

## Supreme Court Commission on Children in the Courts

Summary of February 21, 2005 Meeting

Attending: Chief Justice John Hendry, Chief Judge Everett Inbody (Co-chair of Commission), Honorable Douglas Johnson (Co-chair of Commission), Honorable Glenn Camerer, Honorable Vernon Daniels, Honorable Lawrence Gendler, Honorable Paul Korslund, Honorable Patrick McDermott, Honorable Linda Porter, Honorable Gerald Rouse, Honorable Kenneth Vampole, Honorable Gary Washburn, Senator Patrick Bourne, Lynnette Boyle, Mark Ells, Marsha Fangmeyer, Frank Goodroe, Robert Goodwin, Meghan Houson, Nancy Montanez, Jodi Nelson, James Ruby, Richard Stafford, Carolyn Stitt, Marlene Vetick, Elizabeth Waterman, Kirs Wertz, (Elizabeth Neeley, Janice Walker, Victoria Weisz, staff).

Chief Hendry warmly welcomed the group and charged the Commission to take a careful look at the court system, not sugar coat the situation, and make recommendations to the Supreme Court that will make a difference in the lives of children. He promised that the Supreme Court will take action in response to the commission's findings and recommendations. Chief Hendry then introduced the Co-chairs of the Commission, Chief Judge Everett Inbody of the Court of Appeals, and Judge Douglas Johnson, of the Separate Juvenile Court in Douglas County.

Judges Inbody and Johnson provided an overview of the purpose and structure of the Commission. The goal of the Commission is to study appropriate steps for the judicial system to undertake to insure that the court system is as responsive as possible for children who interact with, or are directly affected by the courts.

The Commission will replace the Court Improvement Advisory Board, but its scope will be considerably broader. The potential scope of the Commission will include juvenile court issues (abuse/neglect, status offenses, and delinquency); domestic relations and custody determinations; criminal matters such as child abuse or domestic violence; court reorganization possibilities (unified family court, state-wide separate juvenile court).

A website for the Commission has been developed at <http://www.ccfi.unl.edu/outreach/judicialcommission/judicialcommision.html>.

The Commission will meet quarterly. Sub-committees will be set up for a time-specified period to do research and make specific recommendations that will be reviewed by the Commission. Sub-committee chairs and some members will come from the Commission but additional sub-committee members who are not on the Commission will be added. The Commission will begin with four sub-committees that reflect commitments and activities that are already underway. The following is a brief description of each of these sub-committees:

1. Guardian ad Litem (abuse/neglect) standards, training, and implementation. This sub-committee will review findings/recommendations from recent Nebraska reports and will review national best practice standards and training, as well as standards and training from a variety of other states. The sub-committee will make recommendations regarding appropriate standards and training, and a mechanism to ensure implementation. The work of this sub-committee is being done in conjunction with the Nebraska Minority and Justice Task Force and the Nebraska State Bar Association with partial funding from Woods Charitable Fund.
2. Children's attorneys (delinquency and status offenses) standards, training and implementation. This sub-committee will review findings/recommendations from recent Nebraska reports and will review national best practice standards and training, as well as standards and training from a variety of other states. The sub-committee will make recommendations regarding appropriate standards and training, and a mechanism to ensure implementation. The work of this sub-committee is being done in conjunction with the Nebraska Minority and Justice Task Force and the Nebraska State Bar Association with partial funding from Woods Charitable Fund.
3. Expediting Appeals in termination of parental rights and other child abuse/neglect cases. This sub-committee will review current time lines in the appellate process, the effectiveness of recent procedural changes and other state models for expediting appeals. This sub-committee will make recommendations regarding the appellate process.
4. State-wide Summit on Child Abuse/Neglect Judicial Best Practices. This sub-committee will not be convened until summer, 2005. It will plan an annual two-day state-wide summit for judges and HHS administrators from their jurisdictions in order to assist them in developing local court-agency collaborative efforts that promote judicial best practices.

Small groups of Commission members discussed other topics that they thought the Commission should address at some point. A large group discussion of the topics followed. Topics that received the most interest were:

1. HHS/Court Collaborations
2. Problems in Permanency Planning Implementation for Children in Foster Care
3. Information Management Systems and Data Sharing
4. Accessing Services for Children Without Making them Wards of the State
5. Creation of District-wide Separate Juvenile Courts or Unified Family Courts