

As part of our work consolidating the domestic relations court in Cook County, Chicago Appleseed advocated for the expansion of the county's hearing officer program. Hearing officers are non-judicial officers who work with parents to meet their families' needs in a non-adversarial setting. After consolidation of the court, hearing officers were placed in the branch courts on a limited basis to great success.

Coinciding with the consolidation, funding for the hearing officers moved into the County budget and away from federal funding under Title IV-D of the Social Security Act. This greatly expanded the hearing officers' ability to help families by not only drafting appropriate court orders for child support and DNA testing for paternity, but also through helping parents reach agreement about parenting time and other parental responsibilities.

Unfortunately, uncertainties in the county budget threatened the program almost as soon as it began. Fortunately, judges in the division and the Chief Judge spoke in favor of the program and it has been preserved. Expansion of the hearing officer program—and preservation of funding for the program—is a victory not just for the court but also for the approximately 500,000 families seeking child support through the courts in Illinois.

Bringing hearing officers into the branch courts greatly improved the process for parents and judges alike. One judge in the branch courts said of the program "It's necessary here" because the volume of cases and percentage of pro se cases is so high. The judge noted that the program does not reduce the number of cases in the division, but gets families through the process much more quickly, reducing return dates and shortening time to resolution of cases by two months on average. More parents are able to get their cases resolved in a single day or with only a single return date for entry of a divorce judgment.

Innovations in family courts often focus on reducing barriers for people who don't have attorneys to represent them. Feedback regarding the program in the branch courts indicates that having a hearing officer makes the process efficient, professional and more relaxed for parents without attorneys. Although the hearing officer is empowered to swear witnesses, takes testimony and find facts, the officer can only draft orders—they must be entered and approved by a judge. Therefore the hearing officer process is nonadversarial and more flexible than a traditional court hearing. It encourages resolution through explanation and reduces delay not only by preparing clear orders for the court but also by setting clear expectations for parents for their final appearance before the judge.

Improving courts improves the lives of the people who turn to the courts for help. At Chicago Appleseed, we work closely with the courts to ensure the process serves not only justice but the dignity of the people who pass through them. The hearing officer option in the domestic relations courts promotes these ends.

