

# Unified Family Courts of North Carolina

## Family Court Counties

<i>Anson</i>	<i>Buncombe</i>
<i>Burke</i>	<i>Caldwell</i>
<i>Catawba</i>	<i>Cumberland</i>
<i>Durham</i>	<i>Greene</i>
<i>Halifax</i>	<i>Lenoir</i>
<i>Mecklenburg</i>	<i>New Hanover</i>
<i>Pender</i>	<i>Richmond</i>
<i>Stanly</i>	<i>Union</i>
<i>Wayne</i>	

## FAMILY COURT KICKOFF IN BUNCOMBE COUNTY

The 28<sup>th</sup> Judicial District Family Court held a kickoff celebration on March 11 in the beautifully restored beaux art style 5<sup>th</sup> floor Superior Court room. Local and state politicians, law enforcement, members of the Bar, community service agency representatives, school officials, Jan Hood from AOC, and many personnel from the courthouse attended the ceremony. The local Bar provided financial and organizational support for the catering of the event.

Judge Cash, Chief District Court Judge and Robert Christy, Superior Court Clerk spoke at the ceremony. Aleece Hiller, the Family Court Administrator and Attorney Roger T. Smith, President of the 28<sup>th</sup> Judicial District Bar also spoke. Smith and Christy both spoke about the positive changes that Family Court will bring by having cases go through the system more efficiently and referring families to services and resources in the community. In the continuing collaboration with community resources that started long before the official start date, many contacts were made between these agencies and the other Family Court Case Managers Staff – Jessica Walters and Kara Hensley.

Judge Cash thanked many people for their help in implementing Family Court in Buncombe County. In illustrating how the court system will operate differently, Judge Cash relayed a story about Teddy, a young man

he had seen many times in adult criminal court for the crime of “huffing” (sniffing toxic substances to the point of getting high or passing out). During a court delay, Judge Cash talked to Teddy and asked his reasons for huffing. Judge Cash mentioned that there were an increasing number of Juveniles committing this crime. Teddy thought that was terrible and a waste - these young people could end up like him. Judge Cash asked for Teddy’s help with these juvenile offenders. Every time Judge Cash had a juvenile in front of him who had committed this crime, he called on Teddy. Afterwards, they stopped huffing. By using an unusual resource to address substance abuse by juveniles, Judge Cash did something that was not in a civil procedure book, or learned from a “how to be a good judge” seminar. This was not the standard course of business for the court system but it was effective. Teddy felt that he was part of a family because of his involvement with the young offenders. The biggest impression on Teddy was that someone showed caring and concern by taking the time to ask about him. This is the changing face of the court system – this is Family Court. North Carolina Unified Family Court’s newest addition is in Asheville, Buncombe County.

For more information contact Aleece Hiller at [Aleece.M.Hiller@nccourts.org](mailto:Aleece.M.Hiller@nccourts.org).

### OUR MISSION

To help resolve cases involving children and families through combined efforts of the family, the Court and community services. To approach each case in a way that is not overly adversarial or intrusive, but always in a just, timely and efficient manner. To be courteous, safe and accessible and to provide quality service to those in need.



### Cumberland County Family Treatment Court

After a full year of training through the Drug Court Planning Initiative (DCPI) in 2004, Cumberland County began a pilot Family Treatment Court (FTC) in early 2005. Although not yet a fully operational drug court, programs have been initiated including regular case reviews, service coordination, frequent and random drug testing, and bi-weekly court sessions. Cumberland County is currently exploring several funding opportunities, and hopes to become fully operational later this summer.

There have been several unanticipated challenges and obstacles that the FTC team is working through. The Policies and Procedures Manual as well as the Participant’s Handbook are in the process of being finalized. Donations for incentives are being sought from local businesses. Each member of the FTC team is enthusiastic and willing to do whatever is necessary to make the treatment court successful. Building stronger families with court intervention and judicial oversight is their goal.

