

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-explainer3jun03,1,5269478.story>

Q & A | DEPENDENCY COURT

Improved Process Boosts Care, Reduces Cases

By Caitlin Liu
Times Staff Writer

June 3, 2005

In an office on a Monterey Park hill, down the hall from colorful children's wall art and around the corner from a pint-size drinking fountain, Michael Nash holds court.

As Los Angeles County's presiding juvenile judge, he works out of the Edmund D. Edelman Children's Court building, the first courthouse in the nation specifically designed to counter the intimidation that legal systems usually try to impose.

In 1990, Nash became a judge in dependency court. Except for a two-year hiatus, he has been the presiding judge since 1997, overseeing 63 judges, commissioners and referees who handle juvenile delinquency, dependency, traffic and mental health cases.

Long a public advocate for those entering his court, Nash held a one-day "Adoption Saturday" in 1998, bringing together prospective parents, volunteer lawyers and judges to expedite the adoption of 130 foster children. Since then, 20 more Adoption Saturdays have inspired similar events at courthouses across the nation.

To further shield the abused or neglected children who enter the court, what happens is largely kept from public view. But Nash recently agreed to speak with The Times. He said the number of children in the system has been falling rapidly, but problems persist when foster kids must move from home to home.

Question: Los Angeles County has seen a steep drop in the number of dependency court cases. By how much have caseloads been falling?

Answer: In 1998, the county had more than 51,000 children who were under the jurisdiction of dependency court. Today we have 28,000 children. About 24,000 of the court's dependents are in "out-of-home" care, or not living with their parents. About half of those kids are living with relatives, and the other half are in group homes or foster care.

Q: Is the falling dependency caseload a good or bad sign?

A: It's good news. The court system should be made up of families where the abuse was significant, serious cases that require government intervention. We're almost half of where we were a few years ago. But we're still too high in the number of kids coming into court. In a county like this, there should be 20,000 or fewer children.

Q: What caused this decline?

A: A number of things have contributed to the drop over the last six or seven years.

No. 1, we have more than doubled the number of adoptions from the foster care system.

Since 1998, the court's Adoption Saturdays have facilitated the adoption of more than 6,000 foster children.

In total, more than 14,000 foster children in the county have been adopted during that time, which is more than twice as many from any comparable time in our court history.

The law has also changed so that family members who become guardians can receive subsidies more easily and are able to stay out of the court system. Another factor is better social work practices. In the old days, when the Department of Children and Family Services wanted to do an investigation, they would yank the kid out of home first, and talk about it later.

Now, social workers try to do better assessments to see whether removing children out of their home is really necessary. By providing services to families in their communities, that helps keep families together and children out of the court system.

From the mid-'80s to the mid-'90s, a good deal of our caseload was driven by the crack cocaine epidemic. We saw tons of kids born under the influence of drugs.

While crack cocaine and newer drugs like methamphetamine are still an issue, we're not seeing the numbers of drug-related cases we did years ago.

There are some who say economic factors play into all this, but there may be a lag time because even during recent recession years the number of dependency cases were falling.

Others cite changing demographics, such as women having fewer children, for playing a possible role.

Q: In recent years, county officials have pursued a policy of keeping more troubled families together. But a handful of children have died after judges returned them to their parents. What is being done to ensure that families are being reunited in the best interest of each child?

A: None of us have a crystal ball. Under the best of circumstances, bad things can happen. There

are instances where perhaps the best decision wasn't made.

Maybe the decision to return a child wasn't based on sufficient information. How social workers assess families and the potential risks to a child is also a factor.

The Department of Children and Family Services is in the process of implementing a better risk-assessment tool, which hopefully will provide objective criteria for social workers to evaluate families so that we can have more consistency in deciding whether to take away a child or return a child.

But the bottom line is the number of deaths is still very low. In a sense, they're almost statistically insignificant, but of course there's nothing insignificant about a child in the system who dies.

Generally speaking, children who are with their families, in a safe and healthy environment, are much better off than being in the court system.

The family is the foundation of our society.

Q: For children who are taken from their families, one of the biggest challenges they have faced is the lack of coordination and sharing of information when they move from home to home, according to children's advocates. What has been done to address this?

A: Years ago, the foster system and school districts seemed to operate on different tracks — and each pointed to the other as being responsible for a child's education.

That wasn't working. Children weren't getting enrolled in school, children were having problems transferring records from school to school. It was a common problem.

Since then, the county Board of Supervisors created an "education coordinating council" so that everyone in the juvenile education process can communicate.

There are now laws that require officials to try to keep children at their original school, even when the children have to be moved to a different home. For many years, the dependency court system has had the policy of assigning the same judge to oversee a case. The only time a child gets a new judge is if the judge leaves or retires.

Q: What issues remain unresolved?

A: There is still a problem transferring records, such as children's medical histories and needs, when they move to a new home.

The problem is caused in part by a lack of coordination and in part by the large volume of information involved. The county also has not developed the appropriate computer database technology to keep track of foster children's records.

There is more coordination going on now than years ago, but it's still not good enough.

There are constant discussions on how to improve coordination.

That is a question that should be raised with the Department of Children and Family Services, the Probation Department and the folks who work in the county's Children's Commission.

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.

TMSReprints

Article licensing and reprint options

Copyright 2005 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#)