

# **Family Court Coordination of Human Services Research Article**

## **Deschutes County**

Prepared by  
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### **BACKGROUND**

Over the past decade, Oregon lawmakers have directed their attention toward juvenile and domestic relations issues. Their primary focus has been to reduce human service delivery duplication, integrate local programs, and address growing populations and complex needs throughout the system. Considerable reform has been the result in both the executive and judicial branches of government.

During the 1993 legislative session, enabling legislation was adopted to establish family courts (see ORS 3.405 to ORS 3.425). Since the statutes did not mandate family courts, legislative leaders and the state court administrator encouraged judicial districts to serve as pilot sites. As an incentive, then State Court Administrator, Mr. R. William Linden, Jr., authorized the use of federal funds from the Judicial Departments Citizen Review Board program. Two pilot programs were established: Multnomah and Deschutes counties. Each site received a \$65,000 grant which the legislature approved during their September 1993 emergency board hearing.

The primary objective of a family court is to coordinate cases among family members throughout the judicial process. This allows judges to review family issues in a comprehensive manner, consolidate hearings when appropriate, issue non-conflicting orders, impose sanctions to best fit family needs, and instill accountability. To implement this concept, new techniques are needed to identify family members and link their cases as they enter the justice system.

The circuit court judges in Deschutes County adopted a one judge, one family court structure. Each circuit court judge participates, and they are assigned cases by family. Since the courts computer system was unable to combine family members among criminal, juvenile, and domestic proceedings, grant funds were used to employ a family court coordinator. The coordinator reviews case filings, connects family members, and assigns them to the same judge. As cases are connected, the coordinator makes the necessary computer notations so court staff and judges are aware of all associated cases.

The system proved complex from the outset. These hearings involved multiple parties, each represented by separate counsel. Numerous human service agencies were involved since many of the parties received local or state assistance. As cases progressed through the court system, it became evident the services were not coordinated among the providers. The judges felt human services should be coordinated, similar to the court system, to fully integrate family needs and improve delivery techniques. They were convinced that coordination of services would substantially benefit these families.

ORS 3.417 states that The presiding judge . . . may establish procedures for coordinating all services . . . available to persons who are or who may become parties in the proceeding specified in ORS 3.408. With this broad authority, the judges envisioned several goals for coordination: 1) to identify and treat at-risk family members who are not yet parties in the proceedings; 2) to provide services to at-risk parties who are unaware of this opportunity; and 3) to encourage and implement strategies for prevention and early intervention services. Rather than pre impose a structure, Presiding Judge Stephen N. Tiktin, asked the Deschutes County Commission on Children and Families to recommend options to implement this statute. The commission formed a task force composed of affected agencies and the judiciary, led by Mr. Cal Krosch, a lay commission member.

The task force had numerous meetings, reviewed considerable material from around the country, and visited a nationally recognized family court system in Reno, Nevada. Task force members were unable to locate any jurisdiction that coordinated family services among human service providers. Numerous jurisdictions and professional organizations were contacted, but it became evident that Deschutes County was the first jurisdiction to embark on a very important and enviable project.

The primary issues addressed by the task force were:

- a) the appropriateness of the judicial branch coordinating services among executive branch agencies;
- b) ensuring that services would not be duplicated due to court imposed coordination; and
- c) ensuring that services provided to non court referred clients would not be eliminated due to court imposed requirements to serve new populations.

After considerable debate, the task force recommended a family court advocate position to coordinate family services among the providers. In essence, the family court model would be expanded to include: one judge, one family, one treatment plan.

At the request of the presiding judge and court administrator, the State Court Administrator, Ms. Kingsley Click, used federal funds from the Citizen Review Board to this concept. During the September 1995 legislative emergency board meeting, members unanimously authorized \$60,000 to expand the family court program. As a condition, the legislature required a program evaluation and asked that it be presented during their 1997 session. This report is the program evaluation and describes the results of court imposed coordination.

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Since this was the first program of its kind, procedures had to be developed from scratch. Because this project affected other agencies, a one day planning session was conducted with several department heads and legal counsel. In a round table setting, the court asked several predefined questions. Responses to these questions were used to develop written policies and procedures, in effect to minimize new program requirements. On February 1, 1996, the presiding judge issued an order requiring the coordination of human services among family members. The court administrator also adopted procedures to implement the presiding judge's

order. A family court advocate, employed by the court, follows these directives to guide day-to-day activities.

