



# **Promising Practices**

*Descriptions of Promising Practices  
that Domestic Relations Courts are Currently Administering*



# Promising Practices

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# CASEFLOW MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

## **BUTLER COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *Monthly Case Audit Reports for Judges and Magistrates*

The court staff prepares a spreadsheet to show the hearing officer pre-decree cases, post-decree cases and motion. Information that is included in the spreadsheet is a status of case number, future hearing date, days lapsed at time of report, days per guidelines, and days lapsed at next hearing. This is a quick reference reminder for the hearing officer so that they can address matters within time guidelines.

### *Scheduling Conferences Set Immediately Upon Filing of Answer*

The Court immediately holds a scheduling conference and issues specific discovery orders with deadlines, defines the issues in the case, appoints Guardian ad Litem, orders home investigations and psychological exams where appropriate, and has attorneys set settlement conferences with their calendars after the initial discovery deadline, with a pretrial before the judge scheduled soon after. The result is typically active discovery and settlement negotiations by the time the parties appear for the pretrial. Issues are defined and written stipulations are ordered by the pretrial. If the case is not on its way to settlement, the judge schedules a trial at the pretrial to timely resolve the case.

CONTACT: Annette Lolli, Court Administrator  
lollia@butlercountyohio.org  
513.887.3351

## **CLERMONT COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *Parents Matter Docket*

The order gives the obligor a detailed list of goals and a time frame for each goal. The court holds a follow up hearing within two months to make sure that the obligor is meeting the goals as ordered. The goals include attending classes and submitting job applications. Additional hearings are held to monitor the obligor's success with more long term goals.

CONTACT: Penny Gates, Magistrate  
  
Winslow Johnson, Magistrate  
513.732.7327

### *Legal Aid Divorce Clinic*

The Legal Aid Society of Southwest Ohio (LASGC), in partnership with the Volunteer Lawyer Project (VLP), runs *pro bono* Divorce Clinics in cooperation with local domestic relations court to provide eligible clients with an expedited divorce. This streamlined format is very popular with private volunteer attorneys, clients, and the courts.

Divorce Clinics are a way for Legal Aid and the Volunteer Lawyers Project (VLP) to stretch their limited resources to help more low-income clients. The Divorce Clinics serve clients who have no minor children and no contested property issues with their spouse. Clients are assisted in small groups, usually 6-10. The process is fairly simple and requires a total volunteer attorney time commitment of 1.5 – 3 hours. An experienced Legal Aid paralegal prepares and files all of the pleadings, takes care of service of process and handles all scheduling with the clients and the court. The volunteer attorney meets one time with the clients to review and sign the pleadings. The attorney then appears for final hearing before a judge, each hearing lasting approximately ten minutes. The program is successful largely due to the court's willingness to set a unified docket of final hearings before a judge, bypassing the magistrate.

Funding: The clinic is partially subsidized with small grants from the Cincinnati Bar Foundation, Ohio Southern District Pro Bono fund, and in kind contributions from lawyers.

CONTACT: Maggie Fibbe  
mfibbe@lascinti.org  
513.361.8839

## **CRAWFORD COUNTY GENERAL AND DOMESTIC RELATIONS**

### *Mints*

This practice, which the magistrate used for over one year, evolved as the result of an impulse. The magistrate grabbed a piece of mint hard candy one day as she was walking into the courtroom. She immediately thought as she popped the mint into her mouth that she should not be eating candy in front of the attorneys and litigants, so she took another piece of candy for each participant and offered it to them when entered the room. She should say that this was a status conference or pretrial, not an evidentiary hearing. In that particular case, one party was pro se and the other party was represented by counsel. Both parties were in the courtroom, and, as she entered the room, the hostility between them was almost palpable. She explained why she was giving them candy and gave it to both parties and the attorney. She also told them at some point she really believed that they each had everything within them to resolve the case, a custody dispute. When we returned for a later hearing, she dreaded it, but she was surprised when she walked into the courtroom. The mother had contacted the father to suggest that they work together to resolve the case in the best interests of their son. They reached a complete resolution of all issues. After that she started putting candy out for all hearings.

