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**Characteristics of a "Pilot" Management
Information System to Track the Processing
of Abuse, Neglect and Dependency Case
Filings in Juvenile and Family Courts**

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in Juvenile and Family Courts

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INTRODUCTION

In October, 1992, staff from the National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ) began development of a "pilot" management information system to track the processing of dependency case filings in juvenile and family courts.¹ This effort was undertaken as part of a larger project funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to improve the juvenile and family courts' handling of child abuse and neglect cases. It was intended that this pilot system would serve as a platform upon which general dependency management information system requirements and specifications could be developed, tested and refined. The Hamilton County (Cincinnati, OH) Juvenile Court was selected as the beta site for development and installation of this system.

The purpose of this paper is to generally describe the characteristics of the automated system installed in Hamilton County and to identify critical system components and functionalities. This discussion should prove useful to administrative and information services staff of other juvenile/family courts as they develop or enhance their current automated system capabilities to better record and track the processing of dependency case filings. A brief overview of general system requirements is provided as well as a detailed discussion of system characteristics and functionalities that are essential to the juvenile/family court's tracking and management of dependency case processing.

GENERAL SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS FOR JUVENILE AND FAMILY COURTS

A juvenile/family court information system should be sufficiently flexible to permit the recording and tracking of critical case information over the entire range of cases over which the court has jurisdiction. Jurisdiction will vary by individual court but will, in the vast majority of instances, include (at minimum) delinquency, status offense and dependency case filings.² The information

requirements necessary to record and track these types of cases are, for the most part, similar. A good automated juvenile/family court system should have the following fundamental capabilities including:

1. The ability to readily record, store and update information regarding children and families referred to the court, complaints and petitions filed with the court, key case events and outcomes, hearings, legal status, detentions, placements, assigned jurist, and interested parties.
2. Various search capabilities to identify previous and current case filings by child, parent, case ID, and other related legal numbers (such as social security number, children protective services number, petition number, etc.).
3. Systematic auditing of data through on-line screen edits and a wide variety of exception (quality assurance) reports.
4. Separate data entry and display screens. This will limit the ability of system users to add or modify existing data (accidentally or otherwise).
5. A comprehensive series of workload, case tracking/aging, and trend reports that support effective caseload and case flow management as well as court-wide short and long-term planning.
6. The generation of daily docket listings that reflect all scheduled hearings on a jurist's docket for that day, a daily docket listing for the entire court, and courtroom worksheets that permit courtroom staff to record the results of individual hearings.
7. Court history summaries that can be generated on all juveniles referred to the juvenile/family court. This summary listing should include data pertaining to case demographics, family members (siblings, parents and guardian), information on the child's current living arrangement, and historical data on all complaints, petitions, court hearings,

¹ All references in the text to dependency filings, dependency cases, etc. refers to the entire range of dependent, neglect and abuse cases filed with a juvenile or family court. This also includes all termination of parental rights (TPR) proceedings on these cases.

² Hamilton County was unique in this regard. The pilot system installed in the Hamilton County Juvenile Court replaced their antiquated management information system that only handled dependency filings. The court has a separate, independent

system that handles delinquency and unruly (status) filings. The court, however, is currently considering using an expanded version of the pilot system to track both dependency and delinquency/unruly filings.

detentions, placements and legal status history.

More sophisticated automated juvenile/family court systems have additional system utilities and capabilities. These system enhancements expedite a wide range of tedious and time consuming court activities and responsibilities. These relatively more advanced functionalities include:

1. Automated assignment of cases to jurists (and, as appropriate attorneys, caseworkers, etc.).
2. Automated scheduling of court hearings that uses various scheduling parameters to identify and display potential hearing slots. From this display, a user can select a desired hearing slot and have this hearing scheduled on the court calendar with the requisite petition and case identifiers that will link the hearing to a specific case filing and child(ren).

A variety of hearing parameters can be incorporated into this scheduling function. The most basic of these include selecting appropriate time slots on a selected jurist's court calendar that are consistent with the amount of time needed for a specific type of hearing (e.g., 30 minutes for disposition hearings), and the number of days between hearings (e.g., schedule a disposition hearing 14-21 days from adjudication). Parameters for examining the calendars of other key parties (prosecutor, public defender, caseworker, probation officer, etc.) to identify hearing calendar slots with no apparent scheduling conflicts can also be incorporated into this system utility.
3. Automated production of court documents (including petitions, service notices, and court orders) utilizing integrated word-processing and form production software. Integrated word-processing will also allow users to access system data to complete standardized sections of certain court reports (including, psychological assessments and pre-disposition reports).
4. Electronic archiving and retrieval of important court and case documents.
5. Ad hoc report generation capabilities that permit database queries and searches by system users.

