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FAYETTE COUNTY CHOSEN FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

Uniontown, PA – Fayette County has been selected by the state Supreme Court to participate in the Pennsylvania State Roundtable’s Family Engagement Initiative.

Fayette is one of only six counties statewide - along with Beaver, Butler, Snyder, Tioga and Venango - chosen for the 2018 roundtable, which is a collaborative effort among state and national court and child welfare leaders.

The initiative gives selected counties specialized resources developed for them, as well as training from international experts to enhance the way they help serve abused or neglected children and their families.

Its focus is to increase family involvement, reduce children’s trauma and reduce children’s time separated from their loved ones.

Fayette County Children and Youth Services Deputy Administrator John Fritts said the Family Engagement Initiative is a continuation of the Permanency Practice Initiative, of which Fayette became a part in 2010.

“The Permanency Practice Initiative dramatically altered Fayette County’s dependency court practice,” Fritts said.

A local roundtable comprising the court, CYS, guardians ad litem, parents’ attorneys, solicitors, schools and more was created, opening the door for much-needed collaboration between stakeholders to better serve families in the dependency system, Fritts added.

Additionally, judicial reviews were changed from every six months to every three months, allowing all dependent children and their parents to be brought before the court more frequently.

“This led to better coordination with services and better outcomes for families,” Fritts said. “It also increased the overall oversight of the casework.



“This led to more children being returned earlier to their parents, as well as faster permanence for children.”

The PPI also altered counties’ family finding and family group decision making, shifting agencies away from use of traditional or foster homes to more kin-based placement, whenever possible.

Fritts said Fayette has seen many positive changes since becoming a PPI county and his agency is excited to be chosen for the Family Engagement Initiative, which will focus on revised family finding practices, crisis and rapid response family meetings and enhanced legal representation.

Fayette officially kicked off its portion of the initiative this month, but began implementing the crisis and rapid response changes ahead of its selection, Fritts added.

“We have already had several success stories where placements were prevented and children were able to remain with their families,” he said. “With increased family finding, the agency should further reduce the traditional foster care placement numbers and keep more children with family.”

Fayette County Commissioner Chairman Vince Vicites said the selection is “very good news.”

“To participate in a program of this magnitude can only help improve our county and help our children,” Vicites said.

Commissioner Dave Lohr said he’s not surprised Fayette was chosen, thanks to the ongoing work by county judges Linda Cordaro and Nancy Vernon to fight existing family issues.

“Also, our staff at CYS are well known for their work in looking for ways to do things better,” Lohr said. “They are in touch with other agencies and services across the commonwealth.”

Lohr said Fayette County Children and Youth’s endeavors have been praised and replicated in other counties.

“Fayette is looked at as attacking issues and trying to solve them,” he said. “Just another example of the high quality of people in our county.”

Commissioner Angela Zimmerlink said she is “saddened” by the existence of abused and neglected children in our county, but is “glad that Fayette was chosen to receive this specialized training.”

The initiative’s statewide selection process was competitive and rigorous. Fayette was chosen based on its strong administrative collaboration between its court and child welfare agencies; current family engagement practices; and data reviews.

Seven counties received training last year and began applying new techniques to local child dependency systems in January.



Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Max Baer said it's exciting to work with Fayette, one of "Pennsylvania's most progressive counties."

"We have exceptional partners throughout Pennsylvania who challenge each other to improve the way we serve families and who volunteer to implement new family engagement strategies that support healthy child development," Baer said.

For more information, contact Fritts at 724-430-1283 or Jfritts@fccys.org.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.fayettecountypa.info.

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