In short, families with cases before the family court are referred to a screening team composed of representatives from agencies, schools, and legal counsel. This team is known as the Family Advocate Screening Team (FAST), comprised of supervisory level staff and legal counsel. Their primary task is to review the family status and decide if a coordinated treatment plan would be beneficial. They consider several factors: availability of family members; prior history of services and experiences with human service agencies; a family's willingness to allow agency sharing of confidential information; the complexity associated with the family's social, legal, and administrative issues; etc. Following the screening teams review, many families are referred to a multidisciplinary treatment team for coordination of services.

The multi-disciplinary treatment team had the primary task to develop a comprehensive family plan, based on family needs and interest, preferably with the family's input. The team is comprised of line staff, with representatives from affected agencies, schools, and legal counsel. They meet jointly with the family and share information consistent with signed confidentiality waivers. With extensive input, a comprehensive treatment plan for the family is developed and a lead agency representative is assigned. The family plan is filed with the court and monitored for compliance.

Screening team and treatment team meetings are scheduled bimonthly and the family court advocate facilitates each meeting. Several participants attend and a variety of legal and social issues surface. In this setting, the advocate frequently mediates differences among team and family members and seeks group resolution on a variety of issues. The advocate serves as a conduit between team members and the court, attends court hearings, provides the assigned judge with up-to-date family information, reassembles team members to review or modify treatment plans, monitors compliance of court imposed services, and provides copies of treatment plans to family members, affected agencies, schools, and legal counsel.

## FINDINGS

A considerable amount of time and resources were devoted to data collection. Funds were not authorized to evaluate the program, making it impossible to use sophisticated research techniques. Although effort was made to eliminate biases, these findings should be viewed cautiously.

Three methods were used to collect data: 1) a data base to track families; 2) a confidential questionnaire mailed to team members and families; and 3) telephone interviews. To maintain some objectivity, the Deschutes County Commission on Children and Families developed the confidential questionnaire and recorded the results. Court staff created a comprehensive data base to track families and conducted telephone interviews with affected agencies, schools, and legal counsel. Data was gathered between February 1, 1996, and December 24, 1996.

After the screening team meets, families are placed into categories based upon their circumstances. Type A and B families are those with multi-agency involvement and most are referred to the treatment team, while Type C through G, are typically not. These categories are

used to track and compare unique characteristics among families, and nothing more.

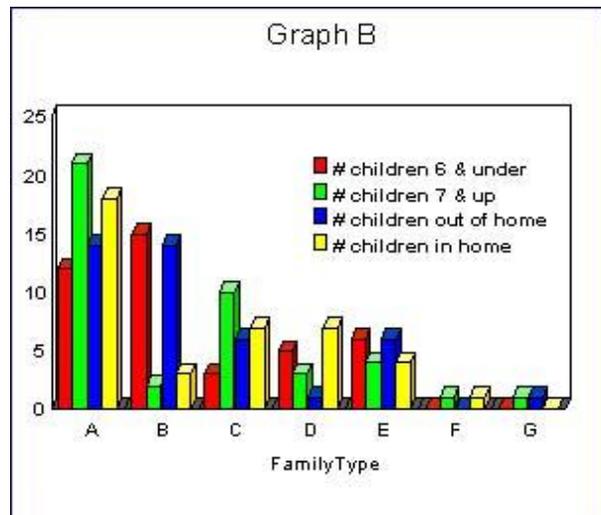
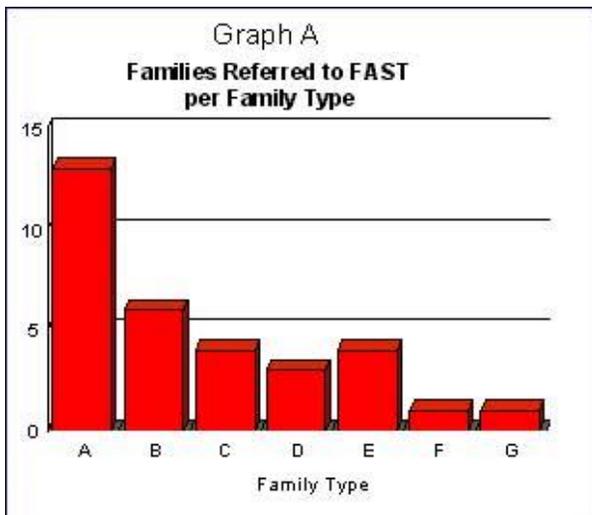
Since the program started, 32 families were screened and 19 were referred to a multidisciplinary treatment team. (Graph A)

