

Every Day Counts Conference 2012

Opening Plenary, May 4, 2012

Judge Eveleen Henry Lane County Circuit Court Opening Remarks

Welcome to Eugene. Eugene in early May – a bit grey, but with the promise of coming spring. May has been chosen as National Foster Care Month – certainly not to celebrate foster care, I am sure, but rather to focus some specialized daylight on the needs of children and youth in foster care, who number nearly 1300 here in Lane County alone.

It is wonderful to be in a room full of, mostly, volunteers, who care so much about our children. The children and families in this county, and all around Oregon, benefit so much from the attention and care that volunteers like you, devote to their circumstances, in your work on the Citizen Review Boards.

I understand that there are nearly 250 individuals registered for the conference this weekend, mostly CRB board members and staff, as well as CASA representatives and other community partners. I would be joining you in attendance, for at least part of the conference, were it not for a very long, still-in-process juvenile trial – Thus, I am able only to take a short break to be with you here at the start of your conference.

I am glad that you have made the time commitment to be here to take advantage of the informative programs planned. I hope you will have an opportunity to participate fully and get to know some of your counterparts from other parts of the state. Recently I spent a lovely evening in the company of some Lane County board members. We shared good food and talked well beyond dessert. I came away impressed not just with the level of interest and commitment of those CRB members, but also with just what interesting people they are. You can and will learn perhaps as much from your colleagues from around Oregon, as you will from the educational programs presently here.

You will of course acquire some resources and tools to assist you in better reviewing the work that the court and our child protective services are doing. I have been doing juvenile court work for 7 or 8 years, full time for nearly 2 years. That means I have read a lot of CRB reports – eventually, each and every one of them generated in Lane County over the past 22 months. I note that the quality of those reports has consistently improved, due in large part to the professional training that volunteers receive. These reports are standardized in the most disciplined way – no small feat when we are talking about individual family circumstances – and they hone in on the critical issues at review. The difficult issues and determinations that must be made around permanency planning, providing essential services to children; and reasonable or active efforts – all are examined and assessed at each hearing.

CRB findings and recommendations assist judges, who strive to apply best practices to improve outcomes for the child and families we serve. For example, I am happy to say that despite the large number of children in foster care here, 37% of Lane County foster children are placed with relatives, compared to a statewide total of almost 26%. Your detailed findings and recommendations related to diligent efforts to place with relatives, helps make those placement one of our strengths. We know that children who are placed with safe relatives are less traumatized, will have fewer moves in the foster system, and less likely to be separated from siblings. This is just one of the measures of success that a judge looks to, in reviewing agency efforts.

Lane County is a big county, with approximately 1300 children in foster care at any given moment, although this number is decreasing. Last year our court conducted 935 permanency hearings concerning our children in foster care. Without the CRB reviews, this number of children would have required nearly double the hearings to meet federal and state review requirements. I can tell you that this would not have been possible in Lane County. I so rely on interim CRB reviews, findings and recommendations that I find time to read every report. AND I strongly urge (although I guess some would say that when a judge strongly urges something, it becomes a requirement) that CRB reports, as well as the reports of CASA volunteers, be made exhibits, part of the evidentiary record at every permanency hearing. Last night, I reviewed maybe 25 CRB reports, as the best preparation to address you today. As a result of those reviews, I attached notes directing that 3 hearings be set in 30-45 days and one ASAP. CRB reports help the court to focus on cases that need special, immediate attention.

This judge is indebted to the work of CRB and I appreciate the opportunity to give thanks to so many volunteers at once. Your work for the courts and your advocacy for the children and families we serve are very much appreciated.

You will hear next from your keynote speaker Kitty Piercy. Mayor Piercy has been a fixture of Lane County for all the years I have lived here. She epitomizes what is best in an active citizenry. She has led Eugene as mayor for nearly 8 years and in fact, is presently offering to continue to do so. Kitty also represented her district in the Oregon House for 3 terms, rising to the elected rank of Minority Leader. She has worked as a Public Affairs Director, for Planned Parenthood; as an Early Childhood educator, and as an elementary school teacher. Like an unbelievably large percentage of Eugeneans, she served in the Peace Corps, in her case, in Ethiopia. She has been a volunteer member of public commissions and task forces probably too numerous for even her to recall, many related to child welfare, public safety, and education. Mayor Piercy will discuss her perspective, in some ways unique, on the needs of at-risk children and families involved in the child welfare system. Please join me in welcoming Mayor Kitty Piercy.