

April 2011

THANK YOU

On behalf of the judges of Pierce County Superior Court, thank you to everyone who attended and participated in the retirement celebration for Judge Gary Steiner. The food was good, the remarks were very thoughtful, funny, and well received. Judge Steiner and his family had a wonderful time and expressed their appreciation to all who participated. Special thanks go to our Master of Ceremonies, Judge Bryan Chushcoff, our excellent speakers, to Kit Kasner for all her help in arranging the dinner and Judge Ron Culpepper for the Steiner Retirement Party Organizing Committee.

WHAT HAPPENED ON A SUNNY SATURDAY IN MARCH?

Ok, sunny or not, your Superior Court Judges and Commissioners spent Saturday, March 12, 2011, reviewing and updating the Court's strategic plan. A copy of the Court's strategic plan is posted on the Superior Court website so it is always available for the Bar and the public to review. Strategic Planning is focused by the Court's regular executive committee, composed of PJ Chuschoff and Judges Culpepper, Nelson, Hogan and Hickman. Any comments or suggestions on the Court's Strategic Plan may be forwarded to any of them. At the one day Saturday meeting, the Court heard updates about Family and Juvenile Court and continues to focus on the criminal case backlog and resolving delays for civil motions and trials.

GUARDIAN AD LITEM TRAINING

GAL training is scheduled on the third Thursday of each month. April's training is set for Thursday, April 21, 2011 at noon in Courtroom 315 (CCB); speaker is Loren McCollom, Ph.D. in Psychology and the topic is domestic violence.

COURTROOM 100 COMMISSIONER RELOCATION

Matters normally heard before the Court Commissioner in Room 100 will be heard in Courtroom 2A until further notice. **Please watch for signs.**

COURT INFORMATION DESK VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

Pierce County Superior Court, District Court and Tacoma Municipal Court are seeking volunteers to work at the information desks on the 1st and 2nd floors of the County City Building. The goal of this project is to assist building visitors in finding what they need and to provide general information to anyone visiting the building. Volunteers are requested to make a minimum commitment of 5 hours per week. Volunteer service is contingent upon successfully passing a background check. The program was funded by a grant from the State Administrative Office of the Courts. If you are interested in this program or know of someone who might be, please contact Mary Madden at Pierce County Superior Court; (253) 798-2991 or email at mmadden@co.pierce.wa.us

Superior Court Continues Its Progress In Family Court

Contact person: Judge John Hickman (253) 798-6751

Improving Conflict Resolution in Cases with Children in Pierce County Superior Court

In short, 2010 has been a successful year. The momentum established in '08 and '09 continues as attorneys and self-represented litigants adapt and take advantage of our new system of handling high-conflict cases. Pierce County Family Court continued its mission to resolve high-conflict family court cases in an expedited manner through the use of intensive case monitoring and management practices. Family Court cases consist of dissolutions, parenting plans, modifications of custody, non-parental custody, and relocation matters.

Hundreds of children in Pierce County are the subject of custody disputes. All of them live in a state of uncertainty. Fortunately, as a result of the creation of Pierce County Family Court by the judges of Pierce County Superior Court a few years ago, the time these children have to wait to know where they are going to live has been significantly reduced.

More than uncertainty hurts these children. Children who are victims of high-conflict custody “wars” are at risk for school failure, teen pregnancy and criminal behavior. The duration of family conflict is a major source of reduced well-being among children of divorce. Timely resolution of disagreement minimizes the pain and damages these children and their families’ experience. Reducing the time to dispute resolution is facilitated by a dedicated and well-managed judiciary.

Pierce County’s Family Court is comprised of two judicial departments, three commissioners, and a case coordinator. It is a team dedicated to implementing the plan for Family Court while putting into practice learned lessons to reduce conflict and to timely resolve disputes involving the custody of children.

Measuring Success – 2010 Results.