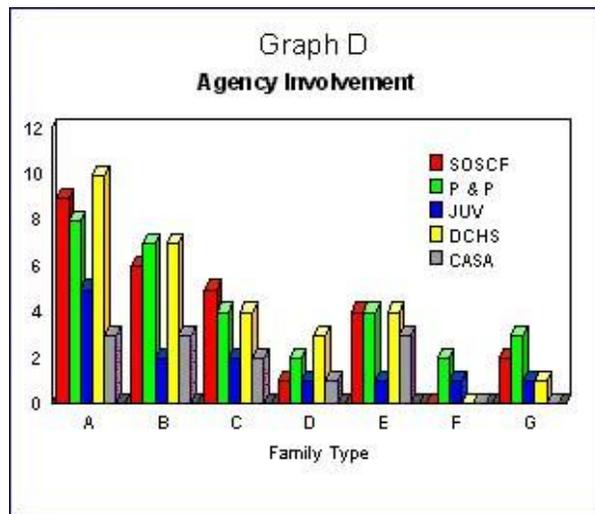
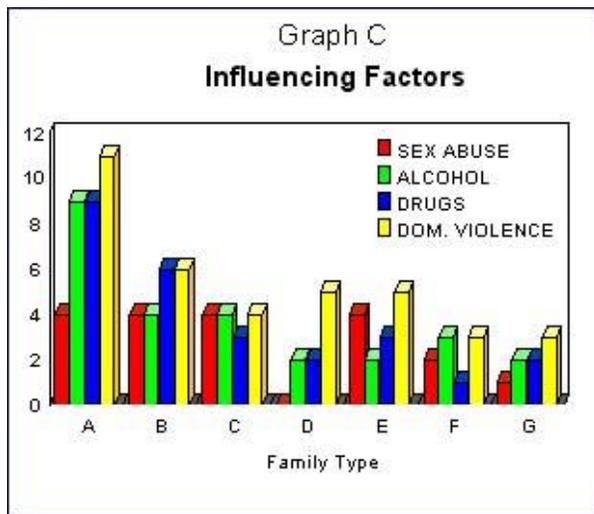
More than 100 children are involved. Half of these children are in home, while the others are mostly in substitute care. More than 50 children are in families referred to the treatment team, generally below seven years of age. (Graph B)

Based on court filings, there was a strong influence of domestic violence, drugs, and alcohol. Sexual abuse was very common. (Graph C)

Three agencies are heavily involved with these families: State Office of Services to Children and Families (SOSCF), Deschutes County Parole and Probation (P & P), and Deschutes County Human Services (DCHS). (Graph D)

Based on telephone interviews and court records, 75 percent of the 19 families referred to the treatment team were doing quite well. Treatment was successful with two, on a successful course with twelve, noncompliant with four, and the court revoked one. Schools indicated that children were doing well in seven families, poorly in four, and were preschool age in the remaining eight families. Children were returned home from substitute care in eight families.





<u>Satisfaction Ratings</u> 10=highest level of satisfaction 1=lowest level of satisfaction	
8.19	Program benefits families
8.13	Program benefits agencies
7.83	Court/agency communication has improved
7.80	Court has improved agency coordination
7.77	Court designs services to fit individual families
7.72	Agency coordination has improved resource sharing
7.34	Innovative solutions are being created for families
7.0	Time/services were efficiently used
5.64	Cases move quicker because of family court

## CONCLUSION

The Deschutes County Commission on Children and Families sent 87 confidential questionnaires to team and family members, legal counsel, and family court judges. Thirty-five responses were received, a 40 percent success rate of return. The commission asked nine questions and the respondents placed a numerical value on each question. The

scale was from one to ten, the higher the number, the greater the satisfaction. Following is an average ranking of each question, in order of greatest satisfaction.

