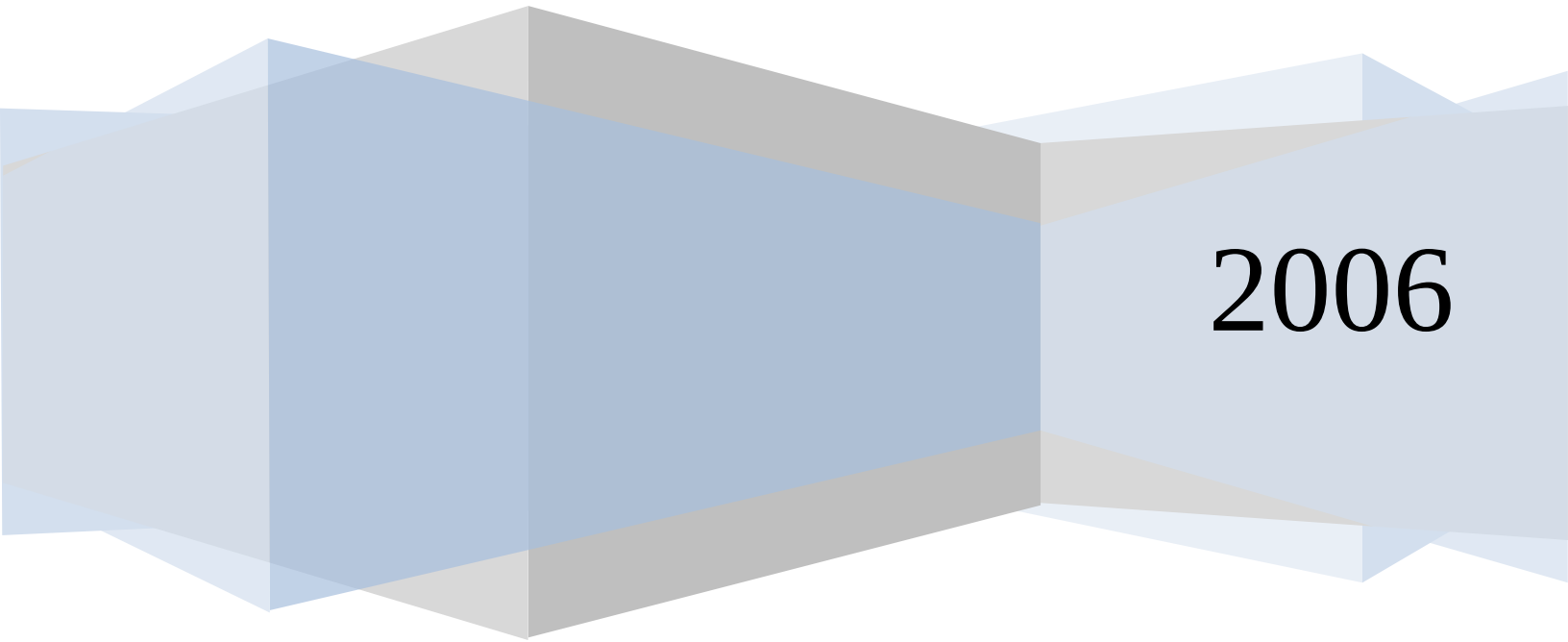
Office of the State Courts Administrator
Office of Court Improvement

Compendium of Family Court Practices



2006

Compendium of Family Court Practices

From the 2006 Family Court Reports

What are the **Family Law Advisory Groups** discussing; what have they accomplished? Page 3

What are some of the family court practices circuits are using?

- Family Court Practices for **Delinquency** Cases Page 10
- Family Court Practices for **Dependency** Cases Page 13
- Family Court Practices for **Child Support** Cases Page 16
- Family Court Practices for **Domestic Violence** Cases Page 17
- Family Court Practices for **Dissolution** Cases Page 21
- Family Court Practices for **Crossover Dockets** Page 27

If you would like to know which judicial circuit is doing one of the family court practices included in the compendium, contact Linda McNeill at (850) 414-8868.

Family Law Advisory Group (FLAG)

Topics discussed in 2006 included:

- arranging pro se legal services for litigants through a local attorney and the local legal services agency
- obtaining additional funding to expand the services of the supervised visitation center within the county
- researching the availability of affordable housing in the county
- coordinating domestic violence injunction procedures between the north and south county and various agencies serving them
- establishing a means of better enforcement of injunctions issued under Chapter 39
- scheduling a presentation at each meeting of some program or service available in the community
- legislative changes to Chapter 39
- requirements for parenting coordinators
- updates relating to Family Law rule changes and forms including: Florida Rules of Judicial Administration, 2.085 (d); Notice of Related Cases; Juvenile Rules of Procedure Rule, 8.260(d), requiring inclusion of Juvenile Dependency Court Orders in dissolution and custody cases; local revision of procedure for "Notice of Intent to Dismiss" and direction as to inclusion of child support cases in the process
- enactment of the Robert J. Koch Drug Court Intervention Act and its impact on drug courts, specifically Juvenile Dependency Drug Court
- amendment to Chapter 751, Florida Statutes, regarding elimination of putative father's standing to bring an action and redirection of child support to extended family members
- use of CourtSmart for recording Domestic Violence Injunctions for Protection, Juvenile Dependency proceedings, and Juvenile Dependency Drug Court hearings
- clarification regarding the allowance of family cases to proceed to final judgment despite lack of complete payment of statutory fees
- Discussion of need and possible funding sources for courthouse security
- availability of new Parenting Classes offered by Resolutions Health Alliance, Inc., specifically geared to the factual issues at hand, e.g. Infants, Special Needs, Parents with Substance Abuse, Teen Substance Abuse, Domestic Violence Effects on Children
- updated motion and orders for closing and disposing of old family files
- availability of Best Practices in Court Based Self-Help Programs for the Self-Represented
- distribution of the most recent listing of approved parenting classes for divorcing parents
- creation of an internal database for drug treatment court participants
- creation of an informational brochure for litigants involved in injunctions
- implementation of the timely release of an advocate contact form, provided to all petitioners upon the filing of an Injunction for Protection, and forwarded to the domestic violence center in that county
- more standardized use of court interpreters at injunction proceedings for non-English speaking litigants

- Domestic Violence Fatality Review Team Report and implementation of recommendations of team
- provision of courtroom security during domestic violence proceedings
- Domestic Violence Case Management Guidelines provided by OSCA
- Checklists for Sexual Violence, Repeat Violence, and Dating Violence Injunctions
- drafting of a "Finding of Paternity" order for injunction cases
- amendments to the Domestic Violence Bench Book
- "Wilderness Quest," Youth Program by Jeff McSpaddin, Director
- "Brief Child Custody Evaluations," by Dr. Candace Valenstein and Dr. Clifton Russell
- completion/distribution of Circuit Wide Resource Directory
- 2005 Domestic Violence Mortality Report
- First Annual Domestic Violence Awareness Walk and Rally took place at Naval Air Station Jacksonville on October 3, 2006
- custody evaluations
- dependency mediation
- kinship care
- guardian ad litem participation
- child support in dependency cases
- foster care qualification and licensing, and adoption, including the "permanency project"
- UFC family law case management/case management conferences
- unified family court/crossover cases
- family court services staff support to the court
- visitation guidelines
- interpreter services
- law library services
- standing family law administrative order
- Florida Statute 61.13001, Parental Relocation with a Child
- parenting coordination
- custody investigation program
- administrative establishment of paternity
- Title IV-D child support
- accessibility of low fee counseling and legal services in the community
- Title IV-D cases routed to administrative hearing and the impact on the court
- member agency updates
- family related topics in the media
- civil citations
- juvenile restitution mediation
- crossover divisions
- implementation of the Standing Temporary Domestic Relations Order, the Rules and Regulations, the Notice of Related Cases, uncontested Final Hearing procedures, and the Standing Order for Case Management Conferences
- case flow in dependency cases
- UFC and case assignment
- Department of Juvenile Justice and "lockout" children
- resetting hearings due to (emergency) court closure
- lack of funding for Guardians Ad Litem for domestic relations cases

- extraneous information provided within child abuse reports filed with the hotline
- temporary supervised visitation before injunction hearing
- funding issues
- security at schools for parents and teachers when there is domestic violence
- creating FLAGs in other counties
- pay or appear program
- parenting plan assistance
- improvements being implemented by the Department of Defense regarding their normal restricted reporting policies
- improvements in the implementation of the unified family court concepts, including reviewing the formal procedures for identifying and processing related cases
- security issues for victims and the presiding judges and other court personnel during evidentiary hearings in domestic violence cases, including safety concerns for judges who hear post judgment actions in their chambers

Accomplishments in 2006 included:

