



Court Information

Thirteenth Judicial Circuit

Unified Family Court is a fully integrated, comprehensive approach to handling all cases involving children and families, while at the same time resolving family disputes in a fair, timely, efficient, and cost effective manner.

Since 1991, a series of Florida Supreme Court opinions have been instrumental in establishing Unified Family Courts throughout the state.

The Commission on Family Courts or Commission was established by the legislature. That legislation directed the Commission to: (1) develop specific guidelines for the implementation of a family law division within each judicial circuit; (2) provide recommendations for statutory, rule and organizational changes; and (3) recommend necessary support services.

The Florida Supreme Court created the Family Court Steering Committee whose goal was the creation of "a fully integrated, comprehensive approach to handling all cases involving children and families, while at the same time resolving family disputes in a fair, timely, efficient, and cost-effective manner.

The Family Court Steering Committee submitted a report to the Supreme Court in May, 2001 that outlined their proposal for a model family court. That model is now referred to as the Unified Family Court.

The following guiding principles and characteristics of the model family court were endorsed by the Supreme Court:

1. Children should live in safe and permanent homes.
2. The needs and best interests of children should be the primary consideration of any family court.
3. All persons, whether children or adults, should be treated with objectivity, sensitivity, dignity and respect.
4. Cases involving inter-related family law issues should be consolidated or coordinated to maximize use of court resources to avoid conflicting decisions and to minimize inconvenience to the families.
5. Therapeutic justice should be a key part of the family court process. Therapeutic justice is a process that attempts to address the family's interrelated legal and non legal problems to produce a result that improves the family's functioning. The process should empower families through skills development, assist them to resolve their own disputes, provide access to appropriate services, and offer a variety of dispute resolution forums where the family can resolve problems without additional emotional trauma.
6. Whenever possible, parties and their attorneys should be empowered to select processes for addressing issues in their cases that are compatible with