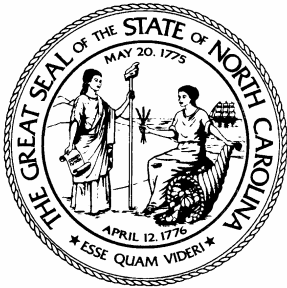


Unified Family Courts of North Carolina

Family Court Counties

Anson	Buncombe
Burke	Caldwell
Catawba	Cumberland
Durham	Greene
Halifax	Lenoir
Mecklenburg	New Hanover
Pender	Richmond
Stanly	Union
Wake	Wayne



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.

FAMILY COURT MAKING VISION REALITY

How do you change the perception of the courthouse to a place where you can receive the services you need, rather than a place that is frightening, overwhelming, and only people with money get what they want? Thanks to the financial support of Buncombe County Department of Social Services, the Permanency Mediation Program in Asheville is making that difference for families involved in the court system. Permanency Mediation provides an opportunity for parents and agency representatives involved in a juvenile abuse, neglect, or dependency case to meet and attempt to reach an agreement about issues in conflict in the case rather than through a trial. The meeting is facilitated by mediators trained in juvenile issues as well as child development and family relations.

In North Carolina, a co-mediation model has been adopted, meaning that there are two mediators in every case because most Permanency Mediation cases may have as many as 15 or more people involved. In addition, the issues in juvenile law cases and the family dynamics involved can be very complicated.

A number of factors enhance the success and popularity of Permanency Mediation. First, the mediation environment is an informal, non-courtroom setting conducive to talk-

ing about issues. Bringing all parties in the case together allows everyone to speak and be heard, as well as encouraging clarification of misperceptions. Second, mediators manage the conflict, and facilitate discussion which allows for informed decision-making, with no resolution unless all agree.

One case from Buncombe county highlights the process:

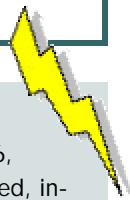
Mary and Joe* have 4 children: 2 year old twins and a 3 and 4 year old. One of the twins was taken to the hospital with a broken wrist with no one taking responsibility or providing an explanation for the injury. DSS filed a petition in Juvenile Court alleging abuse and neglect and removed that child. If Mary or Joe did not admit to injuring the child, all 4 children could be removed (the other children were healthy and showed no signs of abuse). Mary and Joe were between the proverbial rock and a hard place—if they admitted or not, they felt their children would be taken from them. In mediation, Mary and Joe felt safe to express their feelings of sometimes being overwhelmed with caring for 4 small children. Mary acknowledged that the injury was an accident with the car seat. As a result of mediation, Mary and Joe received in home services on how to manage the children better and correct procedures on safely using a car seat. *Names and the story have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Buncombe County Family Court has two new Case Coordinators: Anne Elliott and Kathy Phillips. Anne has extensive knowledge of family law from her many years of experience as a paralegal in private law practice. Kathy, also a paralegal, joined Family Court after working in the juvenile law area at Buncombe County DSS.
aleece.m.hiller@nccourts.org

Union County Family Court's programs will be covered in a series of articles by the Union County newspaper, *Enquirer Journal*. The first of a series of stories covered the Supervised Visitation Center. The front page article, which included pictures of Union's District Court Judges, highlighted Family Court's instrumental efforts in starting the supervised visitation center at Central Methodist Church. Later in the week, an editorial appeared in the paper:

Thumbs up to District Court Judges Chris Bragg, Hunt Gwyn and Joseph Williams for providing the vision and impetus to establish a place for non-custodial parents to have time with their children. The Visitation Center at Central United Methodist Church is a place for parents whose visits are required to be supervised—they have drug or alcohol problems, most often. What these judges have remembered is that it is the children who suffer most from lack of contact with both of their parents. That kind of initiative and vision just might give judicial activism a good name.

The continuing series will have articles on the other Family Court programs: Custody Mediation, Access & Visitation. Truancy Court, and Drug Court. martha.s.hall@nccourts.org



FAMILY COURT NEWS FLASHES

Wake Family Court sponsored a continuing legal education training for domestic stakeholders, on September 27, 2006, entitled "Family Court Resources for Parents: Time Together and Parent Education 4." Forty-eight individuals attended, including thirty-one attorneys. Presenters shared information on the local supervised visitation exchange center and the local four hour parent education classes mandated in conjunction with Family Court. lori.m.price@nccourts.org

New Hanover County Family Court, together with the YWCA Legal Access Program and Lower Cape Fear Legal Services hosted its' quarterly "Family Law Clinic" on November 14. The clinic's goal is to provide an overview of not only the legal processes involved in issues related to custody, separation and divorce, but also to provide an overview of how our Family Court system is instrumental in helping the parties reach a timely resolution to their issues. A private attorney, who specializes in family law, is available to answer questions. suann.n.bechtel@nccourts.org

Halifax County—Judicial District 6A has been allotted a new District Court Judge position. This judge will begin January 15, 2007. The addition of this third judge will allow expansion of criminal court days and allow the two Family Court Judges to each have a three day session every month instead of the previous two days, thus allowing much needed days for longer trials instead of judges using chamber days as has been the practice. Also, beginning in January, judge assignments will be made in juvenile abuse and neglect cases. A Lunch 'n' Learn will be held on November 30th to offer lawyers a better understanding of how their parent clients can benefit from participation in Family Drug Treatment Court. susan.w.horrell@nccourts.org

Mecklenburg County Family Court's [MCFC] SelfServe Center, along with the Mecklenburg Bar, began the Attorney for the Day Program on Nov. 20, 2006. Volunteer attorneys offer advice-only consultations to assist low-income, self represented litigants in the area of family law. Litigants and attorneys are already booked through January 2007. In addition, MCFC's SelfServe Center, NC AOC, and Mecklenburg County DSS have established The Family Law Facilitator Program to assist self-represented grandparents and other kinship care providers in obtaining legal custody of their young loved ones due to abuse, dependency, or neglect and removal by child protective services. With this program, families can remain intact in a cost efficient manner. elisa.a.chinn-gary@nccourts.com

Cumberland County Family Treatment Court held it's second graduation in September. Our graduate successfully completed the program in 14 months and on the day of her graduation, both legal and physical custody of her children were restored. There are currently 6 participants enrolled in the Family Treatment Court Program. lisa.m.stolarski@nccourts.org

Pending Median Age Domestic Cases
July 2006-October 2006:
Family Court Districts: 140 days
Non-Family Court Districts: 334 days

For Family Court information, contact:
Jan Hood at 919-791-2013
jan.c.hood@nccourts.org
or
Traci Hobson at 919-420-7957
traci.l.hobson@nccourts.org
AOC Court Management Specialists