

Dependency Counsel Focus Groups

Conducted for Joint Subcommittee on Court Appointed Counsel Funding
Allocation Methodology

November 4, 2015

Focus Groups

- Conducted between August and October 2015
- Four groups: San Francisco, Sacramento, Burbank, Riverside/Murietta
- 37 case-carrying dependency attorneys participated
- Counties represented:
 1. Alameda, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz
 2. Contra Costa, Nevada. Placer, Sacramento, San Joaquin, Shasta, Stanislaus
 3. Los Angeles, Orange, Ventura
 4. Imperial, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego

Themes shared by all groups

- More attorney time is required at case initiation (detention and jurisdiction/disposition phases).
- Late reports and lack of time to read reports or speak with clients lead to over reliance on setting matters for contest or requesting continuances.
- Both parent and child's attorney need more time to engage in relative search and placement. This is the area of case planning that needs more scrutiny at the beginning of the case.

Themes shared by all groups

- The great majority of an attorney's time is spent in court, impacting their availability to perform case work out of court.
- Visiting clients, contact with social workers and family, and research takes place after work hours and on weekends.
- Funding for support staff (investigators and social workers) has eroded over time.
- Investing in longevity in dependency counsel practice creates systems in which attorneys are knowledgeable of local resources to serve clients and opportunities to mentor new attorneys.

Themes more common to attorneys from most under-resourced courts

- In simpler cases, such as the one used in the scenario, clients will not be contacted routinely by attorneys. Attorneys only have time to respond to calls from clients, or will see the client in court.
- Attorneys with high caseloads are not able to visit clients.
- Research and writing is done in court between talking to clients and participating in hearings.
- Experienced attorneys are expert at managing high caseloads and can manage caseloads higher than the Judicial Council standard; however they also manage their caseloads at the expense of meeting with clients.

Impact of high caseloads (all attorneys)

- Unable to look for relatives/ensure relative placement whenever possible
- Over reliance on continuances and contested hearings
- Unable to check-in with clients between hearings, often only meeting with clients at a scheduled court hearing
- Unable to attend IEPs
- Unable to engage in building assessment of case/legal research/legal writing