

## Parent Defender Training: Looking Back and Moving Forward

The Indigent Defense Education group at the School of Government (SOG) in collaboration with Indigent Defense Services (IDS) held its 11<sup>th</sup> annual Parent Attorney Conference on August 10, 2017. Parent attorneys represent parents in abuse, neglect, dependency and termination of parental rights (A/N/D) proceedings.

The conference includes three to four topics centered on a particular theme. It always includes an ethics session and a case law and legislative update. Examples of past themes are *Representing Parents with Mental Health Disorders*, *Working with Non-Removal Parents*, *Representing the Chemically Dependent Client*, and *Defending Complicated Medical Cases*.

This year's theme was *Looking Back and Moving Forward: The Next Ten Years of Parent Representation*. With the exception of the case law and legislative update, the topics focused on challenging business as usual practices to enhance advocacy for parents and their children. During his ethics presentation on "Implicit Bias," James Drennan, Adjunct & Former Albert Coates Professor, encouraged attorneys to be mindful of how their implicit biases can affect their ethical duties to clients. He discussed the advantages and potential pitfalls of "fast thinking" and the importance of slowing down their thinking so attorneys advocate for clients in a consistent and fair manner. Professor Drennan encouraged attorneys to be aware of their own biases as well as the biases of the other practitioners working with parents and children.

To address the *Looking Back* theme, the conference included a session "Strategies and Successes of Parent Representation." The [Office of Parent Representation \(OPR\)](#) at IDS discussed the history of the OPR and then shared the results of the parent attorney survey they conducted before the conference. The OPR survey showed the percentage of parent attorneys that relied on the following resources:

- Parent Attorney Listserv – 95%
- Abuse, Neglect, Dependency, and Termination of Parental Rights Manual - 93%
- SOG Continuing Legal Education - 87%
- OPR consultation and OPR materials - 80 to 83%

The OPR survey also showed that approximately 31% of the parent attorneys that responded has more than ten years of experience in A/N/D proceedings. I began thinking about where we go from here to enhance the practice. Of course, it is important to continue providing training for attorneys new to the area of abuse, neglect, dependency and TPR proceedings. I have two ideas about the future trainings sponsored by IDS and SOG.

First, we could design a four to five hour training on a specific topic, such as dispositions. The training would include some plenary sessions, after which the parent attorneys would break out into small groups to participate in a workshop and have the opportunity to practice the skills taught in

the plenaries.

The specific topic training would not replace the annual conference. However, in conversations with attorneys and from comments on evaluations, I learned that participants want to spend concentrated time on specific topics. Therefore, I am suggesting a narrower one-day training on a specific topic in addition to the annual theme focused training.

Second, we could design a training for judges, parent attorneys, and other parties, and yes, I mean in the same room at the same time. I cannot take full credit for this brilliant idea. My colleagues LaToya Powell, Assistant Professor of Law and Government, (juvenile delinquency) and Sara DePasquale, Assistant Professor of Law and Government, (child welfare) both develop trainings for district court judges focused on their specific areas of law. We have discussed the idea of designing a combined training for judges and attorneys.

A combined training is a great opportunity to train practitioners on the non-legal topics that challenge parents and children involved in A/N/D proceedings. Some examples are homelessness, mental illness, and accessing services for parents and children with disabilities. It can be beneficial for practitioners to hear the same information at the same time. They can share their experiences and perspectives in a non-adversarial setting.

In partnership with the North Carolina Court Improvement Program and IDS, the IDE group offered a trial skills training for parent attorneys, Department of Social Services attorneys and guardian ad litem attorney advocates, breaking down the barriers of training one group at a time. The child welfare attorneys convened at the SOG on March 9-10, 2017. I discussed the training in a [previous post](#).

Please share with me your ideas for more advanced resources and trainings that SOG could provide for all practitioners working in child welfare.