

E-Filing of Abuse, Neglect Petitions Reaches Family Court

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Newly implemented electronic filing of abuse and neglect petitions with the hard-pressed Family Court has cut by more than half the time it takes to get the papers before a judge, according to a preliminary evaluation.

The effort is a "huge step forward" in the court's efforts to speed the resolution of child-protective proceedings, said Family Court Administrative Judge Edwina Richardson-Mendelson ([See Profile](#)).

New abuse and neglect filings increased 147 percent from 2005 to 2006 and have remained high as authorities seek to avoid more tragedies like the high-profile death of Nixmary Brown, an abused 7-year-old who was beaten to death in Brooklyn in 2006.

The median time for disposing of such cases in 2008 was 10.4 months, an increase of more than three months from 2006.

Caseworkers filed 15,735 new child-protective proceedings in 2008, and court officials projected more than 16,000 last year.

After two years of development, the new electronic filing system was rolled out at the end of last year starting in Manhattan in October and ending in Staten Island in December.

The system will soon be expanded to enable the Family Court to electronically send to the Administration for Children Services (ACS) docket entries, court orders and notification of court dates, said Judge Richardson-Mendelson.

She added that the system will allow the electronic exchange of documents between the court and lawyers who represent parents and children involved in abuse and neglect proceedings.

The exchange of information is intended to ensure that everyone involved in a case appear on time, ready to go forward.

A preliminary study has found that the use of electronic filing already has cut the time to get a petition into a courtroom by two hours on average, said Virginia Gippetti, the Family Court's top data analyst.

When ACS had to physically bring petitions to the courthouse, it took from 3 1/2 hours from the time the ACS caseworker first met with an agency lawyer to draw up the papers until the petition reached the intake part where abuse and neglect cases are first heard, according to the study. Now it only takes 1 1/2 hours, the study found.

Improved technology is one of a number of steps the Family Court is taking to speed the processing of child-protection cases and "permanency" for "vulnerable children," said Judge Richardson-Mendelson.

The effort also includes firm deadlines for handling all aspects of cases; a times-certain when all parties on a matter must be in court; fewer and shorter adjournments; and court conferences, attended by all parties, with the judges' law clerks to set the agenda for upcoming court sessions.

Funding for the electronic filing project came from annual grants, which total \$1.4 million, from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. A computer programmer and a data analyst were assigned to work on the project, said Ms. Gippetti.

The city pumped \$377,000 of its capital funds to upgrade its ACS' computers, according to Scott Trent a spokesman for the agency.

Separately, Judge Richardson-Mendelson has authorized \$236,000 of the federal grant funds to be set aside to hire four staffers to work with Family Court's four supervising judges in implementing case-processing initiatives.

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