

## Court information for resource parents of DC's children

### Attending Court hearings

Attending Court hearings for the first time when you are not represented by counsel can be daunting for anyone.

Federal and District of Columbia law recognize the importance of foster parents' attendance at hearings. Regardless of what you may have been led to believe, your appearance at hearings is important to the well-being of your foster child.

You are legally entitled to written notice of hearings from the Agency, and to be heard at hearings.

There are several different types of hearings in abuse and neglect cases. Most likely you might attend review or permanency hearings. Once a case reaches the permanency stage, reunification is unlikely as federal and District law require the Agency and Court to determine a permanency goal other than reunification at the first permanency hearing.

It is important that you arrive a little early for your hearing. Parking at the Courthouse is generally terrible and there is frequently a line to go through Court security, so plan on giving yourself extra time.

Neglect Courtrooms are generally located on the JM or John Marshall level, which is one level down if you enter from the Indiana Avenue entrance. You can also directly enter the Family Level of the Courthouse from the courtyard area between MPD headquarters and the Courthouse. Courtrooms identified as JM-number are located on the JM level.

Despite the differences in hearings and their purpose, there are certain things that will be the same or similar:

The judge will sit on the bench in the front of the courtroom

Counsel table is across from the judge.

The government attorney (Assistant Attorney General or AAG) will stand at counsel table, along with the social worker, the lawyer for the mother and the mother, the lawyer for the father and the father, the Guardian Ad Litem (for the child). There may be others, like a psychologist or social worker from another agency. You should be aware that the AAG represents the Agency.

The courtroom clerk sits next to the judge. When you arrive at the hearing, you should let the courtroom clerk know who you are and what hearing you are there for. If you have questions about logistics, and there is time before the hearing, you can ask the courtroom clerk. You

should sit in the audience area of the Courtroom toward the front, unless the judge instructs you otherwise.

The judge will walk into the courtroom and everyone must stand until told to be seated. The judge will ask everyone to identify themselves and their relationship to the child. After everyone at counsel table identifies themselves, you should stand and give your name and relationship to the child.

If you are concerned that the birth parents' learning your name will jeopardize the safety of the child, then you can let the courtroom clerk know before the hearing starts and ask that you be able to refer to yourself by initials only. You may need to reiterate this with the judge once the hearing begins.

Depending on what is going on in the case and the purpose of the hearing, you may be permitted to stay for the entire hearing or you may be asked to temporarily leave the courtroom while issues confidential to the parents are discussed. Until you are made a party to the case by order of the court, you are not entitled to copies of court orders or to receive information about the family that is deemed confidential.

When you have the opportunity to speak, you should be prepared to raise each one of the issues you want to discuss. If necessary, you can make a list of all the issues that you want to cover. You should expect to tell the judge about what is going on in the child's life with respect to topics such as home life, school, activities, medical and dental information, services the child is receiving or should be receiving, asking for services that the child needs. You may also voice your dissatisfaction with services or how the agency is responding to the child's needs or to your needs with regard to the child (untimely provision of clothing vouchers, failure to respond to calls or requests), and your concerns with the GAL's responsiveness to the child, among other issues. If you are presenting information concerning claims of ineffective responses by social workers or attorneys, it is important that this information be presented as neutrally as possible and focused on professional performance and not personality.

Each topic you raise will be discussed individually, so it will be important to have your list to refer to as each issue is resolved.

It will be important for you to maintain your composure. Avoid interrupting the judge or others, don't take parents' or others' reactions or responses personally. Remember, you are providing care for the child, so you are the best source of information to the Court. Make sure that you write down the date and time of the next hearing, which will be set at the end of the hearing.