Twenty-four telephone interviews were conducted with affected agencies, schools, and legal counsel. Twenty participants felt the program was successful while four felt it's too early to tell. Several positive themes emerged from these interviews:

- Good to have a place where all agencies can come together
- Schools were connected, see the big picture, and take steps to intervene early
- Families clearly benefit from court imposed coordination as evidenced by several success stories
- Better results now that judges and providers see the entire family picture
- One judge, one family, and coordination of services is a very good idea

The findings support court imposed coordination. It has resulted in resource sharing, innovative problem solving, and strategies for early intervention. Family input is encouraged, services are not duplicated, schools are an integral part of the process, and treatment plans appear successful. These are positive findings for a relatively new program.

Several inferences can be made from the data:

1. Schools are an integral part of the human service delivery system. Their involvement is critical. Children frequently act out or withdraw in school for unknown reasons. As teachers and counselors become aware of the family's full range of issues, they can respond with enhanced support systems and specialized programs. In addition, they can make an effort to assist families through the county's 12 school-community family access centers.

2. Counsel for the parties need and deserve full involvement. Without their investment and cooperation, family members and agencies may work at cross purposes. Family members who receive encouragement from their attorney are more likely to participate and view agency assistance with less skepticism. A family member's willingness to address problems is important to the court and viewed with approval.

3. Data suggests that less court delay is preferred. Data also suggests that family court cases are complex, interrelated, and involve numerous parties and agencies. These matters are difficult to set on the court's calendar because of conflicting schedules and statutory priorities on other case types. Agencies desire less delay to reduce resource demands and instill early accountability - a goal shared by the court. Family court objectives (driven by outcomes, structure, resources, and legal requirements) may hinder speedy resolutions. This topic requires further discussion and research.

4. A high level of dysfunction exists in many of these families. Substance abuse, domestic violence, and sexual abuse are dominant. To fully address these needs, long

term intensive services are required. Although agency resources are shared and used more wisely due to court imposed coordination, needs far outstrip agency means. Without additional support, success stories will become more uncommon.

5. Continued efforts are being made to improve workflow efficiencies and operational structures. Creativity is a by-product of court imposed coordination and family advocate facilitation. This has been demonstrated by treatment team members and agency heads. Treatment plans reflect new ideas to solve old problems, administrative rules have been redefined, and obstacles are frequently viewed as challenges. Agency heads continue to link programs, connect with schools, and explore means to prevent family problems or intervene sooner.

Court imposed coordination does not appear to be viewed as a threat or an intrusion upon the separation of powers between the executive and judicial branch of government. It clearly benefits families, agencies, and legal counsel. The legislature should make the family advocate process an integral part of the family court system.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The success of this project was due to active leadership, risk taking, broad support, creative problem solving, and a commitment to serve children and families unlike any other county. Community and government leaders, including schools and local bar members, established personal, sophisticated, and effective alliances. They continually review data, debate issues, and explore options to better serve Deschutes County residents.

Several community officials merit acknowledgment.

- Mr. Cal Krosch, Chairperson, Commission on Children and Families
- Ms. Bee Paulson, Family Court Advocate
- Mr. Michael Dugan, District Attorney
- Mr. Thomas Crabtree, Public Defender
- Ms. Diane Hensley, Director, Special Programs for Bend-LaPine Schools
- Mr. Donald Probasco, Branch Manager, State Services to Children and Families
- Mr. Scott Johnson, Director, Commission on Children and Families
- Ms. Carol Weston, District Manager, Adult and Family Services
- Ms. Carol Stiles, Director, Head Start
- Mr. Dennis Maloney, Director, Community Justice

- Mr. Frank Moore, Director, Human Services
- Ms. Shelley Johnson, Coordinator, Citizen Review Board
- Mr. Roland Gangstee, Division Manager, Community Justice
- Ms. Jocelyn Henderson, Director, Court Appointed Special Advocates
- Ms. Toni Anderson, Director, Central Oregon Battering and Rape Alliance
- Ms. Donna Pearson, Coordinator, Bend-LaPine Family Access Centers