

The Newsletter

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An Exploratory Study of the Parenting Coordinator Program in Pima County

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Parenting coordinator programs have gained widespread appeal in courts across the country. They are designed to provide high conflict,

the Director of the Pima County Family Center for the Conciliation Court and the Family Court Bench in Pima County invited and assisted us in conducting an initial exploratory study. The aims of this research were first to explore the PCs' general philosophies of the program and their role in assisting families. Because this program is implemented by people from several professions, we also wanted to understand the variability in experiences and practices with actual cases. Finally, we wanted to gather data to later develop a more comprehensive program evaluation.

separated or divorcing couples with the knowledge and assistance of a trained professional to help resolve disputes. Since these cases make up only approximately one percent (1%) of all divorce cases but they take up ninety percent (90%) of the family courts' resources, parenting coordinator programs also are designed to be an efficient, less costly, less formal and less time consuming way to resolve conflicts than scheduling court hearings to resolve day-to-day disputes regarding parenting. A major goal of these programs is to teach families to resolve problems on their own, without the detailed assistance of the appointed coordinator or the courts.

At the time of this initial investigation (June, 2005), there were 20 active PC cases and 11 PCs actively working with families in Pima County. The professional backgrounds of the PCs included psychologists (Ph.D.s), social workers (MSWs), family law attorneys (JDs), mediator/counselors (MEds) and family law attorneys with master's degrees (JD & M.Eds). We found the County roster of PCs was fairly fluid in that several professionals listed had never been referred cases and no longer intended to take cases and several PCs had taken cases but were no longer doing so. Reasons for this fluidity varied. Some of the PCs had forgotten that they were listed on the roster. Others felt strongly that providing services in these cases was not cost-effective--the cases took too much time for the amount of funding provided. In terms of caseloads, we found that attorney PCs carried the most cases--while just under half of the PCs are JD and JD & M.Eds; just over two-thirds of PC cases are assigned to them.

Parenting coordinators (PCs) provide virtually immediate access for parents who need assistance resolving conflicts and, where necessary, PCs make recommendations to the courts concerning disputed issues. Although these programs differ across jurisdictions, PCs generally have no authority over modification of court-ordered child custody, extended visitation schedules, or child support orders; however, they generally have full authority to make recommendations on most other parental disagreements involving children (e.g., problems with exchanges, education, religious affiliation/training, bedtimes, hygiene/grooming, etc.). Interestingly, there is almost no research concerning the day-to-day implementation of parenting coordinator programs and the extent to which the programs are meeting the goals for which they were designed (e.g., quicker, less costly, less formal, less time consuming, teach parents problem-solving skills).

Open-ended questions concerning how contacts were made with clients were reviewed and classified into three categories (e.g., face-to-face, telephone, and written). Allowing for the possibility that PCs could have implemented more than one mode of contact with clients, only about half of the PCs ever met with their clients in person, whereas a little over half talked with clients via the telephone. The most common form of communication, with three-fourths of the PCs using this type, was written primarily through email. Differences were found in

Arizona has recently implemented parenting coordinator programs in two jurisdictions (Maricopa and Pima Counties). To gain a better understanding of the new program in Pima County,

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the procedures used to contact clients between PCs of different professional training. JD and JD & MEd PCs were least likely to meet face-to-face with clients, with nearly three-fourths never or only initially meeting face-to-face with clients. On the other hand, all mental health trained PCs meet face-to-face with their clients.

Open-ended questions concerning the models of intervention the PCs generally used were reviewed and classified into five categories. Again, PCs could have implemented more than one mode of intervention with clients. The models were identified as the mediation model (e.g., assisting negotiation and compromise, facilitating communication), judicial model (e.g., gathering facts, assessing credibility and making a decision), counseling model (e.g., gain insight, interpret and confront troublesome behaviors), systems therapy model (e.g., working with entire family) and the cognitive-behavioral therapy model (e.g., identifying triggers and chains of behavior). The mediation model was most frequently used by PCs with nearly three-quarters of PCs implementing this model. The judicial model was the second most common with just over half of the PCs using this model. The counseling model was used occasionally (about one-quarter) and the systems therapy and cognitive behavioral models were rarely used with only about one-tenth PCs using these models.

Again, differences were observed across PCs of different professional backgrounds in the interventions of choice. Consistent with their professional training, JD and JD & MEds reported using exclusively the judicial or mediation models with their cases. Well over three-quarters of PCs used the judicial and almost two-thirds of the PCs used the mediation model, while never using the counseling, cognitive-behavioral or systems therapy models. On the other end of the spectrum, mental health professionals (Ph.D.s, MSWs and MEds) were more varied in their interventions.

