



On Balance

Legislative Team Ready for 2010 Session



Tonya L. Griesbach

The 2010 Legislative Session is less than a month away. With the House leadership in question, there has been plenty of activity under the Gold Dome these past few months. Many of the committees have met, including a study committee on the juvenile code rewrite and the House Judiciary Non-Civil

Committee. No action can be taken in these hearings, only testimony. These meetings are intended to help prepare legislators for issues expected to come up during the upcoming session.

Following this year's legislation is as easy as visiting the AOC Legislative Website at www.ciclt.net/aoc. You can also find committee meeting announcements and agendas, news stories and a host of other important information from the legislature that affects the judiciary at this site.

The AOC has put together a Legislative Team to review bills and develop judicial impact statements for important legislation. This Team will consist of a designee from each department in the AOC along with other stakeholders within the judiciary. The Team will help create a unified front to the legislature and improve communication within the judiciary.

Your AOC Governmental Affairs team at the Capitol can be reached at the following contacts:

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AOC Staff Celebrates Holiday Season in International Style

This wasn't your Mama's holiday party. There was no turkey or ham on the menu, no cranberry sauce in sight. More like spiced Thai curry, Kugel, and Ethiopian Injera (spongy bread) amongst the international dishes served.

The Administrative Office of the Courts staff came together on Monday, December 14th for its annual holiday party, international-style. Staff cooked sweets and savory items from Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas.



Marla S. Moore, AOC Director, stirred her Wassail.



The AOC Information Technology group won best decorated table for their spread of Asian and Greek food.



The Children, Families, and the Court team served up Eastern European treats.

Committee on Civil Justice Hosts Georgia Legal Needs Summits

Submitted by Tracy Powell



Tracy Powell

In 2005, the Supreme Court of Georgia created by order the Committee on Civil Justice, and charged it with the mission of strengthening Georgia's civil justice system through the development and support of policy initiatives designed to improve access to the courts for poor and vulnerable cit-

izens of the state. The Committee came under the administration of the Administrative Office of the Courts in late 2007, and is staffed by Jill Radwin, Executive Director, and Tracy Powell, Project Coordinator. The Committee is part of the Children, Families, and the Courts division.

The cornerstone of the Committee's work is the *2007/2008 Georgia Legal Needs Study* ("legal needs study"). This comprehensive study was divided into four components: a public telephone survey of low and moderate income Georgians regarding their civil legal needs; a telephone survey of attorneys regarding pro bono practices; a web-based survey of court personnel and legal/social service providers regarding their opinions on obstacles to access to justice; and focus groups with hard-to-reach client populations and with court personnel and providers. The A.L. Burruss Institute of Public Service and Research at Kennesaw State University conducted the research and the Committee worked with Mr. D. Michael Dale, a legal services attorney and writer based in Oregon, to transfer the data in to a final report. After a year and a half of work, the study was completed and published in May, 2009.

The last statewide assessment of civil legal needs in Georgia was done in 1994. At that time, it was found that over 40 percent of our state's poverty population had at least one civil legal need in a year. By contrast, the 2008 survey showed that over 60 percent had at least one civil legal need. Of those surveyed, low income households named consumer, housing, and public benefits related issues as the top three areas of need, while moderate income households identified consumer, housing, and

health. Almost 74 percent of respondents said they did not obtain legal help to address their issue; of this group, 73 percent said they did not even know the problem was legal in nature.

To roll-out the final results of this long-awaited report, the Committee hosted the Georgia Civil Legal Needs Summit on June 24, 2009. The event was held at the State Bar of Georgia headquarters in Atlanta, and was presented via webinar to the Tifton and Coastal Georgia satellite State Bar offices. Over 55 attendees, primarily from the Georgia legal community, received a copy of the report and a summary of the findings. The results of the study were presented, followed by a panel discussion regarding current access to justice initiatives taking place in Georgia. Former Chief Justice Leah Ward Sears delivered the opening and closing remarks, and Committee co-chairs Anne W. Lewis and Teri P. McClure served as moderators for the program.

The Committee followed up the summit at the local level with round table discussions held around the state; these proved to be a smashing success. Jill and Tracy (with assistance from AOC staff – Patricia Gavel, Elaine Johnson, Eden Freeman, Debra Oliver, and Raquel Gonzalez) traveled to twelve sites across Georgia to present the study and to facilitate conversation among local stakeholders about ways to improve access to justice in their area. The series began in Albany on July 31, with Chief Judge Willie Lockette (Superior Court, Dougherty Judicial Circuit) serving as host, and concluded in Savannah on October 16, hosted by Judge Louisa Abbot and Judge James Bass of the Superior Court, Eastern Judicial Circuit. While total attendance varied at each location, there was one trend that was common throughout – far more participants showed up than had preregistered. Most locations had double the number of attendees than originally anticipated. Yet, what was even more exciting was the enthusiasm and exchange of ideas that were generated at each of these sites. The round table with the greatest number of participants was Ellijay, with approximately 90 in atten-

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Around the State

dance. The average number of attendees for all twelve of the round tables combined was 43.9.