- Revised the Standing Order for Case Management Conferences and the Notice of Related Cases. The FLAG participants expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to provide feedback, and the chance to help shape the process to best serve families.
- Implementation of a circuit-wide Standing Temporary Domestic Relations Order, with Courtroom Rules. The Standing Order is used in all family law cases, and has greatly reduced the number of emergency hearings associated with the various subjects it controls. The Standing Order is intended to apprise the parties of their duties and responsibilities during the conduct of the litigation. This has proved to be a valuable tool to help families preserve assets, and maintain relationships, as their legal disputes are addressed by the court.
- In October 2006, one circuit's largest county implemented a new Standing Family Law Pre-Trial Order. A subcommittee of the FLAG, consisting of local family law attorneys, the family court manager, and several family law judges worked to draft a revised family law pretrial order.
- The dependency court subcommittee of a FLAG worked with the local Department of Children and Families office and the local community-based care office to develop a two-day conference entitled "*The Road to Permanency*." The conference, held at a local college, was developed to bring together all child welfare professionals and service providers to discuss ways that children in foster care can reach permanency at an earlier stage.
- Produced a new Family Court brochure that was designed to be handed out at all Case Management Conferences. The brochure contains information regarding accessing the self-help program, how the court process works, and what case management conferences entail. The brochure also explains unified family court, and what cases will be included on those specialized dockets.
- A form was created, 'Relative Placement Form,' that is completed by parents at the time of shelter hearing or shortly thereafter which lists the names of relatives to be considered as possible placement alternatives to foster care.
- A Domestic Violence Fatality Review Team was formed in one county and four Cases were reviewed in 2006. The meetings have been extremely positive and supportive.

- District Support Officers (part of the local police department) began to attend the FLAG meeting and now have available to them all the valuable resources the FLAG has to offer. These officers are in a position to refer people for services at various agencies when they are responding to police related calls and families need help.
- The Courtroom Rules and Regulations were added to the Standing Order to advise all participants in family law cases of the conduct required of them when coming to court. The rules also address many specific issues regarding cases involving children, including using them as witnesses, relocation, as well as a child's right to love and affection from both parents.
- As a result of a FLAG meeting in one county, it has been determined that although several family law attorneys attended the meetings, their legal staff did not attend. Because they felt there was a breakdown in the delivery of the information distributed and shared at the FLAG with the staff working for family law attorneys we developed regular meetings with local paralegals and legal assistants working in family law.
- The FLAG discussed cuts in local funding that provided advocates for two local programs, Intimate Violence Enhanced Services Team (INVEST) and the Center for Prevention of Domestic Violence (CPDV), both state model programs. The discussion led to suggested actions that the group would take collectively in an attempt to prevent the cut in funds and/or to seek new funding avenues in order to protect the positions that the funding loss would impact. A letter requesting the city to reconsider the funding cuts was drafted and sent directly to the mayor by the FLAG group. Representatives from the FLAG group were sent to meet with local legislators and to address the funding issue with city counsel representatives, who have supported these funding issues in the past. Although unsuccessful in retaining local funding for advocates from the city, as a result of the involvement of the designated members of the FLAG group and others, a new advocacy position at the CPDV was created and funded by VOCA. The INVEST Program is now fully funded through the city's sheriff's office. In addition, an advocacy position at CPDV was funded through a military grant. Additional sources of funding continue to be explored by the FLAG.
- The FLAG held discussions and received updates throughout the year from the Implementation Subgroup on the use of the $350,000 military grant designed to effectively counter the effects of domestic violence on victims, children, military readiness, the military communities of relevant state, county and local agencies who entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on November 9, 2005. The grant was awarded for a two-year period. The primary goal of the MOU is to enhance victim safety and secondarily, to increase accountability for the offender. The MOU is intended to provide guidance for a coordinated community and military response to domestic violence from the first report of a domestic violence incident through its investigation, case disposition and treatment. General law enforcement support agreements between the two Naval installations and the state, county and local agencies are also detailed in the MOU. Specific areas addressed in the MOU are: increasing the flow and effective exchange of information between civilian and military agencies; increasing information available to victims on both the military and civilian response systems, including access to confidential services; coordinating on-base investigative and jurisdiction responsibilities for cases involving civilian and military alleged offenders; facilitating service of civilian protection orders and exchange of civilian protection orders and military protective orders between

relevant agencies; and coordination of offender prosecution/accountability efforts. The Memorandum of Understanding was formed between the Commander, Navy Region, NAS, NS Mayport, a State Attorney for one judicial circuit, Department of Community Services, The City's Sheriff's Office, Clerk of the Court, Salvation Army, Probation Services/Batterers Intervention Program and Hubbard House, the local Advocacy and Shelter Program.

- As a result of FLAG discussions, FLAG representatives from the clerk of courts and state attorney's office developed procedures and forms to be used to record conditions of release in criminal domestic violence cases, so that information can be readily available to both victims and advocates.
- A representative from World Relief, an agency serving victims of human trafficking community, provided a moving and powerful presentation describing the growing number of victims of modern day slavery, informing the FLAG group on ways to identify and empower the victims by raising awareness. A task force is currently in place to develop tool kits, training, intervention programs to protect and assist victims of severe forms of human trafficking by providing federal and state benefits and services.
- Several accomplishments related to the issue of children not being picked up at the detention center when they were released, and the subsequent last minute calls to the abuse hotline: decision made to conduct a staffing prior to the time of release when it was thought that this may be an issue to try to make the appropriate arrangements in advance; and, if a parent does not pick up a child the case is placed on the detention calendar the next day. It has been found that when the parents come into court they are more likely to listen to the judge and pick up the child.
- Established a pilot project, using a judicial plan, for children 13 and under who have a sexual offense case and were previously abused. DJJ has agreed to supervise these children as if they were on probation.
- Kinship care and the tremendous number of grandparents and relatives who are raising minor children was a large of emphasis of one FLAG group in 2006. As the result of the interest in that subject, special programs were initiated in 2006 for those relative care providers. Programs have been initiated to provide them with education and support, referrals for services, and just an opportunity to get out of the house for a few hours of fellowship.
- The importance of getting dependent kids to permanency was a topic of importance in every FLAG in one circuit. By the end of 2006, the circuit, through the operation of the Guardian ad Litem Program, had implemented a Permanency Project, dedicated to identify and eliminate the obstacles to adoption for children whose parents' rights have been terminated. That program has received considerable judicial support, as well as an enormous time commitment from the GAL and the community based care adoption services providers. It continues to grow.
- From the FLAG meetings discussions on child support and the need to expeditiously implement enforceable child support orders in dependency cases, forms for orders establishing child support and referring child support for enforcement have been developed and are in use.
- The waiver of personal appearance in uncontested DOM cases was a result of attorney input at the FLAG meetings. All the judges in the family division adopted the same pretrial order, and the FLAG meetings were crucial to the implantation and attorney (and judge) education about the desirability of that.

- The FLAG met and focused heavily on issues pertaining to domestic violence. The FLAG's judicial leader was also the chair of the Family Violence Task Force, therefore promoting the sharing of ideas and collaboration among the groups. The FLAG continued to collaborate with the Task Force to plan the future development of the Family Justice Center. The Center, still in its early development stages, is envisioned to be a one-stop-shop for family law litigants to receive information and help with their legal proceeding, as well as to obtain community resources right on the spot.
- The Unified Family Court in one county holds an alliance between the Courts, government agencies and community organizations that (especially through the FLAG subcommittee) has taken a holistic approach to addressing the legal, social, educational, economic, housing, health care, and other needs of children and families in the Courts. Some of the accomplishments of 2006 include:
    - The Unified Family Court judge began holding annual judicial reviews on long term relative placement cases to check on the family situation, appropriateness of the long term placement, and basic welfare of the children. These hearings provide good information on how well the long term placement is working, and allow the Court to address any unexpected changes and/or additional needs.
    - Developed and instituted a Juvenile Drug Court Program for delinquents within the Unified Family Court.
    - Designated an advocate from the State Attorney's Office to help assist petitioners complete a Petition for Protection Against Domestic Violence.
    - Established a Fatality Review Committee to review domestic violence fatalities, in conjunction with the Domestic Violence Council.
    - Local Domestic Violence Shelter through the Domestic Violence Council created the document "What to Expect in Court" to assist domestic violence victims with this process.
    - The Unified Family Court Judge worked with law enforcement to clarify the differences between injunctions issued under chapter 39 and chapter 741, and instituted a system to make injunctions ordered under chapter 39 more readily enforceable.
    - Coordinated the systems for service and processing of injunctions by law enforcement between the north and south ends of the county.
- The general family subcommittee, which has a large representation from the local bar association, has worked on the following: (1) drafting the Standing Pre Trial Order for Dissolution cases, (2) amending the Shared Parenting Schedule to include new substantive legal matters, (3) meeting with the School Board to obtain information to be addressed in final judgments related to children (e.g., pick up from school provision for both parents), (4) recruiting volunteers to staff the pro se clinics.
- The juvenile subcommittee was involved in the following: (1) determining how the newly renovated juvenile courthouse can be both functional and family- friendly, (2) working with new judges in the juvenile division who are interested in the Unified Family Court concept, (3) Juvenile Assessment Center operations and potential for reverting back to an on call system, (4) Guardian ad-litems for delinquency cases.
- A number of parenting coordinators on the FLAG took a particular interest in the development of an administrative order regarding parenting coordination. A particular point of interest was that of communications between the parenting coordinators and the

judges. In the end, the administrative order that was signed provided that no such communication should take place without prior notice to the parties.

