



# Connection

UNIVERSITY OF BALTIMORE SCHOOL OF LAW ♦ CENTER FOR FAMILIES, CHILDREN AND THE COURTS

## Family Court Services: Safety, Accessibility and Convenience

BY PAMELA CARDULLO ORTIZ, ESQ.

In some ways, the Unified Family Court movement is hardly radical. After all, courts have been deciding child access issues since Solomon offered to partition the baby. When a court undertakes family court reform, it is essentially committing itself to do very ordinary work in extraordinary ways.

Family court reform in Maryland has been driven by a set of core values which include, among others: promoting parents as primary decision-makers for themselves and their children, ensuring access to the family

*Family courts undertake the age-old task of resolving family disputes by addressing underlying family problems.*

justice system for all, providing judges and decision-makers critical information to make informed decisions, stabilizing families in transition, protecting adults and children at risk, and preserving family relationships and support networks.

Family courts are in a unique position to identify and address family problems. The legal problems that families present are often one aspect of a complex set of issues and family dynamics. Family courts recognize this opportunity. By providing services to these families, courts can make or permit the parties to make more effective decisions, reduce recidivism, and promote better long-term outcomes for children and their parents. Family courts undertake the age-old task of resolving family disputes by addressing underlying family problems.

## Judicial Leadership: The Guiding Force in Creating the Unified Family Court

BY JUDGE THELMA WYATT MOORE

The Fulton County Family Court is a model court reflecting institutional change under judicial leadership. The court operates so efficiently that it is sometimes difficult to realize it has not always existed.

The court is not only a model one in our state for family issues, but it also is a model for case management and case disposition processes.

### THE NEED FOR A FAMILY COURT

Prior to the establishment of the family court, we, as judges, constantly juggled rule nisi hearings and trials on divorce, child support, child custody, and contempt with the daily caseloads of criminal felony and civil cases. Attorneys faced time limits, domestic litigants felt short-changed, and judges were stymied in making decisions because of lack of time and information. Urgent attention to domestic cases was delayed due to the court's mandatory attention to felony criminal matters.

Domestic cases comprised three quarters of the total civil-related filings. Moreover, the process of adjudication of family law issues and disputes consumed almost half of the resources of Georgia's Superior Courts, in addition to separate juvenile court jurisdiction.

The tipping point came when I adjudicated a domestic case with allegations that the husband had threatened suicide and that this constituted a threat to the lives of his two children. The weight of my decision, in that and every case, loomed large as I considered the gravity of the family's circumstances.

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Pamela Cardullo Ortiz, Esq., executive director of the Department of Family Administration for the Maryland Administrative Office of the Courts.

### WHAT SERVICES?

In Maryland, core services are offered which complement the values driving family court reform in the state. These fall into five general categories:

- ▶ Alternative Dispute Resolution Services
- ▶ Evaluative Services
- ▶ Educational or Therapeutic Services

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# A Practitioner's Reflection on the Value of a Unified Family Court and the Importance of Local Bar Support

BY RANDALL M. KESSLER, ESQ.

We all fear change. Fear of the unknown is one of the great commonalities of human beings, particularly lawyers. As we grow older, we get more comfortable with the routines, local rules, and procedures. Trying to develop a family court requires change, and that is scary.

When Atlanta began the development of its family court in the late 1990's, there was much fear and resistance.

In early 1997, I received a call from a friend who had become a superior court judge in Georgia. He told me that the Fulton County Superior Court chief judge was going to announce that there would be a family court and that I, as the leader of the Atlanta Bar Association's Family Law Section, needed to attend and offer the bar's assistance.

With many in attendance, the chief judge announced plans to develop a family court, in cooperation with the American Bar Association (ABA), which had designated Atlanta as one of its pilot sites for a unified family court project.

Lawyers were invited to participate, as the court needed assistance from all walks of life and, most importantly, from the local bar association.

Perhaps one reason for the success of the Fulton County Family Division was the "train got on the tracks" before anybody who wanted to was able to stop it. Once that train was on the tracks, my peers and I took the position that it was more productive to develop the blueprint than to complain about it later. We volunteered our time, and the court wholeheartedly accepted our help.

Our involvement in the planning process proved to be an invaluable experience. We agreed to write special rules that the court would use. In order to do this, we formed a committee of local family law attorneys and met with the judges who would serve on the family court bench. There were great exchanges of information. For example, lawyers learned that judges appreciate pre-trial orders, while judges came to understand that attorneys detest lengthy pre-trial orders. Those understandings led to a compromise.

