



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
330 C Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

April 14, 2020

Dear Chief Justices and State Court Administrators:

I hope this letter finds you and your families well during these difficult times. I am writing on behalf of the United States Children's Bureau (CB) to highlight and strongly encourage court leaders to engage Court Improvement Programs (CIPs) in assisting dependency courts to respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). As previously communicated in my letter to legal and judicial leaders on March 27, CB believes continued judicial oversight of child dependency matters is critical during the pandemic.

I am writing again to urge judicial leaders to work closely with the CIP in your state or territory to help acquire and support telework and video-conferencing equipment and software that will allow judges to continue to provide statutorily required oversight in ways consistent with public health mandates.

The highest courts of appeals in all fifty states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands currently receive CIP grants from CB. The purpose of the grant is to continuously improve the quality of dependency court hearings and reviews, and to promote high-quality legal representation for parents, children, and the child-welfare agency at all stages of dependency cases. The grant specifically allows use of funds to promote access to justice and enhance judicial oversight through use of technology, including electronic case filing and management systems and equipment to allow for virtual hearings and reviews. Maximum use of any existing resources or efforts to expand such capabilities are encouraged. We believe that CIPs are a tremendous resource at this time.

CB expects that CIP directors, as the designated representative of the highest court of appeals for the CIP grant, will work closely with the administrative office of the courts and the courts of the state or territory to improve the child welfare system in conjunction with the child-welfare agency and other stakeholders at all times, and especially in times of urgent need. CIPs across the country are providing critical support for efforts to ensure children's safety and well-being, and to protect constitutional rights during the pandemic. Examples of CIP efforts under way since the beginning of the COVID-19 public health emergency include:

- Purchasing technology to allow hearings to continue remotely;
- Working to develop protocols for remote hearings;
- Providing remote training to judges, court administrators and clerks on how best to use technology platforms;
- Coordinating COVID-19 responses with child welfare agencies;

- Providing remote training to attorneys for children, parents, and the child welfare agency on how best to use technology platforms to communicate with their clients and participate in hearings and reviews; and
- Working to develop or improve e-filing systems.

Furthermore, we are aware that a small minority of states have deemed CIP staff nonessential or may not be permitting CIP staff to work remotely. We strongly encourage Chief Justices and State Court Administrators to work with Governors to reexamine such determinations and permit telework as CIP leadership, funding, and staff are critical to supporting court capacity to continue protecting our children and families in these challenging times.

We appreciate all the efforts you are making to ensure that access to justice and critical protections for children remain in place as we all work to adapt to the challenges in front of us.

Sincerely,

/s/

Jerry Milner
Associate Commissioner
Children's Bureau