- The FLAG addressed topics related to child support establishment and enforcement in Title IV-D cases. We invited representatives from the Department of Revenue to our meeting to explain their requirements and to assist us in developing procedures for situations in which the children are dependent or paternity has not been established.
- The FLAG sponsored a Divorce Symposium on February 4, 2006. The event was held at the courthouse, with 80 people in attendance. Educational topics ran concurrently and were focused toward attendees that were either going through a divorce or contemplating divorce.
- An extremely noteworthy accomplishment arising from the Unified Family Court Advisory Board (FLAG) in 2005 was the pursuit of funding by the Judicial Circuit, together with the Advocate Program, Inc., through the Children's Trust for key social services to benefit families and children in high conflict cases in the Family, Domestic Violence, and Complex Litigation Divisions. As a direct result of the critical issue raised with our FLAG regarding the funding needs for expanded social service provision, including supervised visitation and safe exchange, and addressing the unmet needs of children of divorce and domestic violence, a collaborative community partnership was brought together in December 2005 to submit a Concept Paper for funding for a Planning Grant to the Children's Trust, in the amount of $300,000.00. The Children's Trust approved funding in 2006 in the amount of $285,755.00 for the Service Partnership to plan for implementation of a system of care in one county to address the unmet needs of children in high conflict families and domestic violence by developing a *system of care* that identifies children in need of services at the inception of their contact with the court system, law enforcement, and the battered women's shelters. After determining needs through screening and assessment, service referrals may include: psychological evaluations, safe exchange, supervised visitation or therapeutic supervised visitation, parenting coordination, counseling, and other services essential for a child's wellbeing. The Children's Trust also granted an immediate award in 2006 for continuation funding for CourtCare, which provides a safe space at the Family Courthouse for children while their parents are in court hearings regarding parental conflict and domestic violence. This intervention and prevention program is a safe haven for children and source of information regarding other community services for children to parents.
- Visitation guidelines were initiated and developed by a subcommittee of one FLAG, for one circuit. Guidelines were forwarded to all family law judges as well as other FLAG meetings for corrections, revisions or amendments as deemed necessary and later adopted by Administrative Order. The visitation guidelines include suggestions for local parents in close proximity, long distance and split custody or time sharing/rotating custody arrangements.

Delinquency Dockets

- In 2006, one circuit collaborated with the county sheriff's office to obtain funding for forty electronic monitoring devices for delinquents. Utilizing specific guidelines for eligibility, the judiciary is able to order delinquents to in-house arrest as an alternative to secure detention or while they are awaiting trial. The detention judge is the first to whom these devices will be available. The purpose of making these devices available is to attempt to reduce the pre-dispositional population at the detention center, while providing for the safety of the public. The sheriff's office agreed to place the electronic monitor on the children and perform the monitoring of them. The devices are G.P.S. units, but require a land line telephone with the latter being present as a backup. If all 40 monitors are utilized the potential cost savings to the county is $1,982,928 annually, less the cost of the program's operation which is $336,962. Feedback from community stakeholders regarding this program has been very positive and it is expected to expand within the near future.
- The Juvenile Delinquency Drug Court (JDC) participants engaged in several events in 2006, within the local community, such as Green It Up Clean It Up. During the program cycle each juvenile is required to complete six hours of community service. This builds character and instills commitment to assisting others. The juveniles are required to attend school on a regular basis, maintaining good grades as reported by each teacher in writing to the court.
- Also in 2006, there were several programs added to the juvenile detention center to help rehabilitate the juveniles and support the parents. These programs consisted of Empowered Parents, the Henry & Rilla White Foundation and PACE Center for Girls. The Empowered Parents program is unique in the fact that it focuses on the parent and not the child. This program starts by requiring that the parent attend a weekend parent training, and attend parent support meetings. The third step of this program is Camp Consequence, which consists of the parent and child visiting a wilderness camp where they are given tasks to complete each day. Camp Consequence teaches the child that every behavior has a consequence and can also help children feel better about themselves. The Henry & Rilla White Foundation is a diversionary program and its purpose is to divert juveniles assessed as offenders from entering the justice system for the first time or any further involvement in the justice system. The PACE Center for Girls provides counseling for the children and additional education.
- Under the guidance of Suwannee County Court Judge William R. Slaughter, II, a truancy court, based on the drug court model, was developed and commenced in 2006. The court uses a holistic approach for the six week program and attempts to determine the underlying causes contributing to truancy. The truancy court team is made up of family court case managers, mediators, state attorneys, school guidance counselors, and truancy officers. The family law case manager is responsible for coordinating the team, acts as the liaison with the schools, and obtains weekly attendance and grade reports for court. Parents are required to attend parenting classes and parent teacher conferences. Parents

may also be referred to agencies that can render financial assistance or provide household necessities. When appropriate, children and parents are referred to outside services including family counseling, substance abuse counseling, homeless services or anger management. Sanctions imposed by the court vary according to the age of the truant child. Older youth are required to perform community service to make up for missing school or failure to complete homework. Middle school children are required to complete a journal and bring it to court with them each week. The court provides positive feedback and other incentives to the family when the child's school attendance improves.

- In 2006, the Truancy Magistrate Program commenced under the unified family court manager's supervision. This program is funded by the juvenile welfare board. The court contracts with a magistrate and subcontracts with family resources for case management. The circuit commenced in five pilot middle schools and has now expanded for a total of ten pilot middle schools. The magistrate holds truancy hearings in the schools each week. This program is in addition to the circuit's diversion truancy teen court and another truancy court overseen by a judge. Most recently, two of our participants in the Truancy Magistrate Program received turnaround student awards at a televised ceremony.
- One circuit instituted a partnership with the University of Florida to assist with research on issues and practices involving juveniles. The alliance began when the Center for Children and Families at the University became interested in the issue of shackling juveniles during delinquency proceedings. They initiated a pilot project for thirty days during which the juveniles would not be shackled. During that time, the Center monitored the behavior of the juveniles. At the end of the thirty days, with input from the Center, our Family Division Administrative Judge, who is also the delinquency judge, decided that unshackling the juveniles for court proceedings had not caused any problems and that the practice would continue.
- Another circuit recognized the truancy problem in Alachua County and worked with the School Board to put a truancy court in place. Procedures were instituted to be followed when cases are filed. The juvenile dependency judge is hearing the cases because, if the youth fails in truancy court, the next step is to file a Children in Need of Services petition which also falls under the dependency judge.
- Delinquency related reports were developed in one circuit to identify newly filed, pending and disposed cases, as well as an aging out report. Laptop computers with wireless access have afforded delinquency case managers the ability to acquire pertinent information while in the courtroom. These computers also allow more efficient means for data entry.
- One circuit's delinquency restitution mediation program involves the juvenile offender and the victim. The parties meet to discuss the restitution and resolve the issue in a mutually satisfactory agreement. Mediations are scheduled by the state attorney and public defender on dates scheduled by the court for restitution cases. The restitution mediation program began with the hope of reducing the judicial time required for these cases. The results have been outstanding and everyone involved in the process has been very pleased. During 2006 there were 140 cases mediated with a settlement rate of almost 84%. There is no cost to the participants for the mediation services, the three juvenile judges each schedule a separate date each month for restitution cases.

- One circuit secured a new position in 2006, an alternative sanctions coordinator. This person is a case manager for difficult delinquency cases. She also develops alternative sanctions, as requested, and makes referrals to families in need of services.

