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Court Practices Impact How Quickly Foster Children Find Permanent Homes, New Texas Appleseed Study Finds

Austin, TX – Best court practices—when applied consistently—correlate with moving more children more quickly out of state-supervised foster care and into safe, permanent homes, according to new findings released today by public interest law center Texas Appleseed. The report further shows no apparent correlation between how much counties spend on child placement review hearings and better outcomes for children in foster care.

“This report confirms that certain recommended practices are indeed best practices in every sense of the word. In the seven surveyed jurisdictions, courts’ practices seem to significantly impact how soon children in long-term foster care find permanent homes,” said **Senior District Judge John Specia**, who serves as the Jurist in Residence for the Texas Supreme Court Children’s Commission. The Children’s Commission and **Casey Family Programs** collaborated with Texas Appleseed on this study.

Texas Appleseed **Executive Director Rebecca Lightsey** said the best court practices recommended in Appleseed’s 2010 statewide foster care study “appear critical” to reducing the number of children and the length of time children spend in long-term foster care or Permanent Managing Conservatorship (PMC) in the seven studied jurisdictions. Children in foster care usually enter PMC between 12 to 18 months after Child Protective Services becomes involved. There are currently about 13,500 children in long-term foster care in Texas.

“When courts hold PMC placement review hearings *a minimum of every four months*—which is more often than the state’s current mandate of twice-a-year, and when *children in long-term foster care attend these hearings* with a well-informed and *engaged advocate*, these children find permanent homes more quickly,” Lightsey said.

Court practices vary widely among Texas court jurisdictions, and the two jurisdictions—**Travis County** and the **Child Protection Court (CPC) of Central Texas**—that routinely hold more frequent hearings, have children in court, and ensure children have effective advocates *perform significantly better than the statewide average* in finding permanent homes for children in PMC and in reducing the total

number of children in long-term foster care. Between 2007 and 2011, the number of children in PMC decreased by 15% per capita statewide, compared to a 57% per capita decrease in Travis County, which began implementing many best practices in 2007.

Other Texas court jurisdictions included in the Texas Appleseed report include: Bexar County, Dallas County, Harris County, the CPC of Permian Basin, and the CPC of Northeast Texas. Among the larger urban jurisdictions, Travis County has the fewest children in PMC.

“In Harris County, the overall population of children in long-term foster care is steadily increasing and these children are staying in PMC longer. Harris County has unique challenges, but stakeholders and judges seem committed to making much needed changes,” Lightsey said.

Integral to the report is the survey and analysis of court costs related to PMC cases provided by pro bono partner **DLA Piper** and **Allen Page, CPA, JD**, Lightsey said. “The correlation between the consistent use of best court practices and moving more children more quickly from foster care to permanent homes in these seven jurisdictions appears to exist *irrespective of how much counties spend on permanency review hearings*,” she said.

“To devote more time to these cases and hold hearings more frequently, courts must have adequate resources,” Lightsey said. “One of our next steps will be to advocate for the sufficient allocation of these resources so that courts can better serve Texas children.”

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