



## MICHIGAN COURTS NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### **State Honors Child Welfare Professionals, Volunteers for Exceptional Service to Children and Families in Michigan's Foster Care System**

LANSING, MI, October 4, 2018 –The State Court Administrative Office (SCAO) Foster Care Review Board will recognize six individuals this week for their outstanding service to children in Michigan's foster care system. Awards will be presented during a luncheon ceremony at the 2018 Foster Care Review Board Annual Training on Friday, October 5, in Bay City.

"The most important job in the world is caring for and protecting our children," said Justice Elizabeth Clement, who is the Michigan Supreme Court liaison on children welfare issues. "Thank you to these award winners and to every parent and professional who work diligently to safeguard and provide stability for children and families served by our foster care system."

The award winners, who are chosen by a panel of child welfare professionals, advocates and past winners, include:

**Bacara and Anthony Cotner**, foster parents in Muskegon County, will receive the **Foster Parents of the Year** award. Mr. and Mrs. Cotner were nominated for this award by Laura Borek and Anna Beechnau of Muskegon County Department of Health and Human Services. The Cotners have been foster parents for three years, and during that time, have distinguished themselves as not only excellent care providers for the children placed in their home, but also as strong advocates for the services and support necessary to meet the children's special educational, medical and mental health needs. They have cared admirably for children with severe behavioral problems and have done so with patience, compassion, constancy, and unconditional acceptance of these children, all of which are essential for helping them to heal from their traumatic past. The Cotners are very active in seeking appropriate services and working closely with service providers and caseworkers to ensure the children receive the best possible care. On their own, they have pursued information and training that enables them to better understand and care for children with these exceptional needs and to more effectively interact with service providers.

**Susan L. Pyles**, a foster care specialist with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) office in St. Joseph County, will be honored as the **Foster Care Worker of the Year**. Susan received multiple nominations for this award including nominations from Judge David Tomlinson, St. Joseph County Probate Court; Linda Jo Skipski, Children's Services Supervisor at St. Joseph County DHHS; and Jeffery Boyce, Foster Care Supervisor at St. Joseph County DHHS and Regional Board 5-2 of the Foster Care Review Board program. Nominators cited her exceptional work ethic and professionalism, her compassion for her clients, and her high level of dedication to her clients. They also shared that she is always exploring, searching, advocating, and networking to deliver appropriate services for their specific needs. Judge Tomlinson noted Susan's exemplary

preparation for testifying in court: “Over the years Susan has inspired me by her actions to do my best to save those in our society who are most vulnerable.”

**Robyn Lynn McCoy**, of McCoy & Associates, will be honored as **Lawyer-Guardian Ad Litem of the Year**. Robyn was nominated by Tracy Monica Martin, of Motor City Justice, PLLC. Ms. Martin described Robyn as a “noble and exemplary LGAL and educational advocate” who works tirelessly in advocating for the best interests of her child clients, while helping to ensure their safety and wellbeing in the foster care system. Robyn works with Michigan Children’s Law Center in their Education Advocacy Unit to connect children in foster care with the support, services, and structure they need to succeed in school. Robyn is active in the community as an advocate for social justice, collaborating with the Legal Aid and Defender Association to ensure high quality legal representation for low-income clients.

**James A. Keedy**, director of Michigan Indian Legal Services (MILS), will be honored as **Parent Attorney of the Year**. James was nominated for this award by Stacey Tadgeerson, director of Native American Affairs for DHHS. Ms. Tadgeerson nominated that James for his 40+ years of providing exceptional legal counsel and quality representation on behalf of American Indian/Alaska Native parents involved in child protection proceedings. In addition to providing legal representation for parents during these proceedings, he has authored numerous *amicus* briefs to the Michigan Court of Appeals, which have provided successful outcomes on behalf of clients. James has also made numerous contributions to the child welfare field through his leadership of young attorneys at MILS and as a subject matter expert in the codification of the state statute specific to Indian children and families, which was subsequently instrumental in the drafting and passage of the Michigan Indian Family Preservation Act.

**Judge Jennie E. Barkey**, Genesee County Probate Court, will be honored as the **Jurist of the Year**. Judge Barkey was nominated for this award by Vivek Sankaran, clinical professor of law at the University of Michigan Law School. Judge Barkey presently presides over the specialized post-termination review docket in Genesee County. Professor Sankaran asserted that her work on this docket has been “outstanding” and that she sets a remarkable example for all of us as to how seriously the system needs to take these cases. He noted that Judge Barkey does an excellent job holding agencies accountable in fulfilling their responsibilities to the children and parents, thereby ensuring that children do not languish in foster care. Professor Sankaran highlighted in his nomination Judge Barkey’s keen intellect, her ability to listen carefully to all of the testimony and ask probing questions, and to demonstrate a deep engagement with the facts and the law. He concluded his nomination by lauding Judge Barkey as tireless worker and as a true judicial leader on child welfare issues.

*The FCRB, which was created by the Michigan legislature in 1984, serves as a statewide system of third-party review of the foster care system. The program is administered by the State Court Administrative Office, the administrative agency of the Michigan Supreme Court. Citizen volunteers serve on the FCRB’s 13 Regional review boards throughout the state. Regional boards review foster care cases to support the courts, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, and private child welfare agencies in their efforts to achieve positive outcomes for all children served by our foster care system. For more information, visit [www.courts.mi.gov/fcrb](http://www.courts.mi.gov/fcrb).*