Dependency Dockets

- The Guardian ad Litem Program for one circuit, in addition to the successful continuation of the Adoption and Permanency Project, began a new endeavor related to children who are aging out of the dependency system. The continued implementation of independent living guidelines and the allocation of new resources allowed an office to develop an independent living team of two attorneys who are assigned to all of the 17 year old (and older) children within a county. The approach to serve this population is also being addressed by the statewide by the Guardian ad Litem Office through the use of pro bono attorneys in local fostering independence projects. The circuit's focus is to ensure that each child is aware of their rights to extended jurisdiction, independent living and other services available to them as they become young adults. Currently, the team is providing case coordination, representation and legal services to approximately 160 children in a strong effort to ensure these young adults are afforded every opportunity for success. The companion to this project is a joint effort of the Guardian ad Litem Program with Florida's Children First and the United Way to start a local chapter of Youth Shine. Youth Shine is a young adult group of men and women who grew up in foster care. Their purpose is to advocate for positive change of the dependency system in addition to providing a support system and network of mentors and resources. The circuit expects that these projects will provide a level of representation and support not previously provided to dependency children.
- Prior to January 25, 2006, mediation for dependency cases was generally ordered at time of arraignment, which caused a delay for parents to begin working on their case plan tasks. A new policy was implemented for court ordered mediation to be scheduled at the shelter hearing and for the mediation to be conducted on the Wednesday following the shelter. It is anticipated that this practice will reduce the timeframes for parents to begin their case plan tasks by as much as sixty days. Since January 25, 2006, 16 cases have been scheduled at the shelter hearing all resulting in full or partial agreements.
- In 2006, one circuit experienced a significant increase in the number of referrals to Dependency Drug Court (DDC). With the number of clients in DDC increasing at a rapid pace, a new case manager was appointed to DDC. As the year went on and the number of families in need increased, an additional general magistrate was assigned to DDC to divide the increased case load. With the increased staff, the circuit was given the opportunity to provide greater assistance to addicted parents of dependent children. In an effort to provide more assistance to the DDC clients, the circuit reached out and partnered with other community agencies, such as the urban league, Operation New Hope, city housing, Dignity U Wear, and the Clara White Mission. Along with these agencies assisting the DDC clients with employment, job skills, housing, clothing, and medical care, the drug court encourages the participants to complete their community service hours with these agencies to give back to those that have helped them along the way and to help others in need. In addition to branching out into the community, another accomplishment in 2006 was that 100% of the children born to DDC clients were drug free. The drug court was awarded the Judicial Assistant Grant which enabled them to purchase necessary nursery items that would normally be hard for our clients to obtain.

- In 2006, one county implemented an Adoption Case Management Project (resulting from termination of parental rights through Chapter 39, Florida Statutes). The concept of adoption case management was for the court to manage all termination of parental rights (TPR) cases, where adoption is the court approved goal and to facilitate timely and expedited finalized adoptions for these children. Utilizing a "team approach" consisting of the judiciary, court staff, clerk staff, the Department of Children and Families, Community Partnership for Children, Neighbor to Family and the Guardian Ad Litem, the goal of permanency for children in these types of cases was the drive behind the management of each case and the catalyst for the project's momentum. Each agency within the team was charged with developing internal protocols to identify needs and actions within their respective agencies to facilitate the goals of the program and to comply with any directions and anticipated actions by the Court pursuant to Rule 12.200, Family Law Rules of Procedure, which addresses court case management of cases. At adoption case management conferences, the court determines the status of the adoption, including but not limited to, review of the prospective placement, factors that may be causing delay, next appropriate action to facilitate a finalized adoption and any future adoption case management conference dates, if necessary. Family court services case managers provide support to the court and the project by attending the case management conferences and providing input/documentation to the judges regarding the last action/orders, previous factors for delay and any other support possible via electronic access to judicial records, documents and resource linkage. At the conclusion of the adoption case management conference, all copies of court orders relating to the conference are distributed to appropriate parties prior to their exiting the courtroom. Following the adoption case management conference docket, family court services staff maintains a database consisting of findings of the court, directives of the court, the next adoption case management conference date (if applicable) and all finalizations (i.e. adoption/goal change, etc.). Statistical tracking of most common contributing factors of delay, number of hearings necessary to facilitate adoption, time from TPR disposition to adoption and number of children adopted from onset of project are monitored and provided to the court.
- Through status hearings held every Friday by the general magistrate, dependency cases with very specific issues are monitored to ensure children in foster care are receiving all the services they need or are entitled to receive. The following are those dockets:
    1. Independent Living Docket–Magistrate reviews the status children who are close to "aging out" of foster care to ensure they are receiving all the services, training, and assistance they need to help them prepare for life after foster care.
    2. Trust Accounts Docket–Magistrate reviews the cases for children in foster care that receive SSI and SSA funds to make sure the money is being spent on the children appropriately. The Department of Children and Families is called to court for any children whose balances are close to $2000.00 to explain why the balance is so high (if it goes over $2000 they will lose their funds and would have to reapply) and how they plan to spend the money (such as counseling, tutoring, summer camp, music or art lessons, sports allowances or other interests or needs the children may have). The purpose is to ensure the money is being spent properly.
    3. Adoption Docket–Magistrate reviews the children who are in foster care (parental rights were terminated) to monitor what is being done to find adoptive parents for

these children. If they have potential adoptive parents, the magistrate checks the status of the pending adoption (for example, the status of adoptive home study, status of fingerprints). This is done to help expedite permanency for these children.

4. Interstate Compact for the Protection of Children (ICPC) Docket–Because this process can take from six months to one year, depending on the receiving state, the magistrate reviews cases where ICPC is pending to monitor the process and ensure that it is moving forward as quickly as possible.

- The chief judge in one circuit appointed a Dependency Court Improvement Oversight Committee to review procedural practices in one county. After reviewing existing procedures, the committee recommended several administrative provisions and a new administrative order was signed. The order addresses many issues, including shelter of children previously adjudicated dependent, emergency motions, dependency mediation, continuances, and orders.
- One circuit implemented an independent living court. This court focuses on foster youth who will age out of the child welfare system. The young adults brought before this court have all lived in foster care for a period of over six months and will turn eighteen while still living in licensed foster care. By Florida law, each child needs to have a transition plan at age seventeen to assure that the child is receiving critical living skills as well as other necessary support. In addition, independent living court attempts to work with these young adults to identify their future goals and to coordinate the available resources to community support that has been generated for this group. The Guardian Ad Litem's office has assigned attorney ad litems to specifically be appointed to represent these teenagers. Additionally, the Eckerd Foundation has funded a case manager to track the progress of each child and to work with the independent living staff and the local Connected By 25 Program. The court also tries to assure the availability of a mentor, a part-time job, and housing for each child. Many of these children have aspirations of attending college and the court tries to coordinate the necessary support for a child to continue their education. By establishing this division, the court provides a forum for each teenager to voice their aspiration as well as any concerns and is able to establish a plan so that each child in licensed foster care can become a productive citizen.
- One circuit has a comprehensive dependency database application for use by case managers to track time standards, continuances, advisory hearings, and trials. Judicial Information System (JIS) partnered with the Office of the Attorney General to receive an information migration for a baseline in establishing the new database. There is a separate, one screen application for the quick tracking of cases assigned to dependency drug court. In addition, JIS met with members of the Department of Children and Families' local contracted agency's technology department to discuss information sharing for foster care and other dependency court involved children. JIS has also developed user friendly reports for dependency case managers which outline case status (new, pending, or disposed), future hearings, and children reaching the age of 17. Daily migration of information is received from the clerk's system to JIS regarding cases set for shelter hearings. JIS and case management staff have contacted other area circuits for systems information sharing. Laptop computers with wireless access have afforded dependency case managers the ability to acquire pertinent information while in the courtroom. These computers also allow more efficient means for data entry.

Child Support Dockets

- The chief deputy administrator and the family court manager designed and supervised a plan for reducing and nearly eliminating a child support backlog of over 3,000 cases. Through collaboration and communication with other state agencies, and through the hard work of the three child support hearing officer (two and one half positions), a new schedule that opened a total of 400 new case slots monthly was designed and implemented. The new schedule eliminated over 2,800 cases during a sixth month period with a savings of $56,758 in hearing officer personnel costs and enabled swifter access to justice eliminating nine-month delays for litigants. The child support hearing officers' hard work in this program earned them the Davis Productivity Award.
- In order to maximize circuit-wide judicial resources in family court, the child support hearing officer was allocated part-time clerical staff. The allocation of one part-time staff person has allowed the hearing officer to expand her responsibilities to two additional counties, thereby freeing up judicial resources for other matters. The expansion of the hearing officer's jurisdiction to two additional counties has contributed to a rise in the funds collected for back child support. In the current year, a total of $3,806,611.67 in child support monies has been collected for the months of January, February, and March.
- In one county, the family law case manager began working with the child support supervisor in the clerk's office on disbursing child support monies in a "holding or suspense" status. Working from a report provided by the clerk, the case manager reviewed dependency court files to ascertain where the children were placed at the time the child support payments was made and prepare the necessary orders disbursing the monies to the caregivers. In 2006, $3,133.10 was disbursed to the caregivers.

