



The Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC)

University of Baltimore School of Law

CFCC WORKS TO ENSURE THAT THE PRACTICE OF FAMILY LAW IN MARYLAND, THE NATION AND AROUND THE WORLD IMPROVES THE LIVES OF FAMILIES AND CHILDREN AND THE HEALTH OF COMMUNITIES.

“The Family Divisions have emerged as an organic component of our Circuit Courts—not by fiat but from the collaborative participation of judges, legislators, practitioners and advocates.



As a leading advocate, CFCC has been instrumental in the development of the unified family court system in Maryland and in the nation.”

Robert M. Bell, Chief Judge, Maryland Court of Appeals, retired



CFCC's Unified Family Court Connection, a twice-yearly newsletter, is the only publication in the nation devoted to the development and advancement of unified family courts. It circulates to nearly 4,000 judges, law school deans and professors, attorneys,

legislators, services providers and nonprofit leaders serving families and children.

UNIFIED FAMILY COURTS

WHAT IS A UNIFIED FAMILY COURT?

A unified family court is a single court system with the authority to handle all cases involving children and families. Case types include divorce, custody, child support, marital property, alimony, adoption, paternity, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect and juvenile delinquency, among others. Unified family courts have the resources and ability to address both the legal and non-legal issues that arise in family law—from substance use and mental health issues to the impact of poverty and trauma.

A THERAPEUTIC JURISPRUDENCE APPROACH

With an approach to family law grounded in therapeutic jurisprudence, unified family courts have standards to resolve family law cases in ways that improve outcomes for children and families as a result of the courts' involvement. Unified family court judges bring to their deliberations a holistic understanding of the myriad challenges facing families and children and seek to serve each family's legal, personal, emotional and social needs. A unified family court draws upon a broad array of community resources to help families, with services that may include:

- Marital counseling for family reorganization in the event of divorce
- Parenting classes in high conflict custody cases
- Counseling and other treatments for families and individuals affected by substance use, domestic violence or other adverse events and circumstances

A unified family court is user-friendly and accessible to everyone, including the increasing numbers of self-represented litigants in the family justice system. The unified family court model increases court efficiency; provides for more coordinated and effective case processing and decision-making; and offers cost savings for clients, attorneys and the court system.

CFCC'S LEADERSHIP IN FAMILY JUSTICE SYSTEM REFORM

The American Bar Association has recommended since 1994 that all jurisdictions establish unified family courts. This court model also is endorsed by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts. Yet, many states have not adopted the model.

Professor Barbara A. Babb, CFCC's founder and director, was an early proponent for the establishment of unified family courts and continues to be a leading scholar and advocate for their creation and for the ongoing assessment of their operation. CFCC's website provides access to the extensive body of written advocacy for unified family courts which underpins CFCC's work.

Nationally and internationally, CFCC has provided in-depth consultation and hands-on assistance to state and local courts about implementing and evaluating a unified family court model. For example, CFCC has played an instrumental role in transforming the family justice system in Maryland, helping to create and launch the Family Divisions and authoring *Performance Standards and Measures for Maryland's Family Divisions* (Maryland Judiciary, 2002). In addition, CFCC has provided services to jurisdictions in California, the District of Columbia, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, New Mexico, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Utah, among others. Internationally, CFCC has inspired and influenced the development of unified family courts in Ontario, Canada, and Singapore.

LEARN MORE

Visit our website and keep up with CFCC's work related to unified family courts at law.ubalt.edu/centers/CFCC

Contact us to discuss how CFCC can support your jurisdiction's efforts to implement or evaluate a unified family court. 410.837.5615 or cfcc@ubalt.edu

A BLUEPRINT FOR A UNIFIED FAMILY COURT

Professor Barbara Babb's scholarship outlines a blueprint for a unified family court, which includes the following key features:

- A specialized court structure—either a separate court or a division or department of an existing court—established at the same level and receiving the same resources as a trial court of general jurisdiction
- Comprehensive subject-matter jurisdiction over the full range of family law cases, including juvenile delinquency and child welfare
- A case management/processing system involving early, hands-on and continuing contact with each family law case
- A judicial assignment system where the family appears before one judge for the resolution of the entire case, where the same case management team coordinates the family's case each time the family utilizes the family justice system or where the same judge hears the family's case each time the family appears in court
- An array of court-supplied or court-connected social services that meet the family's and children's non-legal needs related to their family law issues
- A user-friendly court accessible to all family law litigants, including self-represented litigants

The first issue of CFCC's *Unified Family Court Connection*, published in 2007, focused on the nationwide support for unified family courts and a blueprint to establish them, an ongoing principal passion of CFCC's work.

CASE STUDY:

A UNIFIED FAMILY COURT PILOT FOR DOUGLAS COUNTY, NEBRASKA



In projects ranging from presentations to attorneys and judges to in-depth feasibility studies, CFCC works with jurisdictions across the country and around the world to develop standards, implement procedures and evaluate

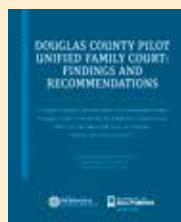
the performance of unified family courts, problem-solving or specialty courts and attorney practices.

CFCC's 2019 report to Douglas County, Nebraska, consisted of a series of recommendations for the development and implementation of a unified family court pilot project, now under consideration by the court. The work plan included:

- **Review of Current Court Operations:** CFCC reviewed the current Douglas County Separate Juvenile, District and County Courts' structures and operations, including case management systems, resource allocation, forms, written procedures and data collection.
- **Site Visits and Stakeholder Engagement:** CFCC conducted a three-day site visit that included court observations, an educational session about unified

family courts, individual meetings with court leadership and multiple listening sessions with stakeholders.

- **Survey:** CFCC, in collaboration with Nebraska Court Improvement Program staff, developed a survey designed to identify significant practices and opinions related to court handling of matters involving Douglas County's children and families, and they analyzed extensive survey results.
- **Unified Family Court Forum:** The CFCC team designed and convened "A Forum on the Douglas County Unified Family Court Pilot" in Omaha, attended by more than 150 judges, court staff, attorneys and service providers.
- **Site Visit by Nebraska Team to Maryland:** Douglas County representatives visited with Maryland court system leaders in Baltimore and Annapolis to learn about the Maryland's Family Divisions' structure and operation.



For more information or a copy of the report, contact CFCC at 410.837.5615 or cfcc@ubalt.edu.

SELECT CFCC COURT REFORM INITIATIVES

- Principal Presenter, International Advisory Council Meeting and the Family Justice Practice Forum, Singapore
- Keynote address and presentation at the California Association of Family and Conciliation Courts Annual Conference: "Therapeutic Jurisprudence and Unified Family Courts: A Bright Light for Family Reorganization"
- Keynote address at the Maine State Bar Association Annual Meeting: "Relations and Rights: Emerging Issues for Maine Families"
- Training for the Utah State Legislature on incorporating juvenile matters into a unified family court
- Presentation to the Louisiana Judiciary in New Orleans: "Unified Family Courts: Their Structure, Theoretical Underpinnings, Advantages, Concerns, Assessment"
- Presentation on Unified Family Courts to Egyptian Judges at the Family Division of the Circuit Court for Baltimore City, sponsored by the US Agency for International Development
- New Mexico Training on Unified Family Courts, Santa Fe, New Mexico
- Workshop and Technical Assistance to Shelby County Family Court Task Force, Memphis, Tennessee
- Summit on Unified Family Courts co-sponsored by the American Bar Association and CFCC and funded by the ABA, Maryland Administrative Office of the Courts and Casey Family Programs for 150+ Judges, Court Personnel, Attorneys and Academic Experts from 25 states: "Serving Children and Families Efficiently, Effectively and Responsibly"
- Presentation to Toronto, Ontario, Family Court Judges and Staff
- Examination of the Family Division, Ninth Judicial Circuit, Kalamazoo County, Michigan
- Comprehensive Evaluation for the Indiana Family Court Initiative, Indiana Supreme Court