

Children's Court of Los Angeles: An Innovative Approach to Juvenile Justice

By Judge Michael Nash

In the summer of 1997, the California Court of Appeal made the following observation about the state's juvenile justice system: "While each division of the court is vitally important to the litigants and to society, there is no division of greater importance than the juvenile court, which deals with the sensitive parent-child relationship and the potential of horrendous damage to children."

Few people, especially those who work in the courts, would disagree with that statement. However, how many people truly understand what the juvenile court does that makes it so important? And how many are aware of the innovative programs and truly unique courthouse known as the Edmund D. Edelman Children's Court in Monterey Park?

The juvenile court system in Los Angeles County is most likely the largest system of its kind in the United States and perhaps the world. Each day there are no fewer than 60 full-time courts devoted to the different segments of our juvenile

justice system. When thinking of the juvenile court, most people think primarily of the Delinquency Court, the court that handles kids who commit crimes. There are actually three distinct parts to the juvenile court system: Delinquency Court, Dependency Court and the Informal Juvenile and Traffic Court. This article discusses the innovations we have made in the Dependency Court.

Dependency Court hears all cases involving abuse and/or neglect of children. When a complaint is made to the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), alleging abuse and/or neglect of a child, DCFS investigates the complaint and, if it concludes that there is an imminent danger to the child warranting court intervention, it files a petition in the Dependency Court. There are several remedies available to the Dependency Court. These include the temporary removal of a child from the home until the danger no longer exists, maintaining the child in the family home on specified conditions or, when it is warranted, permanent removal of the child from the home. The court can also order placement of the child with relatives, in foster homes or in group homes. The law mandates that if a

child is removed from the family home, the parents or guardians, with the assistance of DCFS, must cure the problems which required the removal within a certain period of time, which can vary from six to eighteen months. If the child is not returned within the specified period, the court is obligated to provide a permanent plan for the child with adoption being the preferred plan under the law.

If circumstances require a family to enter the Dependency Court system, the issues that the court has to consider can be numerous and complex. The court must consider whether there is a danger to the child and what to do about it. Additionally, if the child cannot stay with the parents, the court must decide where the child should be placed, what conditions should be placed on visitation with the child by the offending parent or parents and the conditions that should be set for the return of the child to the parents and/or for termination of the court's jurisdiction. The court must always consider the child's interests as paramount and must determine what services the child needs to cope with the events which have occurred as well as the services that are necessary to help the child grow and

mature in a healthier environment.

As one might imagine, these cases are often highly emotional, a fact which weighs heavily on all involved. Consequently, coming to court can be an emotionally traumatic experience for everyone involved, especially the children.

In Los Angeles County there are 20 full-time Dependency Courts. Nineteen of those courts are located at the Edmund D. Edelman Children's Court in Monterey Park. There is also a small satellite court located in the Antelope Valley. Each Dependency Court hears an average of 20-30 cases every day. There are currently over 26,000 children under the jurisdiction of the court.

Fortunately for those who must appear in the Dependency Court in Los Angeles County, they arrive at what is unquestionably the most unique court of its kind anywhere. The Edelman Children's Court which was named after former county supervisor Ed Edelman, opened in 1992 and was designed and built to be what is referred to as a "child-sensitive" courthouse. A child-sensitive courthouse is a place which creates an environment that reflects the

recognition that children are the most important parties in the system and which attempts to reduce, as much as possible, the anxiety that children and their families feel when they must appear in court. A quick tour of the courthouse will reveal how this is accomplished.

Upon entering the courthouse, one encounters a bright, open lobby with a large, colored mural of children's art on the wall. The public waiting areas on the floors where the courtrooms are located have spectacular panoramic views of the mountains and surrounding areas. Unlike other courts, there are no benches along the walls but upholstered chairs and couches as well as carpeted floors. Additionally, there are TV monitors spread throughout the waiting area, which are either tuned to the Disney Channel or are playing a videotape about what families can expect during their visit to the court.

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The courtrooms were designed to create a more intimate and comfortable

environment. They are smaller than the typical courtroom, and the judge's bench is lower than the typical bench. Often, they contain posters and other decorations which signal a child-friendly atmosphere. Further, each courtroom has a TV monitor hanging from the wall which is connected to a video camera in the judge's chambers. This allows a child who is afraid to testify in court to testify in the more friendly confines of the judge's chambers while the parents can see the child and hear the testimony on the monitor. This feature not only serves the child well, but it saves court reporter read back time and frequently causes parents to settle cases after hearing the child testify.

Scattered throughout the courthouse are offices that house resources which parties and caregivers can access immediately after leaving the courtroom. Among these resources are 211 Line (a computerized data-base of drug programs, parenting classes, counseling programs and other programs); Shields for Families; Grandparents as Parents; Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE); Mexican Consulate; Public Counsel; Alliance for Children's Rights; Dependency Mediation; Juvenile Court Mental Health Services Unit

(JCMHSU – which provides consultation on mental health issues to lawyers and judicial officers); and Public Health Nurse. Along with all of these resources, Free Arts for Abused Kids provides on-site arts and crafts activities for children in the public waiting area, and Comfort for Court Kids gives teddy bears to all children who come to court. Last but not least, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) are present to provide a warm and friendly adult face to children who come to court and to provide important information to judicial officers.

The largest and most unique part of the courthouse is Shelter Care. This area of the court complex is home during the day for all children who have been removed from their families and are brought to court. On a given day, there are between 50 and 100 plus children who spend time there. It includes a large outdoor play area, as well as an indoor area with arts and crafts centers, eating areas, games, big screen TVs and a library. There are both organized activities and quiet areas for children of all ages. Adjacent to the Shelter Care area is a visiting area for parents and children, consisting of several comfortable private rooms which can be utilized for

monitored or unmonitored visits.

The Children’s Court cannot change its reason for existence. However, citizens of Los Angeles County can be very proud of the fact that children who have been abused and/or neglected can have their cases considered in an environment which stresses their importance, treats them and their families with respect and attempts to reduce the anxiety they are bound to feel at a court which makes critical decisions concerning their lives.

Other jurisdictions around the country can learn a lot from the way we treat children in the Edmund D. Edelman Children’s Court of Los Angeles County. They can especially learn the lesson that place affects policy. In other words, combining architecture and design with program elements affects the ability of a program to accomplish its goals.

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