**Court Improvement Initiative August 2021**

**Appalachian Judicial Circuit Report**

The Appalachian Judicial Circuit has two full-time judges, Judges Jan Wheeler and Keith Galligan. Judge Wheeler handles the dependency and occasionally Superior Court cases and Judge Galligan does delinquency, CHINS, and has regular Superior Court calendars in each county.

Our circuit consists of three rural counties: Fannin, Gilmer and Pickens with a combined population of approximately 90,000.

Circuit wide we have a total of 149 children in foster case. Each of the three counties has a separate DFCS office with its own Director and staff. We do not have a Citizen Review Panel program so all reviews are done in court.

Our Family Treatment Court numbers are low, currently 22 with four to five more in the screening process. We had a virtual graduation on August 5 where six participants graduated. We have an FTC coordinator and one case manager. Our participants attend many of the same treatment classes as other accountability court participants in our circuit. In addition, we started a live Celebrating Families class for FTC participants in late April, 2021. The current program serves ten families. Prior to this class we offered the Strengthening Families program but shut down during the pandemic.

We have a very active CASA program with 60 active volunteers serving 147 children. CASA recruitment and training has been surprisingly good during the pandemic and we are still attracting very dedicated volunteers. Three new volunteers begin training on August 16 and another eight have signed up for the October training for new volunteers.

We have been doing approximately 85-90% of our dependency cases and Family Treatment Court cases virtually since the beginning of April 2020. Attorneys, DFCS, FTC staff, and court staff have all adapted well to the virtual environment. As most other courts have, we’ve found that we get more participation from children placed out of county and foster parents than in the live hearings. Many of the parties and witnesses in the cases appreciate not having to take an entire day off from work or school to attend court. The process also seems to be more efficient in that attorneys appear to be better prepared and more focused. We continue to conduct contested TPRs, adjudications and legitimations live. This year we added 13 court days to our normal calendar for dependency hearings.

We are in an area with fairly low vaccine rates so we have had numerous COVID outbreaks in the three courthouses. We started doing live FTC reviews in June but by the beginning of August had to return to virtual due to COVID. Although our participants miss the live interaction, for the most part they have adapted well to the virtual hearings. The drug of choice for our circuit continues to be methamphetamine.

Another challenge we face is affordable housing. During the pandemic tourism increased significantly in our circuit which resulted in many landlords abandoning long term rentals in favor of more lucrative vacation rentals. In addition we have very little public housing and virtually no public transportation.

To end on a positive note, all concerned in the Juvenile Court system have continued to work diligently and patiently to make this process work for the children and families in our community. Our “team” pulled together early in the pandemic to keep court going and because of that we don’t have the backlog many other classes of courts are facing.