Domestic Violence Dockets

- Since receiving a VAWA grant in 1997 to serve domestic violence victims, one circuit has worked diligently to institute, continuously evaluate and improve their specialized domestic violence courts, and to ensure a coordinated community response to domestic violence. The system in two counties includes an after-hours verbal order, immediate service of orders to litigants in court, tracking and monitoring batterers' intervention treatment, setting status hearings to review compliance with court ordered treatment, a progressive system of follow-up and sanctioning for violators, and community outreach on domestic violence and use of the courts to obtain and enforce an injunction. They have been asked to participate in a national research project on domestic violence courts being conducted by the National Center for Court Innovation. 2006 improvements included:
    1. Established a protocol between law enforcement, state attorney's office, and the domestic violence injunction courts to ensure prompt, methodical enforcement of contact and other violations of injunctions.
    2. Court staff have provided community outreach through presentations to various groups and agencies in the community. Through this process they have informed the public on the availability of court intervention through an injunction, provided forms and information on procedures, and provided information on other available resources in the community.
    3. Drafted a Weapons Information Form for filing with a Petition for Injunction for Protection Against Domestic Violence. This form helps law enforcement track down and confiscate weapons from respondents.
    4. An Intensive Supervision Unit for domestic violence perpetrators was established in one county to provide closer oversight of domestic violence defendants. This unit works closely with the courts and staff who manage and monitor civil injunctions cases.
    5. Best practices for domestic violence cases were designed for counties that did not previously have a specialized domestic violence court or coordinated community response system. The goal is to have a specialized domestic violence court program in every county in the circuit.
- Court administration staff in one circuit facilitated the drafting and publication of the judicial circuit 2005-2006 Domestic Violence Fatality Review Team (DVFRT) Local Annual Report. Approximately 400 copies of the report were distributed throughout the state by court administration staff. The financial means to publish the report was borne primarily by the administrative office of the court. Subsequent to the report's publication, the DVFRT team appointed an Advisory Council, comprised of community and court leaders, to implement the report's recommendations. The Advisory Council members are currently reviewing local policies and procedures for areas of improvement, as well as working towards the design and use of a standardized risk assessment instrument for agencies that have direct contact with domestic violence victims. Additionally, the DVFRT, through the Advisory Council, is working toward the creation of a comprehensive incident reporting form for law enforcement to use when responding to domestic violence calls. The Police Chiefs' Association, the Circuit Sheriffs, and the Office of the State Attorney,

are attempting to identify the specific information that must be collected by law enforcement, from the victim, to facilitate a successful prosecution of batterers. Incident reports will be made available to the DVFRT, upon request, for statistical purposes. DVFRT members are also developing a circuit-wide "strangulation protocol" for law enforcement. The protocol is tied to a concise reporting instrument being developed in an attempt to ensure that officers investigating attempted strangulation will collect information necessary for felony prosecution of the perpetrator.

- One circuit's domestic violence coordinator devoted many hours working closely with the local community, members of the Family Law Advisory Group and the Domestic Violence Fatality Review Team, the Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence (FCADV), the Department of Children and Families (DCF), the Office of the State Courts Administrator, judges, and law enforcement in developing, planning, and implementing the 10th Annual Domestic Violence Rural Conference. The Conference, entitled, *Behind Closed Doors,* was held in Lake City. The court's domestic violence coordinator was instrumental in developing workshop ideas and obtaining speakers to present information on domestic violence to conference attendees. In conjunction with the Rural Conference, the domestic violence coordinator coordinated the efforts of the FCADV, Florida Department of Law Enforcement, and DCF to host the third meeting of the Statewide Domestic Violence Fatality Review Teams.
- In 2006, the domestic violence case management unit expanded its use of the local Family Court Case Management System (FCCMS). Standard domestic violence motions, reports and orders were updated and added as templates to the FCCMS in order to merge documents with information already in the system. This enhanced use of automation has improved efficiency in the unit and allowed the circuit to better serve the public in filing post judgment actions.
- Due to limited space in one county's courthouse, the Family Mediation Unit (FMU) is housed off site. In 2006, the Family Mediation Unit, together with the sheriff's office developed and implemented a domestic violence safety plan for staff at this facility in order to ensure the safety of all mediation attendees and staff. When the FMU is notified that a mediation attendee has an outstanding injunction for protection against another mediation attendee or that there is a history of domestic violence involving the attendees, the sheriff's office is immediately notified. This sets into play the safety/security plan. If the attendee calls the office, they arrange for the person to arrive and be placed in a secure room 15 minutes before the mediation is scheduled. Upon his or her arrival at the facility, the individual initiating the complaint is immediately escorted by the sheriff's security staff into a secure room in the FMU. A family member or a close friend may accompany the attendee while waiting for mediation. Court personnel meet with the attendee and advise the attendee of the options that are available to him or her to ensure his or her safety and well being. If the attendee feels intimidated or threatened by the other attendee, the attendee is permitted to participate in mediation in a separate room with the mediator shuttling between the two rooms to meet with each attendee individually. The opposing party is kept in the front of the facility until the mediation begins, and is then escorted by sheriff office personnel to the mediation area. After mediation is complete, the attendee making the complaint is allowed to leave the facility first and, after a certain amount of time has elapsed, the other attendee is allowed to leave. A separate exit door may be used by the attendee making the complaint. A

sheriff's officer may escort the attendee to his or her vehicle. The main objective is to provide the individual with a safe and secure environment free of any intimidation or threat from the person against whom the domestic violence petition was filed.

- In one county, the following was accomplished last year:
    1. Designated an advocate form the state attorney's office to help assist petitioners complete a Petition for Protection Against Domestic Violence.
    2. Established a Fatality Review Committee.
    3. Worked with law enforcement to clarify the differences between injunctions issued under Chapter 39 and Chapter 741, and institute a system to make injunctions ordered under Chapter 39 more readily enforceable.
    4. Coordinated the systems for service and processing of injunctions by law enforcement between the north and south ends of the county.
- Family violence prevention or reduction has been a special area of emphasis in the circuit and particularly in one county. The family violence prevention coordinator and the domestic violence coordinator for the circuit have implemented or assisted in the development of a series of programs of education for domestic violence awareness and prevention. While not directly a part of the court, it is believed that providing education to teens and adults on issues of intimate partner violence, and education on availability of public and private community resources and services is both a promising and positive service to those persons whom served in the family court system. The program included the following presentations: Light of Hope (Promoting Child Abuse & Neglect Prevention); Teen Dating Violence Awareness Night at Easy Street as part of Teen Dating; Violence Prevention Awareness week; "Hands are Not For Hurting" expo at a local mall; NAACP Youth Mass Meeting; Hands of Men & Youth in Foster Care. The program also created local domestic violence and teen dating violence brochures and developed an anti-violence pledge for teenagers to create awareness about teen dating violence. The group partnered with the Children's Advocacy Center 6th Annual Child Abuse & Neglect Conference and with RSVP for State Road 200 Mentors Recruitment Fair.
- In 2006, family law staff in one county began reviewing criminal misdemeanor domestic violence cases with crossover civil domestic violence cases. A domestic violence worksheet is prepared for the criminal court judge to alleviate conflicting court orders.
- A domestic violence case management application was designed and implemented in the domestic violence division. This application retrieves case information from the clerk's database and then creates a case file within the application. The application also creates all Florida Supreme Court approved domestic violence court orders, creates domestic violence court dockets, creates statistical reports and allows staff to record case notes. This application greatly reduces the time needed to prepare orders, reports and dockets, allows for effective coordination of cases, and enables staff to track compliance of court orders.
- The administrative order governing the domestic violence task force in two of the circuit's counties was revised to include a provision for establishing a task force in each of the circuit's three counties. The court sponsored educational workshops in each county regarding the community's response to domestic violence. Approximately 300 participants from across the circuit attended the events.
- A printer was installed in the domestic violence and pro se courtrooms, which allows the case manager or clerk to have on-line access to forms. The result is a reduction in time

spent manually preparing orders and forms, and created uniformity in the completion of forms.

- Instruction sheets were drafted to assist respondents in domestic violence cases. These sheets are attached and served with the pleadings to provide information about requirements, procedure, and court process.