Later she purchased Dove candy with quotes inside the wrappers and handed those out. Sometimes she could sense from a person's body language that he or she wanted no part of eating candy in this setting with these people. But often as the people ate the candy she observed a subtle softening of body language and even positions, a slightly improved readiness to move forward in a positive direction. Universally, we do not often eat with our enemies, so perhaps eating even a small piece of candy with the "opposition" leads to some sort of communal feeling. Anytime we can create a sense of community in a group issues tend to become something to be resolved for the common good rather than battles to win. Knowing the candy was from the court perhaps conveyed a feeling of hospitality, a feeling of being welcomed.

CONTACT: cpcourt@crawford-co.org  
419.562.5771, ext. 1141

#### *Caseflow Management Local Rule*

The court's local rule 1.4 and the 1.4 appendix pretrial statement is a caseflow management procedure. It can be found on the court's website [www.crawfordcocpcourt.org](http://www.crawfordcocpcourt.org).

Funding: The case flow procedure is paid for in court costs.

CONTACT: Leslie D. Mack, Paralegal and Mediator  
cpcourt@crawford-co.org  
419.562.5771, ext. 1141

### **CUYAHOGA COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

#### *Forensic Case Manager*

In high conflict cases or cases where one or both of the parents have problems which need to be monitored for progress, the Case Manager can be appointed to monitor that progress in managing possession time or in advancing toward unsupervised possession time by speaking to the parties, the parties' doctors, sponsors, therapists and by monitoring the communication between the parties or working with the parties to improve that communication. This can be pre-decree or post-decree. The Forensic Case Manager could be a social worker.

Funding: This staff is covered out of the general fund and time charged as costs.

CONTACT: Hon. Diane M. Palos  
216.443.8849

## **DELAWARE COUNTY GENERAL AND DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *Interfaith Legal Services Clinic*

The Interfaith Legal Services Clinic is staffed by volunteer attorneys from the Delaware County Bar Association. The clinic is for residents of Delaware County who have legal questions and are unable to afford attorney fees.

The service includes an intake interview to determine eligibility and also to match an attorney whose expertise matches the resident's concerns. There are no fees or charges of any kind. The administrative support for the clinic is provided by Andrews House (a non-profit community services center).

CONTACT: Linda D. Kiser, Office Manager/Administrative Assistant  
lkiser@co.delaware.oh.us  
740.833.2556

## **HANCOCK COUNTY GENERAL AND DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *Domestic Relations Pro Se Clinic*

The court sponsors a monthly domestic relations clinic to assist pro se persons who are eligible for legal aid services.

Funding: There is no cost to the court for the Domestic Relations Clinic because it is coordinated by Legal Aid and the local bar association.

CONTACT: 419.424.7818

## **HENRY COUNTY FAMILY COURT**

### *Pro Bono Clinic*

The court provides assistance and unbundled services for pro se litigants.

Funding: The assistance to the pro se litigants is possible because of the Legal Aid of Western Ohio and the volunteer work of local attorneys.

CONTACT: Katie Baden  
kbaden@henrycountyfamilycourt.com  
419.592.8327

## LAKE COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT

*Publicizing Supreme Court forms available July 1, 2013*

A press release was sent to local papers with a follow-up article and prominent posters which list the Supreme Court web site, and the domestic relations forms are on display on easels in the courthouse.

CONTACT: Susan Lauer  
sue.lauer@lakecountyohio.gov  
440.350.2332

### *Brief Advice Clinic*

This clinic is sponsored by the Legal Aid Society, Family Law Committee, and the Domestic Relations Court. Volunteer attorneys help plaintiffs prepare all the forms necessary to file a divorce complaint. The divorces are filed by the participants the same day.

Funding: This class is funded by Legal Aid Society. The court provides in-kind support through the use of the courtrooms, conference rooms, copying, and two staff members.

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## **LORAIN COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS and JUVENILE COURT**

### *Child Support Unit*

The court has a dedicated Child Support Unit consisting of two magistrates, a program manager, and two support staff. This Unit helps with caseload by streamlining the process.