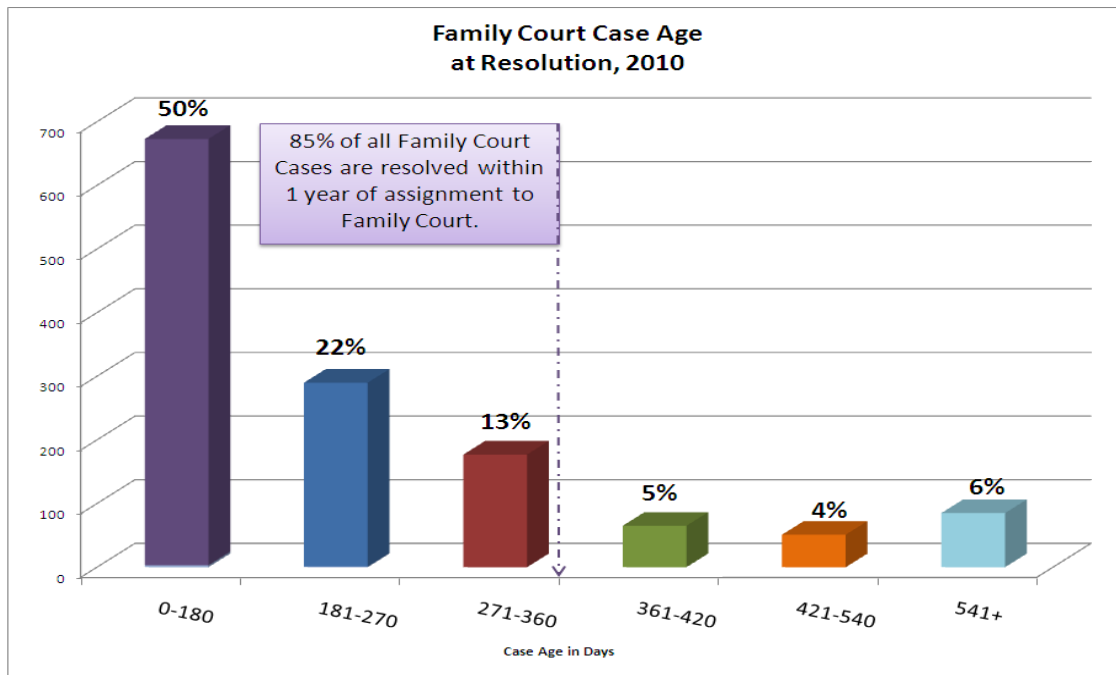
In 2010, Family Court was presented with continued challenges in dealing with families under stress with job losses and increased relocations due to military assignments and transfers due to job opportunities.

Statistics measure progress, help us to focus on our goals and define our strategies for the future. Transparency is a key for stakeholders to see that their efforts are paying off.

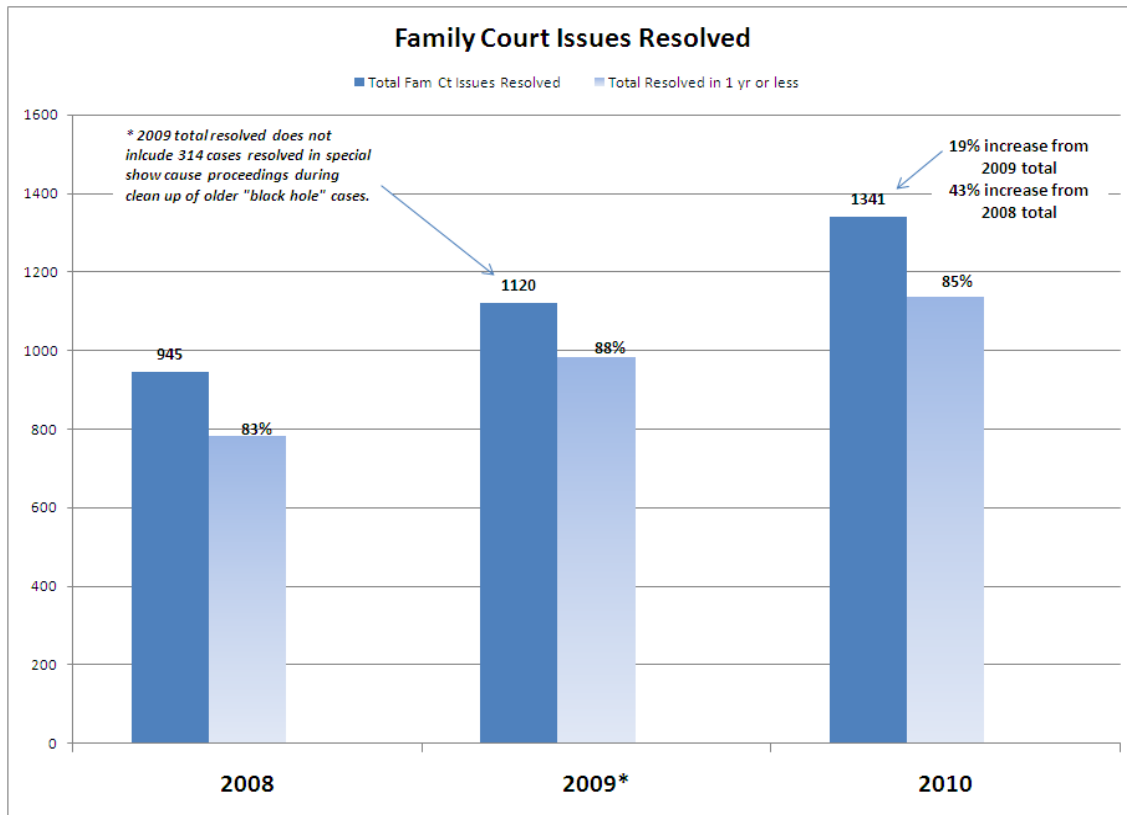
There were 1281 new cases were assigned to the Family Court in 2010 while 1,341 were resolved. Despite an increase in cases assigned, the number of cases pending declined slightly (715 to 688).