The agenda for these discussions was structured around a condensed presentation of the findings of the legal needs study; presentations of the resources available to help litigants in each area (through two to five minute speeches by representatives from various organizations, including Georgia Legal Services Program, Georgia Office of Child Support Services, domestic violence shelters, etc.); and, a discussion of participant's opinions on the current local situation and necessary steps for improvement, led by psychologist Dr. Kevin Baldwin of Applied Research Services, Inc.

There was much positive feedback from participants throughout the series. Judges, attorneys, legal and social service providers, mediators, and private citizens were represented and all shared their thoughts and opinions on the

issues of prominent legal needs, the lack of resources facing the courts and providers, and the unquestionable need to provide alternative options to litigants who are not able to afford legal representation. Many attendees met their

local counterparts for the first time at these round tables and spoke about their excitement to continue meeting together.

The results and findings from the round tables are currently being compiled, and will be included as an addendum to the *2007/2008 Georgia Legal Need Study*. The addendum will include recommendations for programs and initiatives aimed at addressing the

needs of low and moderate income citizens. The goal and intent is for local groups to continue meeting on their own, implementing some of the ideas produced. As for the Committee itself, 2009 was a very productive year and it will continue to work on initiatives in 2010 that will improve access to the courts for all Georgians.



Participants at the DeKalb County Summit.

Location	Date	Host	Pre-registrants	Actual Attendance
Albany	July 31	Chief Judge Willie Lockette	11	26
Gwinnett	August 7	Judge Michael C. Clark	25	44
Brunswick	August 21	Chief Judge Amanda Williams	22	50
Ellijay	August 28	Chief Judge Brenda Weaver	29	84
Carrollton	September 4	Judge John Simpson	25	39
Columbus	September 11	Chief Judge John D. Allen	20	42
Augusta	September 18	Judge Sheryl B. Jolly & Chief Judge J. Carlisle Overstreet	10	35
DeKalb	September 23	Judge Cynthia J. Becker	48	57
Rome	September 25	Chief Judge Walter Matthews	24	57
Macon	October 1	Chief Judge Martha Christian	20	38
Jefferson	October 9	Judge Currie Mingledorff	12	25
Savannah	October 16	Judge Louisa Abbot & Judge James F. Bass, Jr.	14	47

Douglas County Court Helps Drug Dependant Families

Submitted by Melva Steps

The Douglas County Family Dependency Treatment Program (FDTP), part of Douglas Circuit Juvenile Court and awardee of the National Commissioners Award, is making a difference by helping parents seeking drug abuse treatment. Referrals for the program come from the Division of Family and Children Services and the courts. Jennifer King, program coordinator, says the program is designed to break the cycle of addiction and neglect by using a highly structured team approach to treating the parent's disease and addressing other parenting problems. Referrals to the program come from the Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS), attorneys, court personnel, and the Guardian Ad Litem as long as there is court jurisdiction through a deprivation or protective order filing.

The team, comprised of Judge Peggy Walker, Juvenile Court of Douglas County; King, Case Manager Midge Roman-Ortiz, Program Administrator Jenny McDade, Assessor Leisa Mason, along with representatives from the Division of Family and Children Services, Guardian Ad Litem, Special Assistant Attorney General (as needed), attorney team member, court appointed special advocates and treatment providers, meets prior to client review. During the staffing, they discuss individual participant's current progress, needs, other concerns and next steps. This team communication equips each member with the necessary information to compassionately and sometimes sternly encourage participants on their journey to healing. Sobriety is rewarded with incentives such as baby supplies and clothing, personal care items, and photo frames.

The focus of the FDT Program is saving children

under 5 years of age. Judge Walker stresses that this group of children has the greatest risk of death and serious injury, coming into foster care, staying in foster care longer and re-entering the foster care system more than any other age group. These young, vulnerable infants, toddlers and preschool age children do not have teachers, counselors and school administrators who see them every day to make referrals for services and address safety concerns. Judge Walker feels that the program provides early identification of families who need many services and helps them find substance abuse treatment, employment as well as other wrap around services to

strengthen the family. The FDTP works to assure that all children under 5 are screened for and receive any Part C the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) services that they are entitled to receive. Early intervention services for young children helps with physical,

social, emotional, and cognitive development to enable them to enter school healthy and ready to learn.