For additional information, contact Lisa Stolarski, Family Court Administrator at [Lisa.M.Stolarski@nccourts.org](mailto:Lisa.M.Stolarski@nccourts.org).

## ABA Visits Halifax County

Halifax County Family Court and its Family Drug Treatment Court have been selected to participate in a study by the American Bar Association. In April, a team from the ABA visited Halifax County Family Court to observe best practices that have been implemented in abuse and neglect court and interviewed the Chief Judge, Family Court Administrator, DSS staff, GAL staff, and other key partners. Under a Robert Wood Johnson grant, the team from the ABA will study five courts including Halifax and Cook County, IL (Chicago) in order to compare best practices in rural and urban courts. The ABA team will also examine the relationship between Family Court and Family Drug Treatment Court. Halifax County, is currently piloting a Family Drug Treatment Court to treat parents, primarily mothers, with substance abuse problems whose children have been removed from the home by DSS. The purpose of the court is to help these parents get clean and stay clean and hopefully, reunite with their children. A team of ten from the county participated in intensive drug court training sponsored by the Bureau of Justice Assistance in 2004. The team traveled to Pensacola, FL; Kansas City, MO; and Charlotte, NC to observe model drug courts and receive training. The Family Drug Treatment Court will operate under the umbrella of already established Family Court services. Funding from the Governor's Crime Commission will be used to operate the court for the next year. For more information contact Susan Horrell at [Susan.W.Horrell@nccourts.org](mailto:Susan.W.Horrell@nccourts.org).

The Eighth Judicial District Family Court System has changed the way family law is practiced in our district. As a practitioner for twenty years I have seen programs come and go and this is definitely a system that needs to be instituted statewide.

Our Family Court System allows cases to be managed by family court staff and an assigned judge that follows the case all the way through the system. Having a family court administrator, case managers, an assigned judge, and rules insure that a case will not get lost. The monitoring and deadlines required by Family Court assist the practitioner in making sure their clients are well served in the Family Court System.

I believe most cases now move quickly and efficiently through our Family Court System. Most of my clients are pleased to have reliable court dates. I enjoy knowing that matters will be handled consistently and that everyone must comply with the Family Court rules.

We are fortunate in the Eighth District to have a wonderful Family Court staff to assist us with this system. Having strong and efficient staff together with court rules that can be and are enforced have made the Eighth Judicial District Family Court System a success that should be replicated across the state.

*Shelby Benton  
Attorney, Goldsboro NC*

### Pending Median Age of Cases For the Time Period 7/1/04 to 2/28/05:

Family Court Districts: **116 Days**  
Non-Family Court Districts: **410 Days**

## Meeting the Needs of Self-Represented Citizenry

National trends indicate an unprecedented surge in pro se litigation. Shattering the traditional model, more often citizens are electing to participate in the justice process by representing themselves rather than being represented by an attorney. Mirroring the national trend, Mecklenburg County Courts are seeing a large number of self represented litigants in cases involving divorce, child custody and support, domestic violence, small claims and misdemeanor criminal infractions. In fact, Mecklenburg Family Court Division reports that six out of every ten pending domestic cases involve at least one pro se party. Responding to the growing demands of this population and the courts mission to be accessible, the year 2004 marked the integration of the Mecklenburg County SelfServe Center into their Family Court Division. The integration promotes greater continuity of service delivery and helps to ensure that litigants are better-informed consumers of the court.

Targeted to meet the needs of modest means citizenry who cannot afford traditional legal counsel, the Center provides forms and filing instructions for people electing self-representation in many areas. The Center also offers an array of other services including free legal clinics; instructional videos with private viewing stations; access to legal reference material; a list of attorneys providing limited scope or unbundled legal services; and community resource material.

To learn more about the services offered contact Mecklenburg County Family Court Administrator, Elisa Chinn-Gary at [Elisa.A.Chinn-Gary@nccourts.org](mailto:Elisa.A.Chinn-Gary@nccourts.org).



For further information  
regarding Family Court  
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