



The CCJ/COSCA Family Justice Initiative

Supported by the State Justice Institute

Cuyahoga County, Ohio FJI Pilot Site Overview



Court Structure

In Cuyahoga County (Cleveland), Ohio (population of 1.24M), divorce, dissolution, custody, child support, and domestic violence cases are heard in the Court of Common Pleas, Domestic Relations Division. (Paternity, parental rights, and child custody with never-married parents are heard in the Juvenile Division.) There are approximately 7,700 Domestic Relations cases filed per year.

Staffing Capacity

The court has five judges who are elected specifically for the domestic relations bench. Other judicial officers are 18 magistrates, ten of which are assigned to a judge (two per judge), six of which hear child and spousal support matters, and two of which hear domestic violence matters. The magistrates assigned to a judge serve at the discretion of that judge, and the support and domestic violence magistrates serve the court as a whole.

Project Priorities

Cuyahoga County identified five priority areas as part of the Family Justice Initiative: (1) access to justice, (2) case management, (3) trauma-informed practices, (4) data and technology, and (5) language access.

Triage Practices

Judges in Cuyahoga County are completely independent from each other and have broad discretion in how they handle the cases

assigned to them. All of them agree on a problem-solving approach, and all of them engage in efforts to gather as much information as soon as possible to allow them to tailor referrals, services, and other resources in a way that best meets each family's needs. In light of the court structure, however, there is no court-wide, systematic effort; rather, each judge addresses these issues based on their own experience, knowledge, and background.

Cuyahoga County's objective for case management is to provide a framework for improved service delivery through expeditious case processing by triaging for assignment to different management pathways that tailors judicial involvement, processes, and services to the parties' needs, promotes self-determination and problem-solving, and reduces harm consequential to the legal process.

FY 2018/2019



**150 DAYS
MEAN TIME TO
DISPOSITION**



**78% OF CASES
WITH AT LEAST
ONE SRL**



**74% OF CASES
UNCONTESTED**

Court Services and Self-Help Center

The Cuyahoga County Domestic Relations Division provides a variety of services. Costs are very reasonable but may still pose a hardship for some families. Mediation is available for \$250 (usually assessed at \$125 for each party), which begins with a two-hour session, often expanded as needed. Cases with known domestic violence are not referred to mediation. Family Evaluation Services performs custody evaluations as assigned by the court. A full evaluation costs \$800, and a brief focused assessment is \$600. Each parent must complete a parenting education program (\$45) to be awarded any parental rights or responsibilities or parenting time.

Cuyahoga County has a Help Center available to assist self-represented litigants. It offers a variety of forms and written information as well as one-on-one consultation with a non-lawyer staff member. Services are available in Spanish, and other languages are offered through a language line. The Help Center's website has substantial information and forms.

Cuyahoga's objective for access to justice is to provide clear, straightforward information to parties through proactive court staff assistance and technology that empowers parties to navigate the court process to reach a fair resolution that meets the needs of their family. Its objective for language access is to provide a framework for the provision of timely and reasonable language assistance to person with limited English proficiency or who are deaf or hard of hearing.

The Court's Domestic Violence Department is regarded as the best in the state and serves as a mentor court to other domestic violence courts throughout the country. If domestic violence is disclosed, the case is referred to the department for advocacy, safety planning, and a protection order if appropriate. The Court may also adjust other processes to account for any safety concerns. Cuyahoga is working to create an environment, policies, and practices that improve families' long-term safety and wellbeing.



Data Capacity

The current case management system collects data and generates reports focused almost exclusively on mandatory timeliness requirements. Cuyahoga County is working to collect and utilize accurate, accessible case level, program performance, and outcome data and establish technology solutions to meet the needs of court users that will inform case management practices, create efficiencies, and drive executive decision-making.