Dissolution of Marriage Dockets

- One circuit implemented the following improvements in 2006:
  1. The Shared Parenting Schedule was updated to incorporate new laws related to notification required for relocation of children by the primary residential parent and other substantive matters. Family mediators are now reading and explaining the Schedule to parties during each mediation session involving children. This has helped reduce confusion, misunderstandings, and what is sometimes just a basic lack of awareness of the conditions of shared parenting and visitation by pro se litigants. Additional forms and instructions were drafted or updated for approval by the chief judge.
  2. A list of frequently asked questions to assist pro se litigants with domestic relations cases was developed and placed on the clerk's website and is available in hard copy.
  3. Instruction sheets were drafted to assist respondents in pro se domestic relations cases. These sheets are attached and served with the pleadings to provide information about requirements, procedure, and court process.
  4. Information and instructions were drafted concerning mediation services for pro se litigants. The information sheet tells them what to expect, what issues will be addressed, what to bring to the session. In addition, some of the mediators have agreed to provide mediation orientation sessions and a video to assist in this endeavor.
  5. Increased use of magistrates, mediation and case management conferences throughout the circuit in an effort to reduce the time from filing to final hearing.
  6. Translated their pro se brochures into Spanish.
  7. Pro se clinics are held bi-weekly as a resource for pro se litigants. Participants sign up through the pro se office and meet with a local volunteer attorney.
  8. A Standing Pre Trial Order was developed for dissolution cases to address all pertinent matters related to children, property, finances and debt. The order provides a standard for all pending cases, protection for the parties, and a means for enforcement of the terms pending the final hearing.
- One circuit implemented a case management process whereby a case management conference is scheduled approximately 45 days after filing. At the case management conference, mediation is available on-site. Cases that have all required pleadings filed proceed to final hearing. The case management conferences are conducted by the general magistrates.
- Before 2006, throughout one circuit, case management was available in domestic relations cases, if at all, on a very limited basis. At most, when a pro se litigant filed a motion or pleading, the clerk forwarded the file to the case manager for review. Upon review, the case manager communicated with the judge, and followed the judge's directions to set necessary hearings and to generate appropriate orders. "Front-end" case management in domestic relations cases, whereby the case manager monitors and tracks the case from the date of filing of the petition, was implemented as a pilot project in May, 2006, with much success. Front-end tracking and review of domestic relations cases has

allowed the court to identify potential problems at a much earlier date. It has increased the litigants' access to the courts and has helped improve judicial efficiency and economy. Cases are identified and referred to mediation much earlier, reducing conflicts and delays for families and for the court itself. This circuit has also increased the use and availability of mediation throughout the circuit.

- Case management in domestic relations cases was expanded in one county to include all new (attorney and pro se) cases with proof of service and with no activity for six months. All cases were reviewed and set for case management conferences on the family law judges' or general magistrates' dockets. They conducted 986 case management conferences. The family law case mangers noticed a decline in the number of telephone calls from pre se litigants inquiring about the status of their cases because their cases are getting set so quickly.
- Recognizing the provisions of § 61.13, Florida Statutes, the chief judge of one circuit adopted the use of comprehensive visitation schedules/guidelines to assist parties in structuring visitation arrangements that best meet their needs and those of their children. The visitation guidelines were first considered and developed by a subcommittee of one county's FLAG and were subsequently reviewed/discussed at several circuit-wide FLAG meetings. After providing all parties with the opportunity to comment, the visitation schedules/guidelines were ultimately adopted by administrative order. The guidelines are fashioned around the presumption that individually tailored visitation schedules are preferred, but provide guidance to parties in developing visitation schedules that best meet their needs. The guidelines address local, long distance and split custody/rotating-timesharing arrangements with focus on crucial factors such as minimizing loss for children, maximizing relationships, security, conflict and recognition of changes in circumstances.
- Parties, attorneys and mediators can access and schedule family mediations on one circuit's website. This allows parties to easily schedule mediations at mutually convenient times and greatly reduces the staff time needed in scheduling mediations.
- In the area of case management, magistrates and hearing officers are assigned to assist in certain pro se domestic relations proceedings and some child support issues. A pro se case manager reviews newly filed pro se dissolution of marriage petitions, pro se motions to enforce existing dissolution of marriage, paternity and child support orders and petitions to modify existing dissolution of marriage, paternity and child support orders. The pro se case manager refers uncontested and some low conflict petitions and motions to the magistrate's office for hearing. Also in the pro se division, a "fast track" docket is scheduled one day a month for uncontested dissolution of marriage cases with no children and no property. One judicial assistant has opened a free Google account on which she posts a calendar that can be used by law offices when scheduling hearings. "It saves a lot of phone calls," says the judicial assistant. One family court judge regularly offers several dates a month for uncontested divorces. On the date set aside there is a sign up sheet posted outside the judge's hearing room. The cases are heard on a first-come first-served basis. In order to manage all family cases in a timely manner, a family law case manager schedules case management conferences in each of the family sections every few months. This process prevents cases from bogging down the system and helps move cases to a timely closure.

- While mediation services are utilized in high conflict (non-domestic violence) cases to address issues such as custody and visitation arrangements, parenting coordinators have also emerged as valuable resource to assist with implementing a parenting plan by facilitating the resolution of disputes, providing educational information regarding the developmental needs of children and the effects of parental separation, and resolution of child-related issues peacefully to reduce the potential for future conflict. In 2006, one circuit's Family Court Services (FCS) continued to develop the circuit's model Parenting Coordination Program, and an administrative order for parenting coordination was signed by the chief judge in January. A mandatory training was provided to all parenting coordinators who met the circuit's requirements, and the FCS Parenting Coordinators Resource List was updated to include the training participants.
- The domestic relations division has created or revised several forms, brochures, and other types of family court information for dissemination to the court and the public. The brochures "Understanding Injunctions for Protection," and "What is a Hearing Officer, What is a Magistrate," were revised and are in the process of being translated into Spanish. The chief judge approved several forms to be used within the circuit, such as a Petition for Temporary Custody and the Rules of Courtroom Etiquette. Also in 2006, the Family Bench Book was updated just in time for the new family judges to take the bench. Furthermore, a FLAG committee was formed to revisit the Circuit's child visitation guidelines, although the final revision is not expected to be complete until the end of 2007. Developing many of these informational documents has required circuit-wide involvement and collaboration with other offices.
- The domestic relation judges in the circuit noticed that many families with dissolution of marriage cases pending had not filed a parenting plan with the courts. To assist these parents in developing these plans, the judges put together a work group of members from the FLAG, including attorneys and psychologists. Pamphlets providing sample language, definitions of frequently used terms, age appropriate guidelines for visitation and a general parenting plan example, were developed. A safety focused plan was also prepared. The Parenting Plan Packets and Shared Parenting Contact and Guidelines pamphlets are available in each of the courtrooms as well as on the circuit's web page.
- One circuit established Family Court Services which was specifically created to assist families with children involved in a dissolution of marriage case. Family Court Services is a partnership between the circuit and a local agency. It is not unusual for children to be adversely impacted by a divorce. Family Court Services strives to help the parents and children by identifying appropriate court programs and community resources that can help the family during this transition. Examples of these are: The Child and Family Counseling Program; The Family Justice Center; Think Kids; and Mediation and Diversion Services. The program is free to families who need assistance and is located on the second floor of one of the circuit's courthouses. Each party meets individually with a family advocate who completes an assessment of the family's needs. The family is given the appropriate referrals for services which could include a court or community service. Some of the issues that have prompted referrals are: mental health/emotional issues, parenting conflicts, financial assistance, housing, education and substance abuse. Each family advocate is familiar with the circuit's court programs and can assist families with accessing services if deemed appropriate or ordered by a judge. The goal is to provide

services so that the family will spend less time in court and be able to cooperate on parenting and other issues.

- One county has implemented a differentiated case management practice, borne out of necessity when one of the two family law case managers was on a leave of absence for several months. Evaluating the situation, it was determined that the review process must be changed in order to expedite domestic relations cases that involved children. The case manager was assigned all cases involving children and the family court manager reviewed all other cases. Upon receipt of a case, instead of reviewing them in the order they are received and docketed, the case manager determines if there is an immediate need (motion for temporary relief, child support or custody) and schedules the case accordingly. By having one case manager review all the cases involving children, she is more attuned to the special needs involved in these cases and can be of better service to the families involved in the judicial system. The circuit plans to continue this practice as it has proven to be successful.
- In late 2006, one circuit hired an Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Director and a program assistant for the ADR Program. The ADR Director immediately began working to establish a circuit-wide family mediation program and on April 2, 2007 an administrative order was signed creating the circuit's mediation program. Although the actual program became effective in April 2007, preparation and planning for this much anticipated and much needed program began in 2006.
- In 2006, one circuit implemented the use of a circuit-wide Standing Temporary Domestic Relations Order, with attached Courtroom Rules. The circuit reviewed similar orders in use throughout the state, and tailored the order and courtroom rules to meet the needs of their circuit. The Standing Order is used in all domestic relations cases, and has greatly reduced the number of emergency hearings associated with the various subjects it controls. The Standing Order is intended to apprise the parties of their duties and responsibilities during the conduct of the litigation. This has proved to be a valuable tool to help families preserve assets, and maintain relationships, as their legal disputes are addressed by the court. Since the development of this order, and its implementation throughout the circuit, the frequency of emergency hearings on temporary financial issues has decreased. Parties receive this order early in the proceedings, and they are directed to maintain assets, records, insurance policies, and to incur no new joint debt. The order also works to preserve existing family relationships, and encourages ongoing visitation and provision of support for the children. Unrepresented litigants are also advised of what they can and cannot expect from the judge when their case comes to court. The Courtroom Rules and Regulations were added to the Standing Order to advise all participants in these cases of the conduct required of them when coming to court. As many litigants are unrepresented and unfamiliar with court procedures, these rules address how one is expected to appear and act when appearing before a judicial officer. The rules also address many specific issues regarding cases involving children, including using them as witnesses, relocation, as well as a child's right to love and affection from both parents. The feedback that we have received from parties, counsel, and all participants in family court cases, has been overwhelmingly positive regarding the Standing Order and the practical guidance set forth in the Rules and Regulations.
- In 2006, one circuit was able to assign a newly acquired FTE mediator position to be present at all case management conferences throughout the circuit. The parties are able