Funding: The Child Support Unit is funded by IV-D funds and the general fund.

### *Family Divorces Services Department*

The court has a Family Divorce Services Department which provides mediation, supervised visitation, home studies, and reports and recommendations for parenting time.

CONTACT: Jody Barilla, Court Administrator  
jody.barilla@lcfct.org  
440.329.5360

## **LUCAS COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *Pro Bono Legal Services Program*

The Pro Bono Legal Services Program through the Toledo Bar Association (TBA) offers a divorce clinic for clients without real property. Clients can attend a do-it-yourself divorce workshop and receive assistance in preparing complaints, final judgment entries of divorce, child support worksheets, and name change forms.

Funding: TBA Divorce Clinic is funded by membership fees and donations, and grant money from Legal Aid.

CONTACT: Karen Connelly  
kkconnelly@co.lucas.oh.us  
419.213.6824

## **MEDINA COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *The Legal Resource Center*

The court's Legal Resource Center offers forms, books, computer access, as well as volunteer attorneys, to assist unrepresented litigants with the mechanics of the process.

CONTACT: Tim D. Anderson, Court Investigator  
330.725.9733  
tanderson@medinaco.org

## **MONTGOMERY COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *Pro se Clinic/Self-Represented Parties*

The court asked local practitioners to conduct a clinic to help self-represented litigants understand the forms and processes involved in domestic relations filings.

CONTACT: Lydia Thompson, Public Coordinator  
937.496.3397

### *Sign-in Process*

The court is in the process of creating a kiosk that will allow parties to sign in electronically upon arrival in the court lobby. That entry will be sent to the judge's bailiff or directly to the assigned magistrate to inform them of the arrival of the parties. This improves the management of the dockets.

CONTACT: Jennifer A. Petrella-Ahrens, Esq., C.C.M., Court Administrator  
AhrensJ@mcoho.org  
937.225.6060

## **MORROW COUNTY GENERAL, DOMESTIC RELATIONS, JUVENILE, and PROBATE COURT**

### *Case Monitoring*

To insure that cases are being heard in a timely manner, the Court established a process that is not attorney-driven. The assignment commissioner will review all cases within specific time frames to insure that cases are being set for hearing and resolved.

### *Pro Se Compliance Review*

A checklist was created for reviewing pro se filings to insure that the pleadings comply with provisions of the Ohio Revised Code. All pro se litigants are required to use the Supreme Court forms and are directed to its Web site.

CONTACT: Sara Babich, Court Administrator  
courtadmin@morrowcounty.info  
419.947.4515 Ext. 2245

## **MUSKINGUM COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *Delinquent Child Support Cases*

This program is for child support obligors and the court monitors payments each month for compliance. If the obligor is not in compliance, the obligor must appear on a specific date to answer to the court.

### *Case Assessment*

The court uses a case assessment for managing pro se cases. After paperwork is filed, pro se litigants attend a case assessment where it is determined if there are any external agencies involved and help decide a course for the case, such as mediation or a hearing.

CONTACT: Magistrate Thomas J. Tompkins  
740.455.7190

## **STARK COUNTY FAMILY COURT**

### *Pro Se Clinic*

The local legal aid, child support enforcement agency, and the court work together as a pro se clinic to provide services for change of custody issues for pro se litigants.

### *Entry and Hearing Date Process*

Every litigant leaves the courtroom with entry in hand, including the next hearing date.

### *E-Filing*

E-filing has been implemented by using an increase in court costs.

CONTACT: Hon. Rosemarie Hall  
330.451.7308

## **TRUMBULL COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *Online Forms*

With the assistance and partnership of the local Legal Aid, the court has pro se divorce and dissolution forms posted online.

CONTACT: Hon. Pamela Rintala  
330.675.2341

## **UNION COUNTY GENERAL AND DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *Frequent Status Conferences*

The court schedules each hearing directly with counsel, and has frequent pretrials and status conferences to discuss discovery issues and the individual needs of each case with counsel. The court promotes open dialogue with counsel during pretrials; they are informal and extremely helpful. In cases with a pro se party, those pretrials and status conferences are held on the record, but open dialogue is encouraged as well.