Case management through the use of status conferences and non-compliance hearings resulted in 598 non-compliance hearings being held while another 298 were cancelled due to compliance before the hearing.

Family Court continued its success in timely resolving these difficult cases. Family Court held 120 trials in 2010 and nearly 85% of the referred cases were resolved by trial, agreement or dismissal in 12 months or less.



Since 2008 the number of matters resolved in Family Court has increased by 43% while the percentage of those resolved within 12 months has increased by 2% as well.



Relocation matters

These cases receive our highest priority and present some of the most challenging decisions for family court judicial officers. Fortunately, through our team concept, almost all of these cases were resolved within *six* months.

Volunteer Program

In 2010, attorney volunteers handled 75 settlement conferences resolving 32 cases. Unfortunately, by law these volunteers do not have the authority to resolve cases as they did under the court's *pro tem* judge program that was eliminated by county budget cuts. Still, this 43% settlement rate that they achieved greatly assists Family Court stretch the court's limited human resources. These lawyers deserve the thanks of all the citizens of Pierce County.

Effect on Litigants

An e-mail from a mother in family court who had her child returned to her custody, said, "We are fully capable of having a life, our life, because of your signature on those pieces of paper. Thank God you showed faith in me."

When asked where and with whom she would like to be placed, a 13-year-old said, “I want to be around the people I love the most.” Family Court tries to ensure that.

Challenges Ahead.

- *Lack of county and state resources.*
 - *Guardian ad Litem.* Budget cuts present challenges in Family Court. There is little or no public funding for indigent parents who need the services of a Guardian ad Litem (“GAL”). GAL’s provide custody investigations to a judicial officer often in cases involving of allegations of drug or physical or sexual abuse by parents or associated third parties.
 - *Pro tem Judges.* The budget for *pro tem* judges, who try cases as an adjunct of the Superior Court judges, had to be eliminated when county budget cuts began in earnest early in 2009.
- *High Unemployment and Military Deployments.* These issues put pressure on families and increase the demand made on the resources available to Family Court.
- *Self-represented (pro se) litigants.* The number of people representing themselves in court has increased significantly in recent years. They face coping with and understanding a bewildering set of court rules and changing Washington family law. These litigants require extra time from judicial officers and other team members to ensure they have the same access to justice as those represented by counsel. This slows the system and compounds the difficulty of timely resolution of court cases.

“Family court is a success. It works, but there is a cost. It continues to need support from government leaders to ensure proper funding, continued volunteer services by the private bar and the continued support of judicial officers and staff who dedicated to the well-being and safety of countless children in harm’s way. I am confident that in 2011 these challenges will be met with continued success.” – John Hickman, Presiding Family Court Judge, 2010.