

Court to help foster care children get permanent home sooner

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Published: Wednesday, June 22, 2005 8:27 PM EDT

There was a time when foster care cases in Washington shared the same overcrowded court dockets as criminal and civil matters, meaning children often were forced to wait weeks or even months before their cases were heard.

While they waited to learn where they might end up, children were left lingering, sometimes drifting from one foster home to another.

But in recent years the District has made strides to improve and expedite its handling of foster care cases. In recognition of those achievements, a national foster care improvement initiative was announced Wednesday at Washington's Superior Court.

"The Family Court for the District of Columbia ... has become a model for court agency and community partnerships," said Howard Davidson, director of the American Bar Association's Center on Children and Law.

A panel of judicial leaders, including Davidson, discussed details of the new curriculum developed to help courts deal with foster care cases faster and more effectively.

"What they came up with validates some of the things we have been doing over the last four years," said Judge Lee F. Satterfield, who oversees Washington's Family Court.

The Family Court was created in 2001 after Congress passed a bill requiring D.C. Superior Court to revamp the way it handled child welfare and family cases. Family Court is unique because one judge handles all matters for one family and because social service providers are present in the courtroom to offer services.

The new national curriculum - created by a consortium of experts and nonprofit groups - will teach local and state courts how to better collaborate with child welfare agencies and streamline foster care cases, ultimately finding permanent homes for children more quickly.

"Growing up in a stable, healthy home is the most important thing that we can give a child," Satterfield said.

Foster children who suffer neglect or abuse are again traumatized when they are removed from home, even though someone in the home likely is the root of the problem, the judge added.

"If you're going to do all that to a kid, you better have a plan for where they're going to be ... It's our responsibility to figure out where they're going to be permanently and get them there quickly," Satterfield said.

While Satterfield said the court has come a long way in dealing with foster care cases, some challenges remain and he is eager to learn from this national initiative.

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