Open-ended questions concerning goals of the program were reviewed and then classified into four categories. These categories included facilitative (allowing parties to feel heard, learning to employ better co-parenting tools, reducing conflict, helping clients solve problems themselves, helping clients to learn to communicate better, teaching parents to keep kids out of conflict, helping the parents see the bigger picture), authoritative (making quick and fair decisions), system efficacy (less expensive than court, keeping cases out of court, relieving stress on court) and other (anything not specified in one of the other categories). The PCs could indicate more than one goal/type of goal of the program.

The system efficiency goal was the most often used by the PCs with nearly three-fourths of them stating this was a major goal of the program. The facilitative goal was the second most common with nearly two-thirds endorsing this goal, and the authoritative goal was a close third with a little over half of the PCs endorsing this goal. Several other goals were cited and lumped into the residual category but were rarely cited (about one-fifth). In examining the related Arizona statutes, the Parenting Coordinator Program Guidelines and the information given to the parents about the program and its implementation, the main stated goal of the Parenting Coordinator Program is facilitative, to allow the parties to air their grievances to a neutral party while helping them learn strategies for solving the problems themselves; however, only little over half of the PCs responses reflect this as the main goal.

We are now beginning to look at the long-term impact of the PC Program. Longitudinal data from the Superior Court Divorce files for the first 2 cases assigned to PCs has been collected and we are beginning to collect the data for the remainder of the cases. The timeframe included in data collection was two years prior to the PC assignment to two years post-PC assignment. Variables coded include the number and types of pre- and post-divorce actions, outcomes of the action and, in post-divorce cases, PC recommendations to the court. Stay tuned for further analysis of the longitudinal data.

In conclusion, attorney PCs appear to carry the majority of the PC cases in Pima County and this has a strong impact on the manner in which the PC cases are implemented in practice. The models of intervention used are consistent with legal training (e.g., judicial and mediation). Service delivery is also restricted to mostly written email communications. Several of these legally-trained PCs stated that the payment provided in these cases is extremely low and often difficult to collect. It appears that one way these attorney PCs might still be able to provide services to the majority of cases is to dispense with face-to-face meetings with clients, communicate with clients mostly over email and focus on making quick and fair decisions as opposed to teaching dispute resolution skills.

Another possibility is that the professional training of the PCs is important in the informal selection process for PCs for specific cases. It may be that judges serve a screening function, recommending PCs of different professional training for specific types of cases. Cases where parental skill-building is considered less likely to be successful are referred to PCs whose training is geared toward assessing facts and making quick and fair decisions. Cases where emotional issues predominate are referred to PCs mental health training. Future research should broaden the scope of investigation to include family court judges and their views and practices related to the Parenting Coordinator Program.

Another major finding is that it appears there may be a disconnect between the main goal of the Parenting Coordinator Program codified in the statute and the main goal of the practitioners implementing the program. While the facilitative goal is codified in the statute (to allow the parties to air their grievances to a neutral party while helping them learn strategies for solving the problems themselves), the most frequently endorsed main goal of the practitioners is related to system efficiency (providing less expensive services, keeping cases out of court, relieving stress on court). The PCs are clearly responding to pressures to keep these cases out of court. ■

Arizona AFCC is fortunate to have one of the co-authors of this article, Connie J.A. Beck, Ph.D., as a Chapter board member.

New! AFCC Parenting Coordinator Network

The AFCC PC Network is a group e-mail networking list for professionals from around the world who serve as parenting coordinators or are interested in this role. Check in the Member Center on the AFCC website at www.afccnet.org.

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An Update on Arizona AFCC and the Arizona AFCC Board

By Annette Burns



What's the Arizona AFCC Board doing? The Board of Arizona AFCC is already hard at work planning the 2008 Sedona conference. Conference planning starts for the next year almost immediately after the end of each conference. The Board held a retreat in Flagstaff on April 27-28 to discuss ideas for speakers and workshop topics for the 2008 conference.

Who are this year's Board Members? Arizona AFCC Board President for the 2007-2008 year is the Hon. Elaine Fridlund-Horne, who is the Integrated Family Court Judge in Coconino County Superior Court.

President-Elect is Laura Belleau, an attorney in private practice in Pima County, with the law firm of Karp, Heurlin & Weiss. Laura will take over as Board President at the February, 2008 annual membership meeting which is held at the annual conference in Sedona, Arizona. This year's conference will be held at the Hilton Sedona Resort and Spa February 8-10, 2008. (The 2008 conference is one week later than usual due to the Super Bowl being held in Phoenix/Glendale on February 3, 2008).

Vice President is Annette Burns, an attorney in private practice in Maricopa County. Board Secretary is Diana Hegyi, Special Projects Administrator, Maricopa County Superior Court; and Board Treasurer is Phil Knox, General Jurisdiction Court Administrator, Maricopa County Superior Court.