### *Monitoring of Cases*

One person is responsible for monitoring all domestic cases. The staff member keeps a case log and carefully compares it to the monthly Supreme Court report each month to ensure each case is proceeding in a timely manner. There is frequent communication between the domestic bailiff and counsel, with direct contact being made very early in the case.

CONTACT: Heidi Tanner  
htanner@co.union.oh.us  
937.645.3179



## CHILD-CENTERED DECISION-MAKING Practices

### **FAIRFIELD COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

#### *Visitation Center*

A visitation center provides supervised visitation and parenting time and supervised exchanges in cases where domestic violence, substance abuse, or other issues create the need.

Funding: The Visitation Center is funded through a Safe Havens Grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women, and additional court special project funds.

CONTACT: Hon. Laura Smith  
740.652.7444

### **HANCOCK COUNTY GENERAL and DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

#### *Second Parenting Class*

A new and second parenting class was designed for post-decree conflict.

Funding: A combination of court costs and court budget funds the parenting class.

CONTACT: 419.424.7818

### **HENRY COUNTY FAMILY COURT**

#### *Mini Custody Evaluations*

The court has institutionalized mini custody evaluations and home studies.

Funding: This project is funded through the court's special project fund and funds from the ADAMHS Board.

CONTACT: Katie Baden, Court Administrator  
kbaden@henrycountyfamilycourt.com  
419.592.8327

## **LAKE COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *Children's Class*

The court has a class for children entitled "What About Me?" for ages 6-12. This class focuses on activities to reassure their parents and teach the children that divorce is not their fault, they are not alone, and helps to identify feelings and coping strategies.

Funding: This class is funded by special projects.

CONTACT: Susan Lauer  
sue.lauer@lakecountyohio.gov  
440.350.2332

## **MEDINA COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *Supervised Parenting Time and Exchange Center*

The court's parenting time and exchange center provides a safe environment for parents to peacefully transfer children from one home to another without conflict and offers a safe haven for children to spend time with parents who may not otherwise be permitted to see their children.

CONTACT: Tim D. Anderson, Court Investigator  
330.725.9733

## **MONTGOMERY COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *Enhanced Supervised Parenting Time*

The court is working with Erma's House, a local social services provider, to provide additional supervised parenting times on days they are not currently providing the service. There would be an extra charge for the families to participate in this project.

CONTACT: Jennifer A. Petrella-Ahrens, Esq., C.C.M., Court Administrator  
AhrensJ@mcoho.org  
937.225.6060

## **OTTAWA COUNTY GENERAL AND DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *Counseling and Parenting Classes*

The court offers C.O.P.E. which is counseling options and parenting effectiveness classes with the possibility of mental health evaluations and assessments.

### *Supervised Center*

The court has the Joyful Connections which is a supervised center for exchanges and visitation.

CONTACT: 419.734.6818

## **RICHLAND COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *Education on Divorce Class for Children and Adolescents*

The class is for children in kindergarten through 2nd grade, and children in 3rd through 5th grade. They attend three classes which are one session per week. Children in 6th through 8th grade attend two classes which are one session per week. Children in 9th through 12th grade attend one session.

The class is designed to provide education on divorce, coping skills, peer support, and an opportunity to identify and help children who might not otherwise have access to a supportive adult.

Funding: This education is funded through court costs.

CONTACT: Elizabeth Blakley  
blakley.e@richlandcourtsok.us  
419.774.5647

## **STARK COUNTY FAMILY COURT**

### *Working Together for Kids Program*

The Working Together for Kids Program serves never-married parents with education, mediation and child support assistance.

Funding: Initial grant funding obtained for first two years of Working Together for Kids; afterward it was funded by the court through an increase in court costs.

CONTACT: Hon. Rosemarie Hall  
330.451.7308

## **TRUMBULL COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *Supervised Visitation Center*

The court has reopened the supervised visitation center with funds from special projects and the collaboration of domestic violence center, children services board, and the mental health agency.

Funding: The court has created a special projects account to supplement the costs of GAL fees.

