

## Integrated Family Court.doc

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ICM Phase III Project

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The notion of combining domestic relations matters with those other case types that directly affect the "family" was first conceived more than eighty years ago. It was not until the 1960's that states began active attempts to form statewide family courts. Today, the virtues of unifying or integrating family court matters are extolled by individuals and jurisdictions across the country. Although the theory is well founded and even intuitive for some, many jurisdictions have yet to merge their domestic relations matters (dissolution, paternity, custody, visitation etc.) with juvenile (dependency, delinquency, adoption, abuse and neglect), probate (guardianship of minors), mental health, and criminal (misdemeanor, felony and domestic violence). If there are clear benefits to combining certain related case types, could it be that there are obstacles that prevent unification of family court matters? This study examines the internal and external barriers to the successful implementation of family court programs.

A survey instrument was designed with a focus on determining whether there are essential elements that would be instrumental to the creation of a replicable model for successful unification/integration.

Through an in-depth review of current literature, fifteen different court sites were identified based on having accomplished some degree of success in their unification projects. Key administrative and judicial staff were asked to respond to a three-page questionnaire which, after developing individual and jurisdictional profiles asks that the respondents highlight elements of success determined in their own jurisdiction and identify those characteristics thought important to the development of a successful program in any jurisdiction.

Data was collected from twenty-seven respondents reporting from fourteen different courts in various parts of the country (Ann Arundle County, Maryland; Atlanta, Georgia; Baltimore, Maryland; District of Columbia; Hawaii; King County, Washington; Markham, Illinois; Michigan; Patterson, New Jersey; Puerto Rico; San Jose, California; St. Paul, Minnesota; Trenton, New Jersey and Upper Marlboro, Maryland). Questionnaire responses were received from presiding judges, family court judges, court administrators, family court specialists, and program managers.

Generally, results from the study were insightful but there were some findings that could have been anticipated. Although not a stated hypothesis of this research, it was predicted that the interpersonal relationships among those responsible for the management of the family are important. All twenty-seven respondents ranked this as important to achieving successful unification or integration.

When asked to list achievements of their own jurisdiction's unified family court, the factors listed by those surveyed match the advantages usually stated in any argument for a unified model. These factors (improving overall services to children and families, partnering with social service providers and improving caseflow in family court cases) are often espoused as benefits or results of unification. The one success factor that seems to remain fleeting for some of the jurisdictions surveyed is the implementation of an integrated information system. The apparent hurdle of maximizing automated information flow is by far the most difficult for some courts. The Pilot Workgroup in Maricopa County has also found the integration of information systems and information sharing to be a major obstacle. It is good to learn that although this has negatively impacted some progress in other jurisdictions, there are methods to work around and through this limitation to achieve success.

Study findings include some central themes that if considered could lead to improved planning, design, and management of unification or integration of family court matters in nearly any jurisdiction. The stated benefits must be weighed against possible initial increased costs and redirected resources. If the ultimate goal of unification is improved caseflow management and the improvement of services to children and families, lessons learned from these fourteen courts will prove beneficial to others.

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