Ex-Officio Board Members, who are so named because they are the two past presidents of the board, are Megan Hunter, Family Law Solutions, Maricopa County; and Hon. Mark Armstrong, (ret.) Maricopa County Superior Court, who is presently a staff attorney with the Arizona Supreme Court.

New Board Members who are joining the Arizona AFCC Board for their first terms this year are John (Jack) Assini, a private practitioner in Pima County; Joy Borum, an attorney and mediator with Family Mediation Center in Maricopa County; Edie Croxen, an attorney in private practice in Pima County who has served on the Arizona AFCC board previously, and who is welcomed back as a returnee this year; Kiilu Davis, an attorney in private practice with Stone & Davis in Maricopa County; Kathy McCormick, Alternative Dispute Resolution Coordinator, Yavapai County Superior Court; David McPhee, Ph.D., a mental health practitioner in Maricopa County; Hon. Rhonda Repp, a Yavapai County Superior Court Commissioner, and Hon. K.C. Stanford, a Pima County Superior Court Commissioner.

Returning Board Members are Dr. Connie J.A. Beck, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Psychology, Policy and Law Program, University of Arizona; Grace Hawkins, Director, Family Center of the Conciliation Court, Pima County Superior Court; Marlene Joy, Ph.D., a mental health professional in Maricopa County; Lisa Maggiore-Conner, an attorney in private practice in Maricopa County; John Moran, Ph.D., a mental health professional in Maricopa County; Hon. Fred Newton, Superior Court Judge, Coconino County; and Frank Williams, Ph.D., a mental health professional in Pima County.

Honorary Board Members received the Honorary title as recognition of their enormous past service to the Board. They are Russell Schoeneman, Ph.D., and Dr. Fred Mitchell, former director, Pima County Conciliation Services.

How do I become a board member? Each fall, approximately ninety days before the February Sedona conference, the chapter nominating committee meets and determines what board positions will be open for the coming year as the result of terms ending. The nominating committee sends out a plea for nominations to all existing board members and then considers all the proposed names in order to present a slate of nominations at the annual meeting (February of each year). If you have an interest in being nominated, notify this year's Board President of your interest, and INCLUDE your curriculum vitae and contact information. That information will be passed on to the nominations committee.

How are topics and speakers for the February Sedona conference chosen? Every board member takes part in discussion about proposed topics for workshops, plenary sessions, speakers, and an overall conference theme. The board as a whole and in breakout groups reviews current law review and psychological reviews for topics of interest, and brainstorm about current topics, issues and problems that have arisen in our practices. Most board members get a variety of suggestions from colleagues and the community in general.

How do I make a comment or suggestion or ask a question about Arizona AFCC? First, visit the AzAFCC website at azafcc.org to see if your question is already answered there. If your question isn't answered there, the complete contact information for all Arizona AFCC board members is located there, so you can contact any board member for further information.

How do I become involved? You can suggest a topic or a speaker for the annual conference or for the shorter mid-year conferences put on by Arizona AFCC by contacting any board member who will pass along your suggestions or ideas. You can contribute to the chapter newsletter by submitting your article, blurb, notice or other information of interest to the membership to Annette Burns, ArizonaAFCC@yahoo.com. ■

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The Arizona Chapter of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AzAFCC) is requesting your help.

AFCC is a non-profit, international, multi-disciplinary organization. Our membership includes judges, mediators, psychologists, attorneys, court personnel and counselors who tackle the challenging task of resolving parental and family disputes over child custody.

The Arizona Chapter of AFCC is the second largest in the country. Thus far, AFCC has been the leader in providing specialized education and training by sponsoring conferences to enhance the skills of the judiciary, family court staff, custody evaluators, lawyers and mediators. Unfortunately, given the current economic climate, our financial abilities to continue our mission have been compromised. Like so many "non-profits", our budget is strained. This directly impacts our ability to provide scholarships, improve our educational programming or waive membership dues to those of modest means. Consequently, we are in dire need of assistance from other professionals and the business community. Donations to our chapter are fully tax deductible as charitable contributions under Internal Revenue Code 501C(3). All donors will be sent receipts for their records.

All contributions to AzAFCC go directly to meeting the chapter's financial obligations. Our Board of Directors do not receive compensation. We all volunteer our time and effort because we believe in the good works of our organization.

We truly hope you will contribute to AzAFCC. Your time and generosity are greatly appreciated. ■

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UPCOMING CONFERENCES

***AFCC Regional Training Conference
"Applications for High Conflict Families,
Domestic Violence and Alienation"
September 27-29, 2007
Hyatt Regency Columbus
Columbus, Ohio***

***Arizona AFCC Annual Conference
"Exploring Emerging Trends in Family Law"
February 8-10, 2008
Hilton Sedona Resort and Spa
Sedona, Arizona***

***AFCC 45th Annual Conference
May 28-31, 2008
Westin Bayshore Resort
Vancouver, BC, Canada***



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