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Greetings all.

By this medium I wish inform the youth court judiciary of emerging issues which may impact our responsibilities. I welcome any suggestions or additional information which needs to be shared.

In February, I had the opportunity to become a part of the Casey Family Programs Judicial Engagement Team. In that capacity I have travelled to several national conferences and have been introduced to best practices particularly in child welfare. I have been able to share some strengths of our system and have had some weaknesses exposed to me. I want to share what I have learned and hopefully help you in your local jurisdictions.

### **Treatment of CPS workers in courtrooms**

Having been a veteran of the youth court bench, I fully understand the frustration of being charged with making critical life decisions while witnessing what we feel is poor work by CPS personnel. Unfortunately, sometimes that frustration evidences itself by aggressive responses to that personnel. I have learned over this past year that this is not just a Mississippi phenomenon. Courts across the country similarly respond. Around the country there has been complaints of belittling and even name calling. Attempts are being pursued to develop responses that recognizes case work insufficiencies without dramatically impacting morale. What can we do in Mississippi to improve this situation in our state?

As we all know, the agency is under a federal consent decree and is tirelessly attempting to meet its mandates. However, it is faced with many challenges.

One of the central mandates is to achieve manageable caseloads across the state for their workers. To meet this need, many new workers have been employed during the past year while still experiencing crippling turnover. Thus, the workforce is primarily young and inexperienced. Most are fresh out of college. Most have never entered a courtroom. They are enormously intimidated by the courtroom and the procedures conducted there. At this stage, they are extremely sensitive to their work and how it is appreciated by others.

The extreme turnover adds to this problem. If they serve in an urban area of the state, many of the offices have no front line workers with much experience at all. Private sector competition skims promising workers on a regular basis. They offer substantially higher salaries which will continue to be a drain until the state chooses to properly compensate these workers. There is nothing we can do about that except to advocate for those systems improvements. However, another issue has been cited--perceived disrespectful treatment by the court and other court personnel in many jurisdictions.

I am sure that over my years on the bench I have been guilty of this treatment. I know the frustration. And that treatment, I believe is born in the unspoken and perhaps unrealized notion that we are all on the same team to protect at-risk children. We see each other so often and engage in removal and permanency conversations constantly. A sense of familiarity perhaps results in some questionable responses when disappointment occurs, especially if that disappointment is redundant.

May I encourage that we all examine our courtroom interaction with the workers. I am not suggesting in any way that inappropriate or incompetent work not be challenged. I am only suggesting that we refrain from what can be perceived as personal attacks and leave the individual correcting to the supervisory staff of the department. For example, the court may need to respond to perceived poor work by making or threatening a no reasonable efforts finding detailing the shortcomings. That would certainly get the attention of the supervisory staff.

Judge John Specia of Texas points out this is a national issue.

John was a long time family court judge in San Antonio and became the first Jurist in Residence in Texas. He later became the Commissioner of the Child Protection Agency. He encouraged that judges **demonstrate valuing of professionals testifying**. There were many complaints by professionals in the child welfare system of stressful and sometimes oppressive atmosphere in the courtroom. He adds that the judge/courtroom atmosphere should not be the reason a person does not want to come to work or the reason they leave the child welfare area for other pursuits. This does not mean to not contest insufficient testimony or finding. It just addresses the demeanor of the exchange. This would be an area of collaboration.

**Collaboration** between the court and the agency is critical. Opportunities should be developed in every county for court and agency personnel, both supervisory and field workers, to regularly meet and share so each can see issues from different perspectives (not case specific).

For the court it is important to understand the viewpoints, regulations, beliefs, education, skills and values of child protection staff and why those exist. AND

For the child protection staff it is critical for the court to help them understand the thoughts, beliefs, values and attitude of the judge and others in the courtroom. Specifically discuss and explain the roles of the Guardian Ad Litem, Prosecutor, Defense Attorney, Attorney for the

parent while still collaborating for the best outcomes for the child. Invite all those disciplines to be a part of the discussions.

Strength-based counselling is the model in most counselling done with our clientele. Similarly, strength-based oversight in the courtroom is helpful. Hopefully, we can take time to praise workers for a job well done and for demonstrated traits of competency while civilly but firmly addressing shortcomings and mistakes.

I firmly believe that the children and families of Mississippi are lucky to have such a truly committed and concerned judiciary to meet their needs. In a real way we are all on the same team. We want children protected and granted the opportunity to live productive lives within their families if possible. The court plays the central role. I believe regular meetings described above will improve everyone's skills and understanding.

Thanks,

John Hudson