to access mediation services when they appear for each case management conference, and the circuit has found that many are more amenable to working out their disputes, and often present full or partial settlements, on their hearing dates. When a case is settled through the mediation process on the date of the scheduled case management conference, the parties may proceed to a final hearing at that time, and they need not make a return trip to court. This represents a substantial savings to the parties, and maximizes court resources at the same time.

- In 2006, one circuit produced a new family court brochure that was designed to be handed out at all case management conferences. As many of our family court cases involve one or more self-represented litigants, the brochure contains information regarding accessing our self-help program, how the court process works, and what case management conferences entail. The feedback concerning the brochure has been uniformly positive.
- Due to the volume of pro se cases filed in one circuit in 2006, it became clear that the previously instituted case management practices in the pro se unit demanded review and amendment. New filings in the pro se division were four times those of the other domestic relation divisions. Pro se cases comprise 36.6% of all new domestic relation filings. The case management team includes the judge, 1.75 court administration case managers, the clerk, the judicial assistant and the court deputy. Frequent meetings and open communication resulted in the establishment of more efficient case management. The general magistrates also assisted in expediting these cases. Some of the changes in case management have included:
    1. The clerk's coding/docketing system was modified to include additional identifiers for all family division cases. This included dividing dissolution of marriage cases into: with children, without children, publications and simplified and dividing name changes into adult or minor. The cooperation of the clerk's office in doing so has assisted the judge and case manager in preparing cases for review and setting of final hearings.
    2. Petitions for simplified dissolution of marriage, name change, to amended marriage license are set within seven days of filing, unless the parties request a later hearing date.
    3. Due process requirements were improved in publication cases. The court obtains a copy of the marriage license and from the information on the marriage license; there is a Florida driver's license search for the respondent. Addresses found are not provided to the petitioner to avoid any potential for domestic violence or disclosure of confidential addresses. A case management order is entered advising the respondent of the proceedings at the address as located. Current addresses have been located in approximately 30% to 35% of the pro se publication cases.
    4. In-house, including instant mediation has been very effective in pro se cases. The judge handling pro se cases coordinates with director of the family mediation unit and meets periodically with mediators as to changes in legal and procedural issues.

Other case management practices which have been modified and accelerated:

1. Review of court file within three days of receipt of request for hearing to determine if case is ready for hearing and setting of final hearing.

2. Review by judge of every file, including modification cases, that is 30 days old and not set for hearing, to determine status of case. A case manager then follows through by use of checklist and notification to parties of areas which impede the final disposition of the case. Case managers also answer routine questions, refer parties to community services, and schedule case management conference as required.
3. At the 30 day review, notation is made for the date of next review of the court file and the entire pending case load is reviewed weekly to follow up on reviews as necessary. By the above intensive case management procedures, all initial filing pro se cases have been expedited. There are what may appear to be a large number of cases in this division at any one time; however, there are less than 15% of the cases pending in excess of 90 days and only 2% exceed 180 days.

- The modification of case management methods in a domestic relation division has reduced cases from 1099 in January 2006 to 721 in December 2006. Similar case management techniques were applied to this division (see previous bullet) in categories and cases, to-wit: Department of Revenue, dissolution of marriage with no action, dissolution of marriage ready for trial and uncontested paternity. These cases were then scheduled for appropriate action. Some cases had been previously disposed but not officially closed by the clerk for SRS reporting. Traditional case management practices were also utilized such as 30, 60, 90 and 120 day reviews and case management dockets. While traditional case management practices are utilized and found to be effective in all domestic relations divisions, one size does not fit all. This circuit will continue to assess, reassess, and implement those practices which improve the timely resolution of cases.

Crossover Dockets

- In one county, the following was accomplished last year:
    1. The judge began holding annual judicial reviews on long term relative placement cases to check on the family situation, appropriateness of the long term placement, and basic welfare of the children. These hearings provide good information on how well the long term placement is working, and allow the court to address any unexpected changes or additional needs.
    2. Developed and instituted a juvenile drug court program for delinquents within the unified family court.
- On February 9, 2006, an administrative order was entered by the chief judge in one circuit, establishing a unified family court section (or crossover section) and designating one judge as the circuit judge to preside over the crossover docket. The judge held the first crossover docket on February 23, 2006, which included two families and ten cases. A court program specialist II (case coordinator) has been designated specifically for the crossover and dependency dockets. The case coordinator reviews the cases and provides a summary of the family history to the court along with information on any related cases. The case coordinator is present at all shelter hearings and dependency court hearings and cross-references the names of the parties to check for any related cases. Since implementation, there have been 49 families involved in 159 cases on the crossover docket. The juvenile alternative sanctions coordinator remains abreast of available programs and their operating practices and coordinates interagency meetings between the state attorney's office and diversion, education and treatment providers to facilitate better understanding of available resources and to ensure smooth operation of the referral processes for the various agencies. This practice has been very successful in providing valuable information to the family court judges.
- September 2006 brought to a close the one-year unified family court pilot project in one circuit. The project, deemed a success, due mainly to strong judicial leadership and numerous stakeholders coming together to benefit the best interests of children in families where multiple court cases exist. The pilot project addressed issues for 112 families and handled a total of 342 cases: 120 dependency; 111 delinquency; and, 111 domestic relations (paternity/support, custody, domestic violence, dissolution). 134 cases were disposed during the life of the pilot. The result is a unified court division that captures all crossover cases involving a family, bringing them before one judge and in most instances, at one time. The benefits of this approach are numerous and the concept of having one authority figure overseeing a family's journey through the court system is essential to the best interests of children. When developing the protocol and best practices for the project, the Unified Family Court Steering Committee made a commitment to the importance of the essential elements identified by the Florida Supreme Court *In re: Report of the Family Court Steering Committee, 794 So. 2d 518-526.* The committee identified each element and focused on areas that would enhance services to the family and provide efficiencies within areas of the court system in order to develop a comprehensive and coordinated approach. Many of the identified essential

elements of the unified family court were already fully functional and successfully operational in the area of study. This allowed the committee an opportunity to focus on newer concepts introduced to the court system such as comprehensive case management. With the focus on court case management, as well as extensive technological support, implementation of the pilot was a success and the pilot project year-end date came to a close with recommendations to the circuit's chief judge to both continue the pilot and to expand the concept to other counties within the circuit.

