

Table of Ten Report
September 2008 through September 2009

Background

Table of Ten was convened in Thurston County by Tim Jaasko-Fisher of the Court Improvement Training Academy in September 2008. Stakeholders involved in Dependency practice were represented by:

Judges Chris Wickham and Paula Casey
Assistant Attorney General Sara VanMeter
Office of Public Defense Attorney Sonja Hallum
Office of Public Defense Supervisor Amelia Watson
CASA Program Director Wendy Mayo
DCFS Supervisor Becky Smith
DCFS Social Worker Amanda Huber
County Chemical Dependency Program Coordinator Eric Landis
Service Provider Shelly Willis

The first day of training for the Table of Ten was facilitated by Eric Allenbaugh focusing on leadership for change. The second day of meeting was facilitated by Tim Jaasko-Fisher. Six measures of timeliness in Dependency case processing were examined, statewide and for Region 6. Participants evaluated where to focus efforts to improve outcomes for children and parents and these performance measures for Thurston County.

The work statement resulting from these two days of meetings was:

To work together to insure that children are safe and have the opportunity to be reunited with their birth parents, or otherwise be integrated into a safe, permanent, nurturing family in a timely manner.

Table of Ten's initial project was to reduce the time to fact-finding hearings, with a goal of meeting the 75-day law – Timeliness Indicator #6. A second project focused on reducing the time to permanency for legally free children – Timeliness Indicator #5.

The Table of Ten convened 7 times after the initial September 2008 meetings. At the September 2009 meeting, the Table of Ten agreed to continue its work into the future, meeting every two months. Members of Table of Ten agreed that the work has improved timeliness and continued work will be valuable to families and children.

Fact-finding within 75 Days of Filing Petitions for Dependency

The work to improve this measure in Thurston County was quite simple. Stakeholders agreed that the Court would strictly enforce setting all Fact-findings within the 75 days and prioritize these hearings with all the Family and Juvenile Court's trial work. Continuances would only be permitted after hearing on the record and for good cause.

From September 1, 2008, to July 15, 2009, 93 Dependency Petitions were filed. (July 15 is used as the ending reporting date because 75 days would not have passed by September 30 for Petitions filed after that date.) Fact-finding hearings were completed within 75 days in 84 of

those cases – or 90 percent. Of those not meeting the 75 day requirement, these explanations were provided:

- Four petitions (two families): courthouse closure due to snow required these cases to be continued.
- Two petitions (one family): multiple continuances of the first-set fact-finding approved because of conflicts with the private attorney's schedule, and ultimately court availability
- Three petitions (one family): trial was continued due to the unavailability of an expert witness
- One petition (one family): mother's counsel was unable to meet with the mother within 75 days due to mother's inpatient treatment out of the area

This number compares with 41 out of 61 being completed within 75 days -- or 67 percent -- for the prior nine months.

Table of Ten has agreed to review for 75-day compliance quarterly. Keeping an eye on the requirement has made an immense improvement in timeliness.

Adoption within 6 Months of Termination of Parental Rights

The completion of adoption within 6 months of children becoming legally free presented more challenges for improvement. The Department committed to shortening the time for the transfer of cases to the Adoption Unit following Termination Orders. For children in their permanent placements, other time-consuming aspects of completing adoptions are the completion of adoption home studies and negotiation of adoption subsidies. Home studies can begin before a child is legally free if the child is in his or her permanent placement. However, the home study generally begins after the Termination Order is entered. The adoption support process begins after a child is legally free and in a permanent placement for six months with a completed home study.

Table of Ten decided to focus efforts on:

- For children who became legally free in 2009, completing adoptions within 6 months for those in their adoptive homes at the time of termination.
- For children who became legally free before 2009, completing adoptions by the end of 2009 for those in their adoptive homes on June 1, 2009, when Table of Ten met.
- For children who became legally free before 2009 who have a permanent plan of long-term foster care, assuring that written long-term foster care agreements are in place.

Statistical information to determine progress on these goals is not available at the time of this report. Frequent court review hearings are being scheduled for legally free children in the first two-categories, in particular, to aid in reaching the goals. Table of Ten agreed that an annual stakeholder review of legally free children is important to shortening the time to permanency for legally free children.

Table of Ten work has not yet focused on the six-month performance measure for children who are not in their permanent homes at the time of termination. There is more work to be done.