

Oakland County Citizen Friend of the Court Advisory Committee

2010 ANNUAL REPORT

I. Historical Information

In 2002, the Oakland County Board of Commissioners established the Oakland County Citizen Friend of the Court Advisory Committee under the Friend of the Court Act. Each year, the Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) prepares an annual report summarizing its activities and accomplishments, and distributes this report to the respective governmental units, as prescribed under the law.

The CAC functions under a Mission Statement and set of Bylaws which regulates its organizational activities. The purpose of the CAC is to:

- Advise the Court and the Board of Commissioners of the operation of Friend of the Court in the exercise of its duties and responsibilities under the law.
- Review and investigate certain grievances concerning Friend of the Court, limited to office operations and gender bias.
- Identify the needs of citizens in the community who seek Friend of the Court services while they are in the process of dissolving the family unit, as it exists under the law.

II. Membership

The CAC is composed of nine members representing the following segments of the community: a custodial parent, a non-custodial parent, a family attorney, a mental health professional and two members of the general public plus designees from the Offices of the Prosecuting Attorney, the Department of Human Services and the Sheriff.

As of December, 2010, CAC members are:

David Taylor, custodial parent
Jeff Swanberg, non-custodial parent
Henry Gornbein, family law attorney
Elise Finch-Sophiea, mental health professional
Mel Ettenson, general public member
Rackeline Hoff, general public member
David Case, Prosecuting Attorney's office
Lisa Fisher, Department of Human Services
Matt Norman, Sheriff's office

David Taylor served as Chair and Jeff Swanberg served as Vice-Chair of CAC in 2010.

III. Summary of Activities

The CAC had 11 monthly meetings in 2010. Two of the 11 meetings, June and October, were scheduled in the evening for the convenience of members of the general public who may not have been able to attend CAC's regular morning meetings. These open meetings fulfilled CAC's Mission Statement of providing a credible forum for citizens "that grants fair and honest access for review of citizens' concerns." The public has been responsive to the open meetings with 29 citizens in attendance at meetings in 2010, bringing concerns related to parenting time issues, custody issues, gender bias, child support enforcement issues and support payment records.

In addition to the Committee of the whole, four sub-committees were formed for operational efficiency. These sub-committees and their functions are as follows:

- **Administrative/Governance:** A volunteer citizen serves as CAC Secretary taking minutes at every public CAC meeting and providing copies monthly to CAC members and to the Oakland County staff liaison for distribution to the County Board of Commissioners Public Service Committee. To better define functions of CAC sub-committees, job descriptions are being developed by the Secretary and sub-committee Chairs.

- Liaison: Members serve as an informational link between the CAC and the Oakland County Board of Commissioners, meeting with individual Commissioners to discuss topics of mutual interest and/or present materials prepared by CAC.
- Grievance: Members meet as a group to review individual written grievances submitted by members of the public. Most of these grievances were randomly provided by Suzanne Hollyer, Director of the Oakland County Friend of the Court. In 2010, this sub-committee received 40 individual grievances.
- Media: A CAC member prepares and distributes press releases announcing the time, date and location of all public CAC meetings to the following local media: Oakland Press, Oakland Legal News, Crain's Detroit Business, Oxford Leader, Lake Orion Review, Clarkston News Citizen, Eagle Newspapers, Eccentric Newspapers and The Spinal Column. A sample release is as follows:

The Oakland County Citizen Friend of the Court Advisory Committee will meet at _____ am/pm on _____ at the Oakland County Board of Commissioners' Auditorium, Room A. The Advisory Committee can receive complaints relating to office procedures or gender bias and make recommendations to the County Board of Commissioners, the Court, and the State of Michigan on ways that Friend of the Court can better serve the public. The public is invited to attend. For more information, call _____ at _____.

In addition to the standing sub-committees, a special sub-committee was created in 2008 to develop a Family Conflict Resolution Model. This sub-committee continues to refine and promote this model which is focused on addressing the effects of high conflict divorce on the developmental growth of the children in a family. In connection with its Family Conflict Resolution Model, the CAC has been in discussions with the Kent County Friend of the Court regarding a domestic relations pilot project that encourages the use of non-adversarial language and the use of parenting time plans. This pilot project is currently being evaluated and the results will be studied by the CAC sub-committee.

IV. Accomplishments

- Since early 2009, FOC-CAC has had an on-line website to provide citizens with easily accessible information about CAC operations and meetings. The website is updated regularly and includes contact information and an on-line grievance e-form to enable citizens to conveniently submit grievances to CAC. The annual report is also included on the new web site. A link was established from the Friend of the Court website to the CAC home page. The web site has been well received by the public.
- The CAC was highlighted in a 5-minute interview with Dave Taylor, CAC Chair, on “Comcast Newsmakers” which was aired repeatedly, September 13-19, 2010 on CNN Headline News.
- The CAC explored the possibility of developing a survey to determine the needs of citizens as related to the services they received from Friend of the Court. Contact was made with Wayne County Circuit Court and it was reported that the Customer Satisfaction Surveys distributed by Friend of the Court in Wayne County were very beneficial in two ways: 1) instilling employee accountability in the case of complaints and 2) providing positive employee feedback when there were compliments. Oakland County FOC is currently considering implementation of such surveys.
- CAC informed Friend of the Court of concerns about the lack of confidentiality and privacy during meetings/hearings on motion day due to the close proximity of parties in different cases meeting in the same room. FOC acknowledged CAC’s concerns, indicated awareness of the overcrowding situation in the courthouse and made the Director of Facilities Management aware of the issue. In addition, FOC asked CAC for an opinion on utilizing available space in the library which is not very convenient.

V. Looking Ahead

- The CAC is in the process of setting up a program whereby grievances submitted to the Friend of the Court that are appropriate for CAC review – pertaining to FOC office procedures and/or gender bias – will be provided electronically to every CAC committee member for review. CAC members are aware of the absolute need to maintain confidentiality of these records and are providing secure email addresses to the Oakland County IT Department.
- Members of the Family Conflict Resolution Model sub-committee met with Judge Edward Sosnick, who is returning to the Oakland County Family Court. Judge Sosnick was very supportive of the Model and sub-committee members will continue to contact him.
- Bonnie Hanes, Director of the Oakland Mediation Center, will meet with CAC in early 2011 to discuss the current parenting plan mediation program being implemented between Friend of the Court and the mediation center.

The CAC serves the Board of Commissioners and the citizens of Oakland County who use the services of Friend of the Court. In 2010, CAC members provided over 650 hours of direct and indirect service. Through their dedication and generosity, these CAC volunteers offer their time, efforts and talents to sustain the work of the Oakland County Citizen Friend of the Court Advisory Committee.

Prepared and Submitted by:

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