



MICHIGAN COURTS NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Supreme Court, Third Circuit Court, MDHHS Announce Nation's First Court-Led Legal Services Program That Will Help At-Risk Families

Initiative aims to level the playing field in Wayne County child welfare cases

LANSING, MI, June 16, 2021 – During Reunification Month, the Michigan Supreme Court, Third Circuit Court of Wayne County, and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) today announced a new pre-petition legal services program—with grant funding from MDHHS (federal Title IV-E funding)—that will assist Wayne County families who face removal of their children. It is believed to be the first court-led pre-petition legal services program in the nation.

“Having court leadership on this program is so exciting, and it is a trend that we think we will see more of in the future,” said Justice Elizabeth T. Clement, who serves as MSC co-liaison on child welfare matters. “Today’s announcement is an example of how the judiciary and key partners are ensuring that parties involved in child welfare cases have a level playing field so they can avoid family separation.”

“This program couldn’t have come together without engagement from the MDHHS Children’s Services Agency and their visionary leadership. Their funding was a major step forward for families and is helping to prevent the unnecessary removal of children from their homes,” said Justice Megan K. Cavanagh, who also serves as MSC co-liaison on child welfare matters. “I also want to applaud the efforts of everyone who is a part of this program, from the judges to the case workers to the legal aid teams. They have worked—and continue to work—day-in and day-out to put this program together.”

Pre-petition legal representation involves the provision of legal services to families after a family has come to the attention of Child Protective Services, but before a petition has been filed in juvenile court.

Two local providers have been identified to deliver these services in Wayne County: Lakeshore Legal Aid and Neighborhood Defender Service. The process will be for MDHHS in the Wayne County-South Central district office to refer cases at high risk of a removal petition if there is a legal matter that could resolve the issue and obviate the need for a petition.

“The Third Circuit Court is grateful to have Lakeshore Legal Aid and Neighborhood Defender Service provide excellent legal services to at-risk families facing removal of their children. The

additional legal services may be the difference that keeps families together,” said Third Circuit Chief Judge Timothy M. Kenny.

“At MDHHS, we strongly believe that children are better off when they are with their families,” said Demetrius L. Starling, executive director of the MDHHS Children’s Services Agency. “That’s why we celebrate Reunification Month. Our department partners closely with the court and our private agency partners to provide resources to families so that they can be reunified safely. We are proud of families that have worked so hard to be able to be together again.”

Justice Clement added, “This is an especially important message to share during Reunification Month, when we typically celebrate families being put back together, because ultimately we are talking about the goal of family preservation.”

In addition to the Wayne County program, the State Court Administrative Office’s Child Welfare Services division has also helped to develop and launch a second pre-petition legal services pilot program in Van Buren County. SCAO has been assisting with these programs through its [Court Improvement Program](#).

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