



*The National Evaluation of the Court Improvement Program* describes the many paths followed by state courts to improve their oversight of foster care and adoption cases and analyzes the outcomes achieved. It will provide the field with important information on effective models for juvenile and family court reform. Funded by the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in 2004, the five-year study is carried out by a partnership of three organizations consisting of Planning and Learning Technologies (Pal-Tech, Inc.), the Urban Institute and the Center for Policy Research.

The Court Improvement Program (CIP) was established in 1994 as a source of funding for state courts to assess and improve their handling of foster care and adoption proceedings. The funding is codified in title IV-B, subpart 2 of the Social Security Act, Section 438, as part of the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program. Although anecdotal information documents the program's success, this is the first national evaluation of CIP. This study builds on the recommendations of a Children's Bureau funded evaluability assessment (EA) of the program completed in 2003 by James Bell Associates, Inc.

*The National Evaluation of the Court Improvement Program* has three interrelated components:

- **Reviewing and synthesizing state and local court reform activities:** This component is aimed at describing the full range of CIP-funded court reforms undertaken by states. It will provide insights into states' reform priorities and how these shift over time. Especially promising models of reform will be highlighted. Finally, this component will provide important contextual information for a separate study component -- the in-depth evaluation of select reform models.
- **Reviewing and synthesizing existing court reform evaluations:** This component will identify and synthesize findings from research and evaluation conducted to date on family and juvenile court reforms. It will provide important context for the study's in-depth evaluation component in two ways. First, it will provide findings on reform activities beyond those captured within the study sites. Second, it will help inform evaluation within the study sites by providing information on previously conducted evaluations of similar reform models. Evaluations will be prioritized for synthesis based on their methodological rigor and findings reported in the substantive areas defined by the EA.
- **Conducting in-depth studies of reform models:** In-depth evaluation of select models of CIP-supported reform is being undertaken within three diverse sites across the country. The study designs vary among sites, and include quasi-experimental and descriptive outcome methodologies. Reflecting the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, the long-term outcome areas of interest are: child safety, the timely achievement of permanency, and child well-being. Within each site, outcome evaluation is complemented by a qualitative study of the many factors that impacted reform including contextual factors and other related reform efforts, the evolution of the target reform over time, barriers encountered, and methods by which these barriers were overcome. The descrip-

tive analysis will help inform outcome findings within the study sites as well as provide important insights for the replication of the model in other sites.

The three sites selected by the Children's Bureau for in-depth analysis are:

- Connecticut's Case Management Protocol:** Piloted in December 1997, the protocol involves a pre-hearing conference of professionals held early in the dependency court process coupled with expanded parent representation.
- Delaware's Systemic Reform:** Piloted in 2000, the three primary components of the state's comprehensive reform effort are:
  - One judge/one case assignment practice where one judge presides over all legal stages of a dependency case
  - Defined sequence of hearings and reviews that significantly increases the number of hearings and oversight role of the courts
  - Representation for indigent parents in child welfare proceedings
- Texas' Cluster Courts:** Piloted in 1997, these courts are located in rural areas of the state. Each court serves a cluster of contiguous counties, and a specially trained judge is appointed to travel to each county within a cluster on a given day to hear that county's child welfare cases. The cluster courts were formed to enable rural counties to meet the state's strict permanency statute guidelines that were enacted January 1, 1998.

Collectively, findings from the three study components will capture the ongoing nationwide process of court reform supported by the CIP and lessons learned. A technical work group comprised of nationally-known experts and researchers has been assembled to provide input, ensuring that findings are based on sound research and are relevant to the field.

For more information and periodic updates on *The National Evaluation of the Court Improvement Program*, please visit <http://www.pal-tech.com/cip/index.cfm>. If you have any additional questions or comments, please contact:

**Emily Cooke, Federal Project Officer**  
Children's Bureau, HHS  
Switzer Building, Room 2058  
330 C Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20447  
(202) 205-8709  
ecooke@acf.dhhs.gov

**Karl Ensign, Project Director**  
Planning and Learning Technologies, Inc.  
Suite 1000  
1000 Wilson Boulevard  
Arlington, VA  
(703) 243-0495  
kensign@pal-tech.com