### *Lump Sum Administrative Orders*

The court has worked with the local child support enforcement agency to streamline the signing and processing of lump sum administrative orders.

Funding: The court has created a special projects account to supplement the costs of GAL fees.

CONTACT: Hon. Pamela Rintala  
330.675.2342

## DISPUTE RESOLUTION Practices

### HAMILTON COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT

#### *Early Neutral Evaluations for Custody*

The court uses early neutral evaluation for custody.

Funding: This project is funded through the General Fund and the Special Projects Fund.

CONTACT: Lisa Gorrasi, Court Administrator  
lmgorrasi@cms.hamilton-co.org  
513.946.9007

### HENRY COUNTY FAMILY COURT

#### *Early Neutral Evaluation for Custody and Parenting Coordination*

The court utilizes early neutral evaluation for custody and parenting coordination.

Funding: These dispute resolution programs are participant-funded.

CONTACT: Katie Baden, Court Administrator  
kbaden@henrycountyfamilycourt.com  
419.592.8327

### LAKE COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT

#### *In-House Mediation*

The court offers two types of in-house mediation: (1) a voluntary mediation program where parties request mediation prior to filing post-decree motions; and (2) court-ordered mediation which is mandatory for post-decree reallocation of parental rights and responsibilities. Also, if parties request mediation after the case is filed, the case will be screened for mediation appropriateness.

Funding: This class is funded by the county general fund.

CONTACT: Magistrate Marie Umholtz  
440.350.2708

## **MEDINA COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *Informal Mediation Program*

The court's Mediation Department offers mediation services free of charge to Medina County residents with domestic issues.

CONTACT: Tim D. Anderson, Court Investigator  
330.725.9733

## **MONTGOMERY COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *Magistrate and Staff Mediation Pre-Divorce*

The court has instituted a process whereby all divorce filings are screened to determine if that case is a candidate for mediation. We have trained magistrates and staff members to provide this service at no cost to the parties.

CONTACT: Keith Hall  
937.225.6061

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE Practices

### CUYAHOGA COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT

#### *Domestic Violence Case Management*

The program manages the filings of pro se litigants with the aid of a domestic violence coordinator. The program also assists the petitioners with an on-site domestic violence advocate and screens the cases for lethality by the domestic violence case manager. The court uses the different resources and positions of each of these individuals to streamline the proceedings, insure safety and safety planning, help create appropriate orders resolve the case, and monitor compliance.

Funding: These staff are funded by a United States Department of Justice Grant and out of the general fund.

CONTACT: Monica Christofferson  
mchristofferson@cuyahogacounty.us  
216.443.2095

### LUCAS COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT

#### *Domestic Violence Resource Center*

The Family Court Center has a Domestic Violence Resource Center. Dedicated staff assist victims of domestic violence with filing civil protection orders. Petitioners also meet with an advocate to help prepare a safety plan and to explain the court process. After the ex parte order is issued, it is set for hearing on a docket comprised exclusively of domestic violence cases.

Funding: The Domestic Violence Resource Center is funded from court costs and a grant from job and family services.

CONTACT: Karen Connelly  
kkconnelly@co.lucas.oh.us  
419.213.6824

## **MAHONING COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

### *CPO Card*

The CPO Card is a wallet-sized card that victims can conveniently carry. It contains essential information from the CPO order to assist law enforcement to verify and enforce CPO orders.

### *VALU*

VALU is a group of volunteer advocates that help domestic violence victims complete petitions for domestic violence and accompany the victims to the hearings.

Funding: These are funded by special projects funds.

CONTACT: Hon. Beth Smith  
330.740.2208

## OTHER Practices

### **FAIRFIELD COUNTY DOMESTIC RELATIONS COURT**

#### *CLE Program*

The court provides the CLE program for the Fairfield County Bar Association's monthly meeting each February which gives the court the opportunity to speak to all the lawyers at one time about upcoming changes in the law, and any changes in court policy and procedure. This also allows the court to choose the additional CLE for this meeting on a topic the court deems necessary and worthwhile.

CONTACT: Hon. Laura Smith  
740.652.7444