The Douglas and Appalachian Judicial Circuits currently share a \$1.5 million, three year grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services from funds allocated by the Safe and Stable Family Act. The Division of Children, Families, and the Courts staff provides technical assistance to both courts to include project and grant management and sustainability and strategic planning. In 2006, Judge Walker shared some of her most memorable court experiences during a presentation before U.S. Senate staff sponsored by Senators Jay Rockefeller (D-WV), Charles Grassley (R-

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The Douglas County Drug Treatment Program Team.

AOC Staff Celebrates Holiday Season in International Style

In the spirit of the holiday season, staff donated toys to the Toys for Tots drive run by the US Marine Corps. The donated items were displayed around the room during the holiday party.



Some Middle Eastern treats were provided by the Planning, Data Analysis, and Evaluation group.



The Court Services team served traditional African dishes.



Regulatory served up traditional eats from Western Europe.



The Financial Administration group covered the United States, Canada, and Mexico with their spread.

Douglas County cont.

IA) and Michael DeWine (R-OH) who share concerns about the impact of methamphetamine use on children and families. The result was an allocation of \$40 million in Safe and Stable Families funding to serve communities experiencing the adverse affects of methamphetamine abuse to help children and families. These efforts dispel widely accepted false assertions that serious substance abusers do not benefit from treatment and do not recover from methamphetamine abuse.

The AOC staff from the grants management unit provides project management for this program. The management services include grant reporting, managing subcontractors, sustainability and strategic planning, and research. If you are interested in implementing a FDTP or have questions regarding better practices for your existing program please call Melva Steps at 404-463-1229.

AOC Website Committee Working to Develop New Site

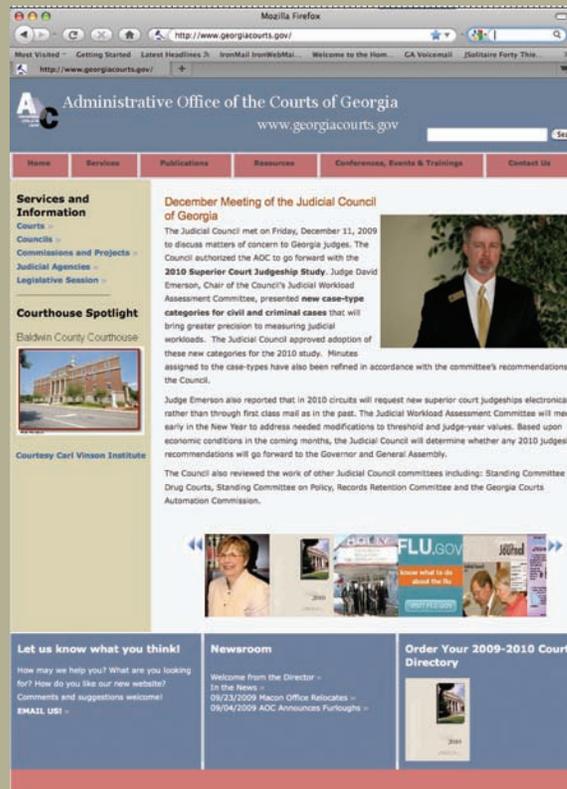
Submitted by Ashley Stollar

You might have noticed some recent changes at www.georgiacourts.gov

Under the direction of Ms. Marla S. Moore, AOC Director, the AOC's website has undergone one redesign and is headed for another new look. Representatives from each of the office's divisions were asked to participate in the weekly session to design a new look for the website and to update the content that is delivered to our customers.

The website has already undergone one design change that you might have noticed (top, right). We will continue to update it until the next version is approved and goes live (bottom, right).

As we make changes, your input is invaluable. Tell us how you use our website. What's there that you don't like? What's not there that you need? Contact us with your ideas about georgiacourts.gov by e-mailing us at publications@gaaoc.us



The current georgiacourts.gov

The Committee:

Mr. Jorge Basto,

Assistant Director for Information Technology;

Mr. Walter Hickman, Manager of Data Services;

Ms. Sowjanya Aligala, Webmaster

Mr. Christopher Patterson,

Associate Director for Court Services;

Ms. Billie Bolton,

Assistant Director for Communications;

Ms. Ashley Stollar, Graphic Designer;

Mr. Christopher Causey, Governmental Affairs Project Coordinator;

Ms. Kelly Steele, Planning, Data Analysis, and Evaluation Planning Coordinator;

Ms. Jennifer Sanders, Center Accounting Manager; and

Ms. Stephanie Hines,

Assistant Director for Regulatory.



The future georgiacourts.gov