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## Fast Facts

Goals of New Haven Regional Children's Probate Court:

- Divert children and families from welfare system
- Improve case management and delivery of services
- Empower families to become engaged, active caregivers

## Court Helps Troubled Families

By Jack Penchoff

When troubled families walk into the **New Haven Regional Children's Probate Court**, they are entering a system dedicated to dealing with their unique problems.

The court is a model of interbranch cooperation among the executive, judicial and legislative branches of Connecticut state government. That collaboration earned the court recognition as one of eight national winners of CSG's 2006 Innovations Awards.

The probate court system in Connecticut operated with the same structure for 300 years. Nearly every town has an elected probate court judge to handle general estate proceedings and an increasing case load of guardianship and custody matters. That's 123 separate courts.

Things began to change in 2003 when Casey Family Services, a program of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, conducted a study of the state's probate court system.

The study concluded that there were few support and mental health services for families involved in the probate system; there was a lack of timely or clear communication from social workers to the probate court; and there was no monitoring of families after guardianship decisions were made.

"We had information, but not the in depth information we have now," said Judge Frank J. Forgione of the North Branford Probate Court and administrative judge of the New Haven Regional Children's Probate Court.

Researchers, academics and judicial experts developed a plan for the first regional probate court to address the concerns raised by the report. In 2004, the Connecticut General Assembly authorized the pilot program in the New Haven region. In 2005, legislators authorized six more regional children's probate courts.

The New Haven court was designed to cover all children's probate matters in 10 towns and cities. The region mirrors the Department of Children and Family Services region. The DCF investigates and provides information for the courts.

The regional court also hired four masters' level social workers to monitor and follow up with families.

The regional court also allows caseloads to be more evenly among judges, said Forgione. Before the regional court was established, judges in the small towns surrounding New Haven might handle a dozen cases in a year. Meanwhile, the New Ha-

ven probate judge was dealing with 50 or 60 in a month. Now, all cases in the region are evenly divided.

The reorganization into regions allows the court system to be more effective in placing children with family members.

"We take the teamwork approach," said Forgione. "We look at a family network and try to find someone in the family for an appropriate placement."

In one case, for example, a woman petitioned the court for guardianship of her 16-year-old sister. The sisters shared the same mother but different fathers. When the 16-year-old's mother died, she lived with her father in New York. The father was subsequently in an auto accident and while hospitalized was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

The older sister wanted guardianship so she could enroll her younger sibling in a Connecticut school.

The girl was 16 and only in the ninth grade. The probate court helped the teenager with her placement needs and provided the sisters with a list of Alzheimer's support groups for teens.

The court is also working with the family to find counseling for the girl to deal with the grief from losing her parents and the adjustments she has had to undergo in her new home environment. An evaluation of the 1,855 cases handled during the court's first year concluded:

- Children were safer, with no reported cases of abuse or neglect;
- Placements were stable with all children still with their court-assigned guardians, even though two-thirds of those children had previously been through multiple placements;
- Children's well-being had improved with an increase in grades, better behavior in school and involvement in community activities.

Forgione credits the interbranch cooperation with helping make the courts a success.

"We fostered interagency relationships," he said. "We nurtured that. It was no small deal."

To find out more about New Haven Regional Children's Probate Court, visit [www.jud.state.ct.us/probate](http://www.jud.state.ct.us/probate).