

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF TEXAS

Misc. Docket No. 06-**9045**

**ORDER APPOINTING TASK FORCE ON CHILD-PROTECTION CASE
MANAGEMENT AND REPORTING**

1. At both the state and national level, child welfare reform efforts are underway to improve outcomes for children who have been abused or neglected. As a gatekeeper for families in crisis, the judiciary plays an essential role in improving court practice in child-protection cases.
2. With recent federal foster care reform legislation and revisions to Texas laws, our state courts are taking a more active decision-making role in child abuse and neglect cases. Courts are expected to help ensure that every child secures a safe, permanent, and stable home. It is critical that Texas' child-protection courts have the tools and information needed to fulfill their responsibilities to children and families in a timely and effective manner.
3. Delay is a major obstacle to achieving permanency for abused and neglected children, and the uncertainties that result can exacerbate childhood anxiety and cause long-term effects. While the law requires courts to make timely decisions on child placement, combating delay in proceedings that encompass many stages and participants can be more difficult than in other types of cases. Courts must be able to track children's progress, identify children in need of attention, and identify sources of delay in court proceedings.
4. Effective case-flow management is an essential component of successful and timely permanency planning. With the ability to accurately track and analyze caseloads, courts are empowered to improve outcomes for abused and neglected children. Likewise, courts that implement effective case-flow management and tracking systems are better able to demonstrate areas of need and pursue additional state and federal funding sources.
5. Texas child-protection courts do not have access to a uniform statewide case-management system, nor do they have the ability to share court data with child welfare agencies or other courts. While court clerks are required to report a number of data elements concerning civil, criminal, juvenile, and family court cases, child-protection cases are not reported as a separate category, making it difficult to accurately allocate, and effectively access, needed resources.

6. Child-protection courts should be equipped with computerized data systems that can effectively manage specific and detailed timetables for the different stages of litigation, spot cases that have been delayed, measure court progress in case-flow management, and identify best practices. Because Texas has a highly mobile population, an integrated tracking system is needed to ensure that courts may properly maintain their oversight role when children and families relocate.

7. In September, 2005, Texas judicial and executive branch leaders attended the National Summit on the Protection of Children. The delegation recommended that the Supreme Court of Texas appoint a Task Force to develop a uniform case-management and tracking system for child-protection cases under the Office of Court Administration, in conjunction with the Texas Judicial Council and the Judicial Committee on Information Technology, and to aid child-protection courts in improving data analysis and collection.

The Court agrees that a uniform statewide case-management and tracking system is essential to optimal permanency planning and improved outcomes for children and families. Accordingly, the Court HEREBY ORDERS

The appointment and creation of a Supreme Court Task Force on Child-Protection Case Management and Reporting. The Task Force shall serve as a Subcommittee of the Supreme Court Task Force on Foster Care, which will provide staff and administrative support. The Task Force will:

1. develop a proposed plan for a uniform statewide computerized data system for managing and tracking child-protection cases;
2. recommend meaningful data elements to be tracked that will facilitate the adoption of court best-practice measures and inform decisions about allocating existing, and accessing additional, court resources;
3. explore potential federal and national funding sources to aid implementation of the proposed plan;
4. draft an implementation plan and time line that allows immediate gathering of relevant data and reporting, and establishes long-term goals for a uniform statewide case-management and tracking system; and

5. draft a final report to the Court due no later than October 31, 2006. The report should include:
 - a. a summary of progress and challenges the Task Force faced;
 - b. a plan for implementation that identifies potential federal and national funding sources;
 - c. minutes from each Task Force meeting; and
 - d. suggestions of court best practices to improve management and tracking of child-protection cases, including recommendations for collaboration with other courts and child and family welfare agencies.

The following members are hereby appointed:

Catherine Babbitt, Bexar County District Attorneys Office
Charles Bacarisse, District Clerk, Harris County
Honorable Jean Hudson Boyd, 323rd District Court
Mike Bradford, Midland County Commissioner
Cynthia Bryant, Clinical Professor, University of Texas School of Law
Honorable Camile Dubose, Associate Judge
Representative Toby Goodman, Arlington
Margaret Keliher, Dallas County Judge
Honorable Patricia A. Macias, 388th District Court
Diane O'Neal, Clerk, Third Court of Appeals
Carl Reynolds, Administrative Director, Office of Court Administration
Carolyn Rodriguez, Casey Family Foundation
Honorable Dean Rucker, 318th District Court
Jim Schwab, Ph.D., University of Texas at Austin, School of Social Work
Honorable John J. Specia, Jr., 225th District Court
Bill Stoudt, Gregg County Judge
Linda Uecker, District Clerk, Kerr County
Terri Ware, Director of Operations, Department of Family & Protective Services
David Williams, County Attorney, San Saba

The Honorable John J. Specia, Jr., 225th District Court, is designated Chair of the Task Force.

The Honorable Harriet O'Neill, Supreme Court of Texas, is designated as the Court's liaison to the Task Force.

BY THE COURT, IN CHAMBERS, this 22nd day of March, 2006.

Wallace B. Jefferson
Wallace B. Jefferson, Chief Justice

Nathan L. Hecht
Nathan L. Hecht, Justice

Harriet O'Neill
Harriet O'Neill, Justice

J. Dale Wainright
J. Dale Wainright, Justice

Scott Brister
Scott Brister, Justice

David M. Medina
David M. Medina, Justice

Paul W. Green
Paul W. Green, Justice

Phil Johnson
Phil Johnson, Justice

Don R. Willett
Don R. Willett, Justice

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