

Judicial Trauma Institute

Post-Conference Follow up on Q&A

Session 7: Judicial Panel on Developing a Trauma-Informed Court

Note: All answers were provided directly from session speakers as noted.

Having the children present during the hearing seems that it could be loaded and complex- my initial thought is that that would have to add to the traumas of the children as well as the parent. Has that been your experience, or no?

Judge Alvarado's Answer: In our court, this is assessed on a case-by-case basis. Our specialty court deals only with teen girls in PMC, having them present helps us further identify issues that were not identified during the case workers' testimony and the great majority of the time works for a more positive outcome for their care and helps them build trust with the court. In the event that we have a particularly sensitive case or issue, the case workers have been directed to contact our court monitors and the ad litem in advance and request the child not be in attendance for all or part of the hearing. Our court monitors are also typically aware of special issues and will confer with the court in advance of the hearing.

Judge Villalon's Answer: Children are required to attend hearings in my court. We do not go over any of the reasons for removal in front of the child. However, we cover all of the child well-being matters and it is best that child be there to hear what is being conveyed and to have an opportunity to engage the court. If there are sensitive issues that we believe will traumatize or negatively impact the child, the child will be excused. It is also important that they listen to the progress reported as to the parent. I have had many instances where the parent misleads the child as to their progress and intentions. And lastly, every one of these children wants to know when they will be able to go home. Unfortunately, they hear versions from foster parents, parents, caseworkers, attorneys, and GAL's. Court hearings provide the transparency that they are asking for.

Judge Alvarado, how do you recruit and train your mentors?

Judge Alvarado's Live Written Answer: We recruit through our community partners, during jury supervision, community events, and anytime I have an audience of people. I talk about PEARLS and invite participation often. We have an application and background check process. Once our volunteers have gone through this process and have accepted the commitment, we train them in two full day training sessions focused on DBT and TBRI. We also train throughout the year during program time while the girls attend group therapy.

Judge Villalon's Answer: Unfortunately, I do not have a mentorship program in my court. I attempted to establish a mentorship program in cooperation with UTRGV's athletic program a few years ago and encountered nothing but red tape and obstacles by the Department in allowing access to the children. So, we took a different approach and UTRGV opened up athletic and performing arts events to our foster families at no cost. I would love to have a mentorship program.

What a brilliant use of AmeriCorps programming. Kids spend 2/3 of their life in school and yet we have very little to offer them aside from CASA tutoring them! Can you tell us how that piece works?

Judge Alvarado's Answer: We utilized One Star's AmeriCorps Vista Project which is designed to build capacity and infrastructure to help more effectively mobilize local resources to our youth in foster care. While they did not personally tutor youth, our VISTA member was responsible for developing community partnerships with organizations like Grade Potential Tutoring and Workforce Solutions that could assist our youth with school and job development. Our VISTA member also established a management system for the volunteers, mentors, and community partners that provide support, including tutoring youth of the court.

What services do the court therapists provide? Such a thoughtful idea to have clinicians on your staff.

Judge Alvarado's Live Written Answer: Our therapists provide therapeutic group counseling on program nights, individual counseling (deployed to our girls' placement), crisis mediation, placement mediation, family therapy, and training to our volunteers/mentors.

Judge Villalon's Answer: Our court does not have therapists on staff. CPC courts are limited to a judge and coordinator. Ideally, the courts would benefit from a therapist on staff during proceedings to help the families process. I do have a plan, in partnership with the UTRGV, to establish internships for counselors and social workers. We are in discussions and are hoping to get something going soon.

How do you get the foster parents involved with the team and trainings, especially if their identity is supposed to be anonymous?

Judge Clark's Answer: Unfortunately, it is difficult because most CPAs do not want foster parents coming to trainings or court. They want to do their own training and have their staff come to court. Involve the CPA's staff and try to work with them.

How do you all get funding for Court Therapists?

Judge Alvarado's Live Written Answer: Our current funding source is grants.