A compromise also was reached regarding discovery disputes, now enabling attorneys to submit a one-page letter outlining a discovery dispute. The compromise allowed the court to resolve the discovery dispute without either side forfeiting the right to file a motion to compel discovery if the attempt to resolve the dispute with this one-page letter fails, which happens rarely.

Another task of the committee was to help select and screen judicial officers or assistants who would help the court resolve temporary or emergency hearings or status conferences. We developed the application form and the criteria for those positions, including determining the required number of years of experience in family law practice and recommending that applicants forfeit their right to practice in the jurisdiction, with no guarantee that they would be used for a particular number of hours.

The nominating committee was comprised of members of every local bar organization, including the Asian bar, the Hispanic bar, and the women's bar, as well as community leaders and clergy members. The committee interviewed each applicant before giving the judges a short list of nominations. The judges chose the officers. Through this process, the local bar was assured that judges were not choosing friends, but they were selecting from a list of lawyers approved by the local bar.

The point of the story, based upon my experience, is that a court or community developing a family court might need to "shoot the starting gun" at the same time as they are asking lawyers to become involved. I am fairly certain that if the court proceeds by asking lawyers to agree with the establishment of a family court before initiating reform, 95 percent of the lawyers would say "no." The opportunity to be part of the planning process at the beginning, however, counteracts some of that reluctance.

Feedback sessions also helped smooth the transition from a non-family court to a family court. One such session involved an hour of complaints and other feedback from lawyers directly to the judges and the family court director, followed by another hour of anonymous criticisms. I facilitated this exchange, which involved listening to the lawyers air their grievances and "translating" these concerns into questions or comments presented anonymously to the judges so that no lawyer would be afraid to voice his or her real opinion. While none of the criticisms was significant or severe, they often were helpful.



## THE CENTER FOR FAMILIES, CHILDREN AND THE COURTS

University of Baltimore School of Law  
1420 North Charles Street  
Baltimore, Maryland 21201

Telephone: 410-837-5750

Fax: 410-837-5737

E-Mail: [cfcc@ubalt.edu](mailto:cfcc@ubalt.edu)

Web site: [law.ubalt.edu/cfcc](http://law.ubalt.edu/cfcc)

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Judith D. Moran, *Senior Fellow for Administration*

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Mimi Lumeh, *Administrative Assistant*

Georgene Kaleina, *Editor*

Alice Cherbonnier, *Design/Production*

# Social Services Coordinator Observes First-Hand the Impact of Substance Abuse in Family Court Cases

BY GLORIA DANZIGER

Anna, a four-year-old girl, was caught in the middle of her unmarried parents' battle over raising her. No matter what her mother did, the father disagreed and filed petition after petition in the Baltimore City Circuit Court's Family Division.

"The father essentially was using the courts to vent his anger and frustration," said Kathy Coleman, the Family Division's Social Services Coordinator. "He was a substance abuser and that had a lot to do with his anger and frustration. It took away his coping abilities. The couple was so hostile with each other that it disrupted their co-parenting."

Their case had filled several volumes when a judge said, "Enough is enough." The couple was ordered to long-term, co-parenting counseling, and the father was ordered to counseling for his substance abuse issues.

Five years later, Anna, not her real name, and her parents are a success story. The parents are civil in their dealings with each other. Anna is an honor roll student. The court no longer is involved and "they have made wonderful progress with their co-parenting. The mother has called me several times to thank us for that order to the co-parenting classes," according to Coleman. "The father got his act together. We do have success stories."

In her job, Coleman sees many families with similar issues. She is responsible for creating and maintaining a list of community resources, developing partnerships within the community, completing substance abuse evaluations, making the appropriate referrals to counseling, monitoring client compliance, and referring a party to an appropriate community program based on input from a judge, master, or family division administrator.

At times, Ms. Coleman's job even takes on tasks that typically are not associated with coordinating social services—resolution of custody and visitation disputes between self-represented litigants, for example, and, on occasion, crisis intervention.

Coleman's counterparts nationwide face a similar challenge. At the national level, substance abuse



Kathy Coleman, Social Services Coordinator of the Baltimore City Circuit Court's Family Division.

and substance dependence impact the welfare and the integrity of families and children. Parental drug use correlates with child neglect and abuse, as well as with children's school performance and mental and physical health.