- In one county, the case management team met with the clerk's team to streamline companion case procedures and compliance with court orders. Additionally, a case manager was assigned to each family court judge to notify the court on the status of crossover cases and criminal cases involving the families/parties. Each case manager was issued a laptop computer to research cases. Using existing software products, innovative and cost-effective means were used to track compliance with court orders, companion cases and calendar cases for upcoming hearings.
- During the course of 2006, the role and job responsibilities of the UFC (crossover) case manager in one circuit were further developed. (It should be noted that while this restructuring was done in a cooperative work spirit, the family and juvenile divisions in the circuit, having absorbed the impact, have had to make adjustments to their respective levels of service provision accordingly. Both divisions "loaned" an existing position to the two crossover docket judges.) In conjunction with the evolution of the UFC case manager's role, case management forms, worksheets, tracking logs, and other tools were created and refined to meet the demands of managing a growing caseload, which include:
    1. UFC Case Status Worksheet
    2. UFC Statutory Timeframe Worksheet
    3. UFC Hearing Notes Worksheet
    4. UFC Liaison Directory
    5. UFC Crossover Cases Research Checklist
    6. UFC Caseload Tracking Log

  Due to the very broad range of subject matters and procedural rules and nuances with which the UFC case manager must possess knowledge and become proficient, and possess the ability to apply these principles to manage a complex caseload involving high conflict families and children, a UFC Case Manager Training Curriculum was devised and implemented in order to immerse staff being newly hired to the division, and provide them with the necessary foundation to carry out their job functions effectively. A UFC Case Manager Training Manual was also created as a reference tool.
- Protocols were implemented in 2006 whereby dependency Judges are now handling companion domestic violence injunction cases. If at the time of filing a domestic violence injunction case, the clerk's office has identified a companion dependency case which is pending, then the permanent injunction hearing is set before the dependency judge, as opposed to the circuit's previous practice of setting these cases before a domestic violence judge, with no knowledge of the companion dependency action. This system redesign was a complex change to accomplish, particularly due to the fact that domestic violence injunction cases are filed at any one of four geographically separate court locations from the Juvenile Justice Center, where the case is then set for permanent injunction hearing before the dependency judge. The requisite cross-training for the

judiciary, case managers, clerks, and liaison officers to handle these cases, and process the injunction paperwork in accordance with critical statutory timeframes and procedures, proved to be the most time intensive aspect of coordinating this transition. Logistical issues, such as obtaining hearing dates, accessing and becoming versed in the DoVs program to print injunction paperwork, transporting court files between courthouses in a timely manner, ensuring proper service of process and routing of injunction paperwork to the sheriff, were most challenging. A future innovation the circuit looks forward to is the co-location of our domestic violence intake unit downtown with the new Children's Courthouse, estimated to open in 2010.

- One circuit has a dedicated webpage for their UFC/Complex Litigation Division (crossover court). Operational information regarding the circuit's UFC model is included, as well as a section on "Frequently Asked Questions", forms which may be downloaded by lawyers, system partners and litigants [i.e. Related Case Information Sheet- for referral of potentially qualifying UFC cases (may also be submitted electronically)], the UFC administrative order, and links to related UFC resources. The circuit has found that the information appearing on the webpage has markedly increased access, as they have received phone calls, inquiries, and case referrals in response from the public, attorneys, and system representatives locally, statewide, and out of state. Additionally, a student who is majoring in sociology at the University of Florida identified the circuit's division through the webpage as a potential summer internship assignment, and will be interning with them during the summer of 2007 for course credit.
- In 2006, one circuit planned for the phase-in of a delinquency crossovers cases docket. The chief judge convened operational meetings, together with the judges and magistrate who hear crossover cases, and all involved system partners, to work together collaboratively to develop a plan to merge delinquency crossover cases within the context of the circuit's UFC model. Crossover case data was carefully analyzed, and consensus was reached to accomplish this massive operational advancement in two phases, with delinquency/dependency crossover cases being phased-in first, followed by delinquency/domestic relations crossover cases (constituting the largest percentage of crossovers). A subcommittee worked to develop specific protocol for this crossover case pilot project, with a March 2007 implementation date, taking into consideration the data, which indicates that approximately one-third of delinquency/dependency crossover cases are both open simultaneously in the circuit.
- One circuit experienced a 133% increase in the overall number of cases transferred into the Complex Litigation Division (crossover division) in 2006, over the previous year. They found that the tripling of the caseload is largely attributable to our front-end identification and research of related cases in the system which may qualify for transfer pursuant to the local administrative order. As they have gained staff resources, they have become more successful with crossover case identification. In addition, increased awareness about which matters qualify for transfer, resulting from training and outreach efforts to the judiciary, court system personnel, system partners, and attorneys, is another contributing factor. Data compiled for 2006 indicates that 40% of the crossover cases transferred into the Complex Litigation Division originated from front-end identification through daily crossover reports, 29% were referrals from the judiciary, 14% were from other court system representatives, 14% were from attorneys, and 3% were from the family self-help program. One of the integral resources they have available to assist with this tremendous

increase in volume is the dedicated and specially trained UFC general magistrate. This magistrate receives referrals from the judges handling crossover cases, and provides litigants with expedited judicial intervention to help reduce and diffuse high conflict matters. Another critical resource to this division was instituted in 2005 is the dedicated UFC mediator. This mediator is specially trained to handle the array of complex issues involved in these crossover cases, and promotes judicial economy by offering an avenue for alternative dispute resolution, at which the parties may feel satisfaction with arriving at a mutual agreement to contested issues.

- Family division case managers in one circuit now have improved computer access to research related cases. In 2005, case managers were restricted to related cases within their county. In 2006, case managers were given access to the Judicial Inquiry System, allowing them to research related cases statewide. Access to case information statewide allows the case managers to provide the judges and magistrates all the information they need to avoid entering conflicting orders and jurisdictional problems. Additionally, case managers can determine if a litigant is not producing an accurate Notice of Related Cases pursuant to Fla. R. J. Admin. 2.545.
- One circuit has developed a comprehensive system to screen all newly filed domestic relations cases, delinquency cases, Marchman/Baker Act cases, dependency cases and criminal misdemeanor domestic violence cases within 24 hours of filing. These case types are identified, related in the BANNER system and transferred with one court order, called "Order Identifying Unified Family Court Case." A local administrative order requires that a Notice of Related Case form be filed for all newly filed and re-opened domestic relations cases. Daily runs have been established to pick up a copy of the Notice of Related Case form from the clerk's office. The jail's first appearance dockets are faxed to the UFC Screening Unit on a daily basis to identify domestic violence cases. Once these cases are routed to the Unified Family Court Screening Unit, various databases are utilized to identify related cases. In addition, each day UFC case management receives a faxed copy of all of the shelter petitions. The Department of Juvenile Justice sends a daily copy of their face sheet and detention "pop sheet". If a case does not meet the criteria established for an "Order Identifying Unified Family Court Case", "Judicial Notice" forms are completed, which alert case management to pull cases to look for conflicting orders in closed cases, notify the court of out standing warrants, open criminal cases, participation in diversion programs or other pertinent information. Each case screener or case manager who screens cases enters the information into a spreadsheet, which allows the data to be tracked and measured. From the months of August 2006-September 2006, an average of 44% of families had one or more open cases and met unified family court criteria. Additionally, 1,072 Judicial Notices were prepared to provide the court with additional information to aid in decision making and 339 open warrants were disclosed to the court.
- The handling of domestic violence cases was a priority when implementing one circuit's unified family court. All civil domestic violence cases are heard by the judge presiding over any open dissolution, dependency, or delinquency cases. If there are closed cases, the domestic violence case is set before the last presiding judge. In addition, a specialized docket has been established wherein civil domestic violence injunctions and misdemeanor domestic violence cases are coordinated and heard before the same judge. This coordination occurs at the time of filing for a civil injunction for protection. The

process is that the petitioner files a Notice of Related Case form and the clerk's office searches for related cases. If related cases exist, then the return hearing is set before the judge who is handling the misdemeanor case. The judge is provided with a case manager who calculates child support in court, drafts orders for supervised visitation, and is available to answer questions that the litigants may have on the day of court. Feedback from involved parties has been that the litigants are less confused regarding the difference between the "No Contact" order and the civil injunction as the judges are aware of both cases. Child support and visitation issues are addressed in a timely fashion and are consistent in both cases and the rate of respondents showing up for court is higher as the civil case is more closely connected to the criminal case.

- On December 1, 2006, one circuit hosted its First Annual Unified Family Court Summit. Through the coordinated efforts of the UFC administrative judge (also the FLAG Chairperson), the DCIP Chairperson, and the family court manager, the summit was a great success. Opening remarks were made by chief judge who then introduced the UFC administrative judge. The presentation of the circuit's court administration UFC Power Point video laid the foundation for later group presentations. The approximate 100 attendees were presented with UFC information in the areas of domestic relations, domestic violence, dependency and delinquency. Each section's presentation included a discussion of case flow and roles of the parties. Participants were encouraged to ask questions and comment on what problems they saw which could be addressed by UFC or further discussed during future FLAG meetings. Presenters included members of the judiciary, general magistrates, court case managers, clerks, sheriff's officers, Department of Juvenile Justice, state attorney, public defender, ChildNet, mediation, guardian ad litem, and Office of the Attorney General.
- A related case report which identifies dependency, domestic violence and domestic relations cases assigned to one judge is distributed to case managers on a weekly basis. A separate summary report identifying related delinquency cases is forthcoming. Several other reports which identify related cases are received on a daily basis.
- In one county, they implement a procedure for reassignment of domestic violence cases to the judge already assigned (if one) in the family and dependency divisions and the assignment of subsequent dissolution of marriage or paternity cases to any judge who had heard a domestic violence petition for injunction case.
- Use of CCIS and JCIS to search for related cases and then using county specific clerk software to more fully research newly indentified related cases and inform family court judges for proper assignment and coordination.