

Oregon Juvenile Court Observation Study

Conducted April, 2015/National Center for State Courts

Brief Summary

Introduction

Child welfare court systems typically struggle to balance efficiency and sufficient thoroughness. The Oregon Court Improvement Project (CIP) in conjunction with the Oregon Judicial Needs Assessment Committee (JNAC) requested assistance from the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) to systematically observe dependency hearings. The main purpose of the court observation project was to provide information about the relationship between HEARING LENGTH and the breadth and depth of:

- Judicial adherence to procedural fairness requirements/judicial engagement of parties
- On the record discussion of children's needs, well-being, etc.
- On the record discussion of parents' needs, services, progress
- Continuances
- Attendance of parents, children, attorneys

Methodology

- 100 hearings observed
- Two 2-person teams
- 10 counties
- Structured court observation form

Main Findings

- Hearings on average were briefer than national best practice recommendations
 - Average length of hearings for all hearings was 16 minutes
 - 45% of hearings took less than 10 minutes
 - 75% of hearings took less than 20 minutes
- Hearings that lasted between 21 and 30 minutes seemed optimal for sufficient thoroughness regarding children's needs, parental progress, etc. There were diminishing returns when hearing length exceeded 30 minutes.
 - Hearings that lasted between 21 and 30 minutes were 62% more thorough than hearings that lasted 10 minutes and 17% more thorough than hearings that lasted 11-20 minutes
 - Hearings that lasted between 31 and 40 minutes were 9% more thorough than hearings that lasted between 21 and 30 minutes
- Judges were highly engaged
- Continuances were extremely rare
- Parties were treated respectfully
- Children rarely attend hearings

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