attendance and improve grades and behaviors.

Learn how we do it by ordering the *Truancy Court Program Toolkit*. This guide enables you to implement a new program in your schools or enhance an existing one. It includes forms and detailed guides for the team, teachers, and judge.

To learn more, visit <http://law.ubalt.edu/centers/cfcc/publications/index.cfm> or email cfcc@ubalt.edu.

The Family Divisions in Maryland have provided a safe haven for family law cases. Although the system is not perfect, it has been a benefit to the families appearing before the court as well as for the attorneys.

Some practitioners feel that a judge serving for a longer duration may be biased if the judge previously ruled against a particular party and/or questioned the character of that party and his/her witnesses. Additionally, some practitioners have been concerned that a judge may be biased because of residual displeasure toward a given attorney who appeared before the judge in a different case. We feel these opinions are in the minority for attorneys who practice in the Family Divisions.

SERVICES:

Family Divisions allow each party to receive and/or be offered necessary services. The judges and masters are educated on the services for families, including domestic violence programs, mental health treatment/diagnosis, grief counseling, and debt services, and can make recommendations based on the facts of the case.

CHILD CARE SERVICES:

Baltimore City's Family Division, for a period of time, offered child care. We heard numerous positive statements regarding this service and countless complaints when the funding for child care was discontinued. The child care room, staffed by volunteers, provided children with a comforting environment. Although offering this service comes with increased responsibility to ensure the safety of those children, this is a worthy service to offer families appearing in court.

OFFICE TO ASSIST SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANTS:

The courts have seen a steady increase in self-represented litigants. An office providing information to these parties is priceless. This service helps the court, the parties, the attorneys and, ultimately, the families. These offices typically offer pamphlets and information about mental health issues, crisis intervention, conflict resolution, and employment opportunities to assist the general public. They also offer family law form pleadings and instructions for completing and filing.

PROACTIVE INTERVENTIONS:

The evolution of the Family Divisions has incorporated measures to encourage parties to work together and cooperate with each other on a long-term basis. Programs have included court-ordered parenting classes, mediation, and settlement conferences, with the goal being mutual resolution and a focus on the children. These interventions also have helped cut costs for the parties and have freed the court to handle cases that cannot be resolved through these interventions.

The Family Divisions in Maryland have provided a safe haven for family law cases. Although the system is not perfect, it has been a benefit to the families appearing before the court as well as for the attorneys.

We conclude with a list of our "Top 10 Best Practices" for Family Courts:

TOP 10 BEST PRACTICES FOR FAMILY COURTS:

1. Implement an integrated and comprehensive approach to handle and resolve all cases involving children and families in a fair, timely, efficient, and cost effective manner.
2. Assure proper training for all judges/judicial officers.
3. Offer resources to reduce court recidivism, including budget education, co-parenting, and conflict resolution.
4. Activate early case management.
5. Use electronic filings.
6. Limit discovery to salient issues and facts.
7. Offer alternative dispute resolution opportunities to avoid/deter litigation and minimize emotional harm to children and families.
8. Offer adequate services to assist litigants with issues relating to limited English proficiency, domestic violence, and non-traditional families.
9. Offer adequate services to assist self-represented litigants.
10. Provide timely resolution of matters before the court, including motion resolution and hearing dates.



Yolanda F. Sonnier and Kendra Randall Jolivet are partners in Randall & Sonnier, LLC in Maryland. Their firm practice areas consist of Family Law, Child Advocacy, Personal Injury and Civil Litigation matters. They can be reached at attorneys@randallsonnier.com.



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ASK THE EDITOR: Unified Family Courts cover a myriad of issues, problems and innovations. If you have questions you would like us to address, or if you want to contribute to the newsletter, please send your suggestions to us. We will try to include them in upcoming editions of the *Unified Family Court Connection*. Send your questions or contributions to: cfcc@ubalt.edu.

FEEDBACK: We value your opinions and your comments! We look forward to hearing from you at cfcc@ubalt.edu.

MAILING LIST: If you want to be added to our mailing list for the newsletter or know of others who would like to receive the *Unified Family Court Connection*, please send your request (with names and addresses) to: cfcc@ubalt.edu.

DVD ON UNIFIED FAMILY COURTS NOW AVAILABLE

A compelling DVD, "Unified Family Courts: Efficient, Effective, Responsible," puts a human face on the Unified Family Court (UFC), a court model designed to address therapeutically and holistically the complex nature of family law cases. The DVD contrasts the experiences of two women in their divorce proceedings. As portrayed in the DVD, one woman was subject to a traditional court system, while the other's divorce was handled in a UFC. The University of Baltimore School of Law's Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families Children and the Courts produced the DVD, which includes interviews with judges, attorneys, services providers and UFC experts.

For a free copy of the DVD, please email Professor Barbara A. Babb at bbabb@ubalt.edu.



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