The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University noted that more than 35 million children, accounting for half of the children in this country, live in a home where a parent or other adult uses tobacco, drinks heavily or binge drinks, or uses illicit drugs.

According to the center's 2005 report, titled "Family Matters: Substance Abuse and the American Family," alcohol and drug users were three to four times more likely to engage in child abuse and neglect than non-drug users. The report noted that drug and alcohol use were factors that influenced parental separation and divorce.

These findings have significant implications for the nation's family courts because family law litigation and juvenile proceedings may be caused, in part, by an underlying substance abuse problem.

As such, this problem is one that family courts across the nation grapple with daily.

From its inception in 1996, the Baltimore City Circuit Court Family Division has incorporated a commitment to address the problem of substance abuse among the family court litigant population.

"This is a significant issue in Baltimore City," Coleman said. "The city's statistics say there are 60,000 addicts in Baltimore City. That's a horrible problem. It's now getting the attention it needs because it has a huge impact on families, our society and the courts."

The traditional designation for a Social Services Coordinator is "Case Manager"—a term that fails to capture the drama and challenges of Coleman's day-to-day work. About 85 percent of her clients and referrals are uninsured or under-insured. Nearly 80 percent need basic life skills counseling, including anger management, positive coping skills, parenting and co-parenting skills, and communication skills.

While Coleman addresses a wide range of problems, there is one issue that runs throughout the majority of referrals—substance abuse and/or addiction.

Coleman tackles the challenges of managing a case that involves substance abuse or addiction by completing a referral form that she receives from a judicial officer or a program director. The form indicates what a litigant needs generally with respect to evaluation or assessment of a substance abuse problem.

"From there I begin to chart a course," explains Coleman. "I use two forms of assessments. I conduct a mini-assessment for a mental health screening or a peripheral issue. For substance abuse evaluations, I have an eleven-page psychosocial assessment. It is the most comprehensive evaluation that I have ever conducted."

The psychosocial assessment Coleman uses was developed by the former director of the Tuerk House, an inpatient, outpatient, and long-term treatment program for uninsured residents of Baltimore. The comprehensive assessment considers the developmental stages of life, such as early childhood, adolescence, and early and middle adulthood, as well as education, work history, family history, and foster care history, if applicable.

Coleman notes: "The people who are assessed either love it or hate it. Those who love it have been waiting for the chance to tell their story. Those who hate it feel that it is intrusive and do not see why or how their childhood experiences could influence their adult decisions."

The assessment protocol is designed to identify, among other issues, whether substance use is a symptom of a greater problem that has not been identified or resolved.

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# Family Court Services *from page 1*

- ▶ **Safety and Protection Services**
- ▶ **Legal Services**

Much is at stake for court-involved families. For this reason, it is essential that services be provided in a manner that is safe, convenient, and accessible for all. What works and what does not may vary from court to court. With ten years of experience in family court reform, Maryland courts have identified some successful program features that promote safety, convenience, and accessibility.

## ON-SITE OR OFF-SITE?

Whether a service should be offered at the courthouse or elsewhere depends on the nature of the service. Courts should provide services on-site when doing so would promote the ease or convenience of the parties, would enhance their safety, and is financially and physically feasible. On-site services might include:

**Self-Help Centers.** Clerks and court staff will direct litigants looking for forms and assistance to the center. Having this just “down the hall” will make it more likely that individuals will get the documents, information or referrals they need.

**Child Waiting Areas.** A family-friendly waiting area with toys and books, whether staffed or unstaffed, can greatly aid families who already are stressed over being at the courthouse.

**Emergency Services.** Often families come to court in crisis, looking for immediate resolution to emergency legal matters. Even if the law cannot provide an immediate legal solution, it is a good idea to have a procedure for handling emergency matters on-site. This may include mediators or alternative dispute resolution (ADR) professionals who can resolve short-term issues through some form of dispute resolution if both parties are at the courthouse. It also may include custody or mental health evaluators, substance abuse assessors, or others who can interview the party or parties and provide a brief evaluation of the immediate issue before the court.

**Legal Programs to Aid Victims of Domestic Violence.** Many Maryland courts provide on-site space for advocates and attorneys serving victims of domestic violence. These programs provide on-site safety planning, assistance in petitioning for temporary protection, and representation in final protective order hearings. Because abusers often control when and how victims can leave the house, on-site programs enable victims to get assistance and obtain a protective order after a single sojourn outside the home.

Other programs are provided more appropriately outside the courthouse. Private practitioners provide many services in professional offices, which may be more appropriate settings. If the courthouse is not open and staffed by security personnel outside normal business hours, an off-site location may be necessary to permit the service to be offered at more convenient times for the parties. Courts should offer programs off-site if it would be more convenient for the parties or if offering the program in the courthouse might be off-putting or inappropriate.

**Visitation Services.** Supervised visitation or monitored exchange services should occur in safe, neutral settings with appropriate security

during the hours when most families spend time with one another. This generally means evenings and weekends. The space ideally should have separate entrances and waiting areas for each parent in order to promote safety and reduce conflict. Most of all, it should provide a home-like setting with family-friendly furnishings, toys, and games. Safety and security should be provided in a discreet way so those provisions interfere as little as possible in the parent-child interactions.

**Evaluative Services.** Custody or mental health evaluations often involve a broad range of interaction between the professional and the family. Most clinicians have more suitable settings for parent and child interviews. These services usually also require the evaluator to visit the home, school, and other settings.

**Services for Non-English Speakers.** Foreign-born litigants may have a different set of assumptions about how the justice system works based on their knowledge of their own country. They also may be concerned that their immigration status will be called into question if they enter the courthouse or approach uniformed officers at the door. Self-help services, educational programs, and victim services for non-English speakers might be more effective if offered in community-based locations frequented by specific populations. In Maryland, the judiciary funds a Latino Legal Access Program in one jurisdiction where forms and basic family law information are provided to Spanish speakers at several community sites.

## ACCESS DISGUISED AS CONVENIENCE

Courts need to consider convenience as just another way to ensure all individuals can access the family justice system. Maryland’s Somerset County Circuit Court recently has requested funding to expand its Family Law Self-Help Center to a second location in the southern part of the county. Somerset County’s small population and caseload might suggest a second site as unnecessary, but this bucolic jurisdiction on the Lower Eastern Shore is a community of farmers and watermen, with a lot of rural poverty and no public transportation. Extending services to a second site can enhance access to the family court for the county’s rural poor.

## SAFETY, ACCESSIBILITY AND CONVENIENCE

Regardless of whether a service is provided on-site or off-site, courts should keep several considerations in mind:

- ▶ Provide family court services in facilities that are accessible under the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- ▶ Unless otherwise agreed to by the parties, offer services at a neutral site, accessible by public transportation, within the jurisdiction.
- ▶ Provide services in a site that is safe for participants and has adequate security. When the court orders parties to come together, for example, for mediation or educational programs, we need to be mindful that we may be putting the parties and others at risk.

*see next page*

## FAMILY COURT SERVICES *from pg. 4*

- ▶ Accommodate the needs of participants by offering services at various times of the day or days of the week.
- ▶ Provide signage that clearly directs litigants and makes it easy for them to know where to go. Post hours of operation and who is eligible for the program so litigants know whether and when to return. Post signage in all languages prevalent in the jurisdiction.
- ▶ Post in a clearly visible place information about where litigants can turn for assistance when a particular program is closed.
- ▶ Avoid legal or Latin terminology in program names, signage, and written materials.
- ▶ Develop a procedure or protocol to identify underlying issues of family violence before referring parties to mediation or other programs, which may be inappropriate when there is a history of violence.
- ▶ Pay attention to what happens in the parking lot. Design security procedures and resources to ensure participant safety before, during, and after services are provided.

## ADAPT TO LOCAL CONDITIONS

Ultimately, each court must develop its services in ways that meet the needs of its citizens and are most likely to ensure that families and the court can benefit. This means the court must build its program to address local needs, capitalizing on local strengths.

All courts in Maryland offer co-parenting education for parents litigating child access issues. The Baltimore City Circuit Court has found that the traditional course does not address the needs of its large population of parents who had never married one another. Working with a large community-based mental health provider, the court has developed a “shared parenting” course for these never-married parents.

The best spectrum of services is one tailored to local needs, built using the resources at hand, and designed to complement the broader spectrum of services available in the community. ■

**Note:** Maryland has developed a set of screening tools and protocols. See *Maryland Judiciary, Screening Cases for Family Violence Issues to Determine Suitability for Mediation and Other Forms of ADR*. Annapolis, Md., 2005. A copy may be found at [www.courts.state.md.us/family/pdf/screening.pdf](http://www.courts.state.md.us/family/pdf/screening.pdf).

Pamela Cardullo Ortiz is the executive director of the Department of Family Administration for the Maryland Administrative Office of the Courts, which has administrative/budgetary responsibility for Maryland’s Circuit Court Family Divisions and Family Services Programs.

## Judicial Leadership *from pg. 1*

*Who better to lead such a massive project than a judge, by sheer force of the office?*

I resolved then to create a family court—where the adversarial nature of the system was replaced with a resolution-oriented culture; where scheduled conferences obliterated delays inherent in the old system; where the judge’s undivided attention was devoted to the family; where psychiatric, psychological, and psychosocial evaluations and counseling would be available; and where persons who could not otherwise afford legal counsel would be afforded access to the court system.

### THE CREATION OF THE FULTON COUNTY FAMILY COURT

There is no question that the judges’ clout was the most promising means to accomplish the goal. Questions remained about how to start and how to proceed.

The Fulton County Family Court needed judicial vision, perception, influence, and commitment. I started with the concept that I knew what we wanted and needed. On the other hand, how was I to obtain buy-in from others, including the judiciary, elected officials, the legal community, and the community at large?

Our mission was truly a judicially-led effort, from the community up to the highest elected officials. I decided to form a task force to thrash out the proposal.

Our first order of business was to conceive and formalize our mission statement in order to move forward. Our mission statement became—“to provide a speedy, certain, comprehensive, non-adversarial approach to the judicial resolution of multiple family problems and disputes, while more systematically and effectively addressing the interests of children and the family unit.”

Over 200 persons were invited to attend a task force meeting, where we presented the concept. We then presented our recommendations at each monthly or bi-weekly meeting to ensure the participants’ buy-in.

Various subcommittees were formed in the areas of: one family-one judge; training and accessibility; coordination of cases and case management; and professional services, volunteers and child care services. By working diligently in sub-committee and task force formats, we came together, with each group making recommendations in a presentation to the entire body. When approved by the body, the areas were incorporated into the overall plan.



Judge Thelma Wyatt Moore, of the Superior Court of Fulton County, Georgia.

Judges, lawyers, community activists, social scientists, mental health and counseling professionals, child advocates, and elected officials all claimed ownership of this family court proposal. Although the proposal constituted a milestone, this was only the beginning of the effort. We still had to obtain the approval of the Fulton County Bench, Fulton County Commission, local and state bar associations, the Judicial Council of Georgia (which represents all levels of courts in our state), the Supreme Court of Georgia (judiciary), rules and appropriations legislative committees, and the entire House and Senate. Lastly, we had to obtain the governor’s signature on the bill for a pilot family court project.

*see page 7*

# A Practitioner's Reflections on the Value of a Unified Family Court

from page 2

The main reason that our court is successful is that everyone acknowledges that the rules are flexible and that nothing is iron-clad. We also have very good judges.

I am convinced that if the court had developed its own rules and procedures without any input from lawyers, there would have been a catastrophe in the Fulton County Family Division. We achieved a successful family court because of the cooperation, interaction, and willingness of lawyers and judges to work together for the common good of Georgia citizens.

There are, of course, always pitfalls, including the fact that most lawyers do not appreciate how much time this system devotes and needs to devote to pro se litigants. Lawyers need to gain an appreciation for this.

Lawyers generally do understand, on the other hand, the importance of pro bono work and of helping the court in those situations. We lawyers also understand that volunteerism is important.

Many of our local lawyers perform "late case evaluations" where, as a last resort, a judge can send parties to an experienced divorce lawyer to get an idea of what they think a judge would do in a particular case. That gives the parties one last possible "reality check."

I am honored to have played a part in the development of Fulton County's Family Division. Since my involvement in the Fulton County planning process, I have served as chairperson for the ABA's Family Law Section Family Courts Committee for seven years. I currently chair the ABA's Standing Committee on Substance Abuse, which funds many family court issues and helped support



Randall M. Kessler, a Georgia family law attorney, said the local bar association's involvement in planning family court reform was an "invaluable experience."

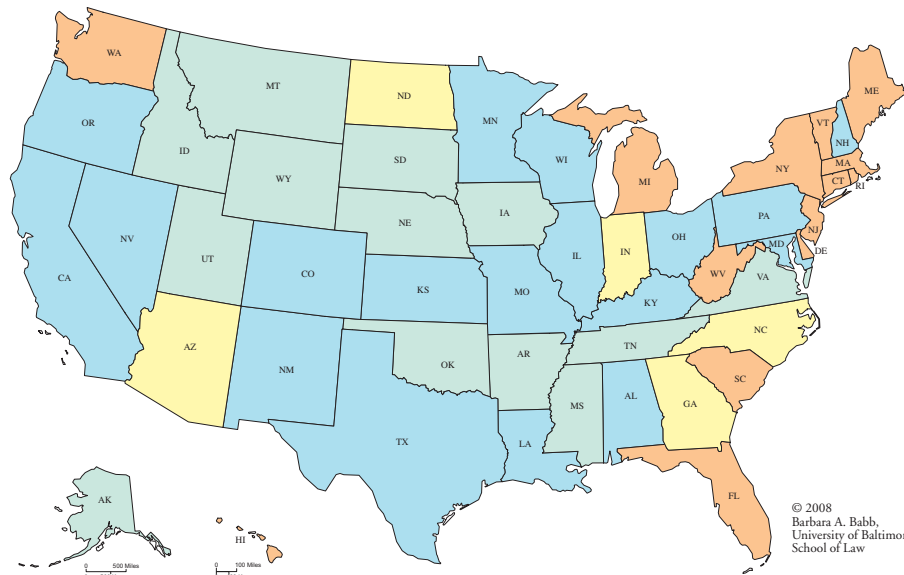
and plan the ABA/University of Baltimore Center for Families, Children and the Courts Summit on Unified Family Courts. The Summit, "Serving Children and Families Efficiently, Effectively, and Responsibly," was held in Baltimore in May 2007.

My experience assisting in the development of the family court in Georgia and other family courts around the country has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my career. I encourage anyone interested in improving the practice of family law to advocate for unified family courts, to develop them where they do not exist, and to improve them where they do exist.

I invite jurisdictions around the country that are developing or improving their own family courts to contact me if they need assistance. Please feel free to get in touch with me about this or any other family law issue. ■

Mr. Kessler is the founding partner of Kessler, Schwarz & Solomiani, P.C. ([www.kssfamilylaw.com](http://www.kssfamilylaw.com)), a domestic relations law firm in Atlanta, Georgia. He can be reached at 404-688-8810 or [rkessler@kssfamilylaw.com](mailto:rkessler@kssfamilylaw.com).

## Family Courts, by State



### LEGEND:

- Statewide Family Courts
- Family Courts in Selected Areas of State
- Statewide Courts Planned or in Pilot Phase
- No Family Court

## Reprints of Nationwide Family Court Survey Article Now Available

A recently published survey outlined a significant shift in family justice system reform, with nearly 75 percent of states nationwide having family courts—either statewide, in selected areas of the state, or pilot/planned family courts.

The survey, *Reevaluating Where We Stand: A Comprehensive Survey of America's Family Justice Systems*, was published in the April 2008 issue of Family Court Review. Barbara A. Babb, an associate professor at the University of Baltimore School of Law and director of the school's Center for Families, Children and the Courts, conducted the nationwide survey.

To receive a reprint of the survey article, please email Professor Babb at [bbabb@ubalt.edu](mailto:bbabb@ubalt.edu).

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Barbara A. Babb,  
University of Baltimore  
School of Law



## Impact of Substance Abuse in Family Court Cases *from pg. 3*

Coleman also uses a well-known source for professionals in the substance abuse/addiction field—the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV).

The DSM-IV defines substance abuse as a “pattern of substance use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress.” The following criteria must occur within a twelve-month period:

- ▶ Recurrent substance use resulting in a failure to fulfill major role obligations at work, school, or home
- ▶ Recurrent substance use in situations in which it is physically hazardous
- ▶ Recurrent substance-related legal problems
- ▶ Continued substance use despite having persistent or recurrent social or interpersonal problems caused or exacerbated by the effects of the substance

“I point out to the clients the criteria for substance abuse and dependence and highlight if they have met any of the criteria,” Coleman explains.

Despite the gravity and extent of many substance abuse disorders, those grappling with these problems often resist and/or distrust the therapeutic process, Coleman said.

“In my experience, clients that never have had a counseling or treatment experience worry about what is expected of them,” Coleman said. “On occasion, the clients ask me what they should say to a counselor or how to respond to a question. Whenever the client-litigant asks me that kind of question, I engage in a role-playing scenario with them. My thinking is that education goes a long way, and I want to alleviate their fear about the therapeutic process. I put on my counselor hat and we engage in a dialogue that mimics counseling.”

Coleman brings to her position the insight and perceptiveness of years of interacting with families and children struggling with substance abuse and addiction.

“For many, counseling involves taking a risk and standing up to the stigma that is linked to the mental health arena, as well as overcoming the huge feeling of vulnerability,” she reveals. “The resistance is sometimes a learned behavior, such as being taught to talk only with family members or friends of the family.”

Coleman compares the therapeutic process to moving into a new house: “I suggest to them that they unload the things that are easiest to carry first and let the therapist help them in moving the heavier pieces. Once they have bought into the house idea, we start to talk about reinventing themselves, if that is desirable. We talk about the investment of reconciling with a child, a marriage, or an aging parent.”

It is that process of re-connecting children, parents, and communities that lies at the heart of the family court’s implementation of the therapeutic process—one that helps Anna and other children caught up in the turmoil of their parents’ fractured relationships. ■

## Judicial Leadership *from pg. 5*

Who better to lead such a massive project than a judge, by sheer force of the office? The entire project may be lengthy, given the scope of planning and the breadth of legal, judicial, and legislative approval. The force and stature of the judicial office carry such weight that those entities with less expertise in family law concede to the judicial expertise.

The community embraced the plan. Other elected officials endorsed it. Their endorsements were made a part of the proposal as it was presented to each body for approval. If they were for us, who could be against us?

Our two-year effort culminated in the Model Family Court Project, signed by the governor in 1998.

### KEY ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL FAMILY COURT

The key elements of a successful family court include:

- ▶ Broad-based bar, judicial, and community support
- ▶ Presiding judges who are committed to and trained in family law
- ▶ A carefully shaped plan, including case management systems setting firm time guidelines to prevent delay
- ▶ Access to justice for all, regardless of ability to pay, including a family law center that provides forms and procedures for persons to proceed pro se
- ▶ Community outreach to educate persons on services available regarding matters of interest, including child custody, child support, seminars for divorcing parents, seminars for children of divorced parents (presented in multi-lingual format)

- ▶ Infusion of psychological, psychiatric, counseling, mediation, and other services that contribute to a successful resolution of family court issues
- ▶ Monitoring, evaluation and review for needed changes

Judicial leadership has constituted the key element in the success of the Fulton County Family Court project. In some states, there is an executive fiat from the top down to create a family court. In that instance, success may depend upon other factors.

The Fulton County Family Court would not have succeeded had it not been for consistent judicial leadership—directing and overseeing the project from conceptualization through execution. The Fulton County Family Court is now an institution used to pattern civil and criminal case management systems.

I am still in awe that we effectuated institutional change in the Georgia justice system, converting the traditional way of handling domestic cases into a family court that helps strengthen families, especially the children. ■

*Judge Thelma Wyatt Moore serves on the Superior Court of Fulton County. She is the architect of the Fulton County Family Court and has served as Chief Judge of the court.*



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## DVD Now Available on Unified Family Courts



**U**nified Family Courts (UFC) represent more than a theoretical court system model for many families who become embroiled in a

divorce. This court system aims to help people going through the myriad of emotions, problems, and struggles. A compelling DVD, called "Unified Family Courts: Efficient, Effective, Responsible," puts a human face on UFCs through the experiences of Candy McCall and Judith Hamilton. McCall went through the legal process in a UFC for her divorce, which she described as "one of the worst things to go through." Hamilton experienced the more fragmented traditional court system and, ultimately, became an attorney representing clients in UFCs.

The University of Baltimore School of Law's Center for Families Children and the Courts produced the DVD, which is interspersed with interviews from judges, attorneys, services providers, and UFC experts.

A. Babb at [bbabb@ubalt.edu](mailto:bbabb@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 in your request (with name and address) to [ccfc@ubalt.edu](mailto:cfcc@ubalt.edu).

### ASK THE EDITOR:

Unified Family Courts cover a myriad of issues, problems and innovations. If you have issues you would like us to address or want to contribute to the newsletter, please send us your suggestions. If you have photos of recent accomplishments, please send them to us. We will try to include them in upcoming editions of the *Unified Family Court Connection*. Send your questions or contributions to [ccfc@ubalt.edu](mailto:ccfc@ubalt.edu).

### FEEDBACK:

We value your opinions and your comments! We look forward to hearing from you at [ccfc@ubalt.edu](mailto:ccfc@ubalt.edu).