



Making the Legal System Work for Children and Parents

Demonstration Site Proposal: Looking for a few good jurisdictions!

The goal of the **Family Justice Initiative (the FJI)** is to ensure that **every parent and every child has access to high-quality legal representation when courts make life-changing decisions about their families.**

Led by the ABA Center on Children and the Law, the Children’s Law Center of California, and the Center for Family Representation, and with participation of parents’ attorneys, children’s attorneys, academics, advocates and others from over half the states, the FJI seeks to build public support and understanding for the important and necessary role that high-quality legal representation for children and parents has in ensuring that the child welfare system meets its promise to strengthen rather than destroy families, that children and parents are engaged and have a meaningful voice in the child welfare legal process, that judges have the best information from all parties, and that families receive due process in legal proceedings that forever impact one of the most fundamental rights – the right to family.

Over the past six-months, and with input from experts from around the country, the FJI has outlined prioritized attributes (both individual and system attributes) of high-quality legal representation for children and parents. These prioritized attributes were identified based on research and evaluation, which has found that improvements in legal representation for children and parents, including lower caseloads, access to social workers and other experts, and attorney supervision, leads to increased reunification rates, as well as increased rates of adoption and guardianship.¹ Additionally, a committee of practicing child welfare attorneys from throughout the country, as well as child and parent representation program managers and national experts in the field of legal representation, identified these prioritized attributes as essential to high-quality legal representation.

¹ Studies have found that improved representation for parents or children can decrease the time children spend in foster care. *See e.g.*, Mark Courtney, Jennifer Hook & Matt Orme, *Evaluation of the Impact of Enhanced Parental Legal Representation on the Timing of Permanency Outcomes for Children in Foster Care*, Vol. 34, Issue 7, *Children and Youth Service Review* (July 2012); *see also* Andrew Zinn & Clark Peters, *Expressed-interest legal representation for children in substitute care: Evaluation of the impact of the impact of representation on children's permanency outcomes*, Vol. 53, Issue 4, *Family Court Review* (Oct. 2015).

The FJI is now seeking jurisdictions interested in improving representation for parents and children to become demonstration sites.

What is an FJI demonstration site? An FJI demonstration site is a jurisdiction that wants to improve legal representation for both parents and children and is willing to commit to utilizing an interdisciplinary model for representation and/or to lowering attorney caseloads consistent with the FJI recommendations. In addition, FJI demonstration sites must be focused on utilizing data and a continuous quality improvement process to measure qualitative and quantitative outcomes.

Become a part of a national initiative and network. FJI partners will provide technical assistance to demonstration sites, including working with the demonstration site to plan implementation of the intervention, create data collection tools, and provide relevant training. FJI demonstration sites will join the FJI initiative and have access to experts and practitioners from around the country.

While the FJI cannot provide financial support to FJI demonstration sites, FJI partners will work with demonstration sites to identify local funding resources including leveraging government resources to support improved legal representation for children and parents in your jurisdiction. Being an FJI demonstration site will provide you the opportunity to highlight the good work of your jurisdiction and will provide an opportunity for jurisdictions from around the country to learn from your experience.

Most importantly, your work as an FJI demonstration site will help build continued support for the national initiative to ensure that every parent and every child has access to high-quality legal representation when courts make life-changing decisions about their families.

What is the FJI demonstration site commitment? FJI demonstration sites will commit to implementing at least one of the FJI prioritized system attributes (with a focus on reasonable caseloads and/or interdisciplinary model of representation) for both child and parent representation. Attorneys will be expected to meet the FJI individual attorney attributes (legal and out of court advocacy, as well as cultural humility). Attorneys must be willing to be part of the demonstration site and there must be some institutional support in place for attorneys (i.e. there must be some level of supervision and attorney oversight). Demonstration sites must commit to collecting data related to implementation of the FJI intervention. For example, FJI demonstration sites will commit to documenting the FJI intervention and utilizing FJI data collection tools so that we can measure the potential impact of the FJI interventions.

How long will the FJI demonstration site last? FJI demonstration sites must be willing to implement the FJI intervention and utilize the FJI data collection tool for two to three years.

If you are interested in becoming an FJI demonstration site or would like more information, please contact FJI Executive Team member: Mimi.Laver@americanbar.org.

Thank you for your interest in the FJI and its work to support children and parents in the child welfare court system.