6. Electronic messaging that is available from each screen through use of a command key. This includes automatic generation of electronic messages to appropriate system users when hearing dates/times are changed.
7. Financial tracking of expenditures for contracted services (including placements) and client fees, fines, restitution, etc.

IMPORTANT DEPENDENCY MIS CHARACTERISTICS AND FUNCTIONALITIES

For the most part, the information requirements necessary to record and track dependency case filings are similar to the requirements for delinquency and status offense filings. In most juvenile/family courts, however, there are several important differences in how cases are structured and processed that will require special system considerations and adaptations. These special considerations revolve around issues that are salient or unique to the processing of dependency cases including:

1. System linking of siblings and family unit;
2. Potential for multiple children to be named as defendants (victims) on complaints and petitions filed with the court;
3. Supplemental filings (petitions, motions) including filings requesting termination of parental rights;
4. Tracking pre-filing voluntary placements and pre-disposition interim placements;
5. Recording "reasonable efforts" findings;
6. Tracking critical case events and legal status expiration dates; and
7. Development of quality assurance, case tracking, aging and statistical reports.

1. System Linking of Siblings and Family Unit

Dependency proceedings often involve all siblings in the family unit. It is not uncommon for multiple siblings to be named as defendants (victims) in a single complaint or petition filed by the local child welfare agency. Even in situations where dependency proceeding are initiated in a staggered fashion on multiple siblings, hearings

on these matters are typically combined - at least at the post-disposition review phase.

In the Hamilton County system, siblings in a family unit are linked through a system-generated identification number given to the mother. All children with the same mother are linked using this system ID number. Each child is also assigned a system-generated child identifier. Prior to the initiation of a case in the system, the user is required to conduct a name search on the child and mother to insure that there are no previous filings (complaints) on the child or family in the system. There are three possible scenarios resulting from these searches:

1. If a prior child record is found, no new child record is opened and the current complaint is tagged with the same family (mother) and child identifiers.
2. If no prior child record is found but the search on the mother's name indicates that dependency proceedings had been initiated on one or more siblings, a new child record is opened and linked with the same family identifier and a new case identifier unique to the child is assigned.
3. If the child's and mother's name searches do not reveal any prior dependency activity by the family, a child record is opened and unique family and child identifiers are assigned.

More so than for the processing of delinquency cases, automated tracking of dependency cases is facilitated by the system linking of family members. By linking siblings, individual case record information can be readily duplicated thus reducing the amount of data entry required. Family, complaint, hearing, hearing result, and interested party information that is consistent across siblings only needs to be entered once (see next section). The potential for data entry error is also reduced considerably.

Linking of family siblings also facilitates case management in instances where dependency proceedings are initiated in a staggered fashion. The same jurist, prosecutor, defense counsel, etc. can be automatically assigned to all siblings. This encourages consistency in the court's handling of related cases and can result in more timely and

efficient case processing as hearings on multiple matters are consolidated (as appropriate).

The definition of the family unit was expanded in the pilot system to allow for the linking of multiple fathers to a specific child. It is not that uncommon in dependency proceedings for multiple fathers to be named and served notice on a case. A field was created in the father file to differentiate between father types. In the Hamilton County system, these included codes for adjudicated, alleged, biological, legal, step, and putative father as well as deceased and unknown.

2. Multiple Children Named as Victims on Complaints and Petitions

The common practice of naming all victimized children as defendants on the same complaint and petition filed with the court is an overriding issue requiring careful consideration in designing an management information system to handle dependency cases. In most juvenile/family courts, separate complaints and petitions will be filed for each juvenile involved in a delinquent action. The same jurist might be assigned to all petitions on codefendants and these related matters may all be addressed at the same hearing. However, each petition is treated as a separate case and tracked individually.

A juvenile/family court management information system can encounter difficulties in counting and tracking dependency complaints and petitions in that multiple siblings included in a dependency action do not necessarily progress uniformly through the court process. Charges alleged and adjudicated can vary by child. More importantly, dispositions and custody status may vary. One child may be placed in temporary custody of the court and placed in foster care; a second may remain with the custodial parent with continuing court and agency supervision (protective supervision); and custody of a third may be granted to a relative and the case closed with no continuing court involvement. Lastly, modifications to the original disposition and the length of time the court remains involved can vary by child.

A juvenile/family court management information system needs to be sufficiently flexible to track dependency actions by child and

complaint/petition.³ In the pilot system it was decided that data on multiple children named in a dependency complaint would be entered individually on separate records and court processing would be tracked primarily by child. If a complaint named three children, three separate complaint records were created - one for each child. To reduce the data entry requirements, a system utility was created to duplicate data from the first child's complaint record to the remaining children's complaint records. However, in these instances, complaint data for each child was displayed on a series of data entry screens that required court staff to confirm the default record or to make the necessary changes prior to system processing. A similar pattern was followed for the entering of hearing data. Prior to creating a hearing record, court staff were asked by the system to indicate which additional siblings this hearing would apply to. The hearing record would then be duplicated for the remaining siblings.⁴

The pilot dependency system, however, can count and track at the complaint-level. Each complaint filed with the court is given a unique system identification number that is recorded on all records where complaint information is stored.

³ The Hamilton County Juvenile Court, Dependency Unit does not distinguish between complaints and petitions. In essence, they are one and the same. All dependency complaints filed with the court are made official (that is, requiring formal court processing). Dependency Unit staff do not substantively screen a dependency complaint filed with the court to determine whether to officially process or divert as is done with the delinquency and unruly (status) complaints. All dependency complaints are made official if the appropriate paperwork is submitted. Legal sufficiency and appropriateness to continue with formal court action is accomplished by the hearing officer at the initial hearing. Automated dependency tracking systems for juvenile/family courts that screen a dependency complaint for possible diversion prior to the initiation of court proceedings may want to consider adding an additional layer to the system that allows for the counting and tracking of both complaints and petitions (e.g., official complaints).

⁴ This pattern of duplicating default data could have been used in a wide variety of instances to reduce the data entry requirements placed on court staff including the posting of charge adjudications, dispositions and legal status modifications. However, court administrators from the Hamilton County Juvenile Court's Dependency Unit decided that these should be entered individually from scratch. They felt that the potential for confusion with regard to what data were posted and for which child was too great and that court staff should become more familiar with the system and how the data are stored before use of the default utility was expanded. However, to facilitate posting of these types of data, a utility was created to permit staff to automatically move to the appropriate data entry screens for each sibling they desired to update.

For example, if a complaint names three children, each child-complaint record will contain, both, the child and complaint identifiers. Programs written to count or track the number of complaints filed, pending or active during a specified period will generate the requisite data based on the number of unduplicated complaint identifiers found.

3. Supplemental Filings Including Those Requesting Termination of Parental Rights

Supplemental filings are common in dependency proceedings. Depending on the court and the case circumstances, these filings can take the form of supplemental petitions (official complaints) and motions.⁵ In most instances, termination of parental rights (TPR) proceedings are initiated through a supplemental filing. Linkages between the supplemental filings and the original filing should be incorporated into the system design so that accurate tracking of case status and case processing timelines can be accomplished.

For example, Ohio law requires that temporary custody orders expire within one year of the date the complaint was filed or the date the child was first placed into shelter care whichever is earlier.⁶ Time in shelter care includes all time spent in voluntary placement (prior to the filing of the complaint), time spent in interim care during the pre-dispositional hearing process, and post-dispositional time spent in temporary custody. The calculation of the precise sunset date of the temporary custody expiration by the system can become a very complicated process if supplemental petitions and motions were filed. Grouping of the original complaint, supplemental

⁵ In Hamilton County, motions are used to request a modification of an existing dispositional order that resulted in a child's placement outside of the home. For example, a request to modify a temporary custody order to protective supervision, or to long-term foster care can be accomplished through the filing of a motion. Motions are also used to request permanent custody in situations where the child is already in temporary custody. However, a supplemental complaint must be filed if the agency is requesting a modification to change a current in-home (protective supervision) order to any type of out-of-home order (i.e., temporary custody, long-term foster care, and permanent custody). Supplemental complaints can also be filed if, at the pre-disposition phase, new charges and/or additional children are added to the original complaint.

⁶ Ohio law does allow for the extension of temporary custody, upon approval of the court, for two six month periods if the child welfare agency files a motion for such an extension prior to the expiration date.

complaints and all motions to modify disposition orders resulting from these complaints can simplify critical date calculations such as these.

In the pilot system, each original complaint is given a system generated group number in addition to its unique complaint ID. All supplemental complaints are given the same group number as the original complaint that initiated the court action in addition to its own unique complaint ID. The assignment of a common group number permits all supplemental complaints to be linked to the original filing. Additionally, all motions are linked directly to the complaint of reference via the complaint ID.

4. Tracking Pre-Filing Voluntary and Pre-Disposition Interim Placements

Juvenile/family courts have a responsibility to closely monitor and track the amount of time a child remains in placement. In designing a dependency management information system, special consideration should be given to how time spent in (pre-filing) voluntary placements and (pre-disposition) interim placements are to be captured and differentiated from time a child spends in post-disposition placements. This becomes particularly critical if, as in Ohio, the amount of time a child can remain in post-disposition foster care (temporary custody) is limited by the amount of time the child has previously spent in voluntary and interim foster care (see previous section). System design should also take into consideration how this information will be used to calculate critical case time limits and deadlines. In the pilot system, these data are captured separately and readily incorporated into program code developed to generate aging and exception reports that flag cases that are approaching the sunset date for expiration of temporary custody.

5. Tracking Reasonable Efforts Findings

At various stages of the court process, a judge or hearing officer is required by federal statutes to make a "reasonable efforts" determination regarding the efforts of the child welfare agency to prevent removal from the home and to reunite the families of children already in placement. A dependency management information system should be able to record and track these reasonable efforts findings. These determinations can have considerable impact on the amount of

federal reimbursement provided the child welfare agency for care of victimized children.

A finding of reasonable efforts is not a one-time event. Reasonable efforts determinations should be made at most dependency hearings (including shelter care, adjudication, disposition hearings, review and permanency planning hearings). In the pilot system, the recording of a reasonable efforts finding is incorporated into the hearing result record. A hearing result record is created for each child involved in the hearing. This allows for the recording of differing reasonable efforts findings by child.

6. Tracking Critical Case Processing Events and Legal Status Expiration Dates

The automated system should be designed in a manner that facilitates the close monitoring and tracking of critical dependency case processing events (including shelter care, adjudication, disposition, post-disposition review and permanency planning dates) and legal status expiration dates. While not substantively different than system requirements for tracking delinquency case processing, the statutory requirements underlying dependency case processing can often be more stringent and complicated than on the delinquency side.

In Ohio, recent legislation has placed firm time limits on the amount of time a dependency complaint can remain pending (90 days from filing to disposition) before a case is dismissed (without prejudice). To reinforce compliance with this statutory requirement in Hamilton County, edits were programmed into the pilot system so that it would not accept scheduled dates for pre-disposition type hearings (shelter care, pre-trial, adjudication and disposition hearings) that were beyond the 90 day limit.

As mentioned previously, Ohio legislation also places firm time limits on the length of time a child can remain on temporary custody (TC) status. Failure of the child welfare agency to file a motion to extend the temporary custody order (limited to two extensions of six months each) or to file a motion to modify to long-term foster care or permanent custody within the prescribed time limits can have serious repercussions regarding placements options available to the court. To

guard against temporary custody cases falling between the cracks, tracking reports were designed to flag cases 30 days before temporary custody or a TC extension were to expire. Court staff can use these report listings to review the status of these cases to insure that the agency has filed appropriate paperwork and that a review or permanency planning hearing has been scheduled.

7. Development of Quality Assurance, Case Tracking, Aging and Statistical Reports

Ultimately, an automated management information system designed to track dependency case processing is only as good as the quality of its outputs (information displays, reports, system-generated forms/orders, etc.). This includes a wide range of case tracking and aging reports that can be used by court staff to monitor and manage the movement of dependency cases through the court system. A system's report capabilities should also prove invaluable to administrators to describe the volume and characteristics of dependency cases referred to the juvenile/family court and the manner in which these cases were handled. Court administrators can use report data to compile annual reports, allocate personnel and other resources in both the short-term and long-range, estimate costs, and forecast future filing and case processing trends.

An extensive series of automated reports were developed and tested prior to the time the pilot dependency management information system went on-line in Hamilton County. These included reports to assure data integrity (quality assurance), aging reports to facilitate case flow management and the tracking of individual cases, caseload listings to expedite the monitoring of individual referee's pending and active caseloads, and statistical and reports to assist the court in its administrative and planning functions. Select and sort utilities were also built into the individual report programs to allow the system users additional flexibility to customize these reports to fit their individual needs.

Sample formats for most reports generated by the pilot system are provided in an accompanying document that examines indicators by which the juvenile/family court can gauge their performance in the handling of dependency cases. Brief narratives describing the purpose of these reports

and their potential uses are also provided in this document.

FINAL COMMENTS

This paper attempts to describe, in layperson terms, the critical system components and functionalities of the pilot dependency case tracking and management information system installed in Hamilton County. Seven critical issues were identified that court administrators and information services staff from other juvenile/family court should pay special attention to as they develop or enhance their current automated system capabilities to better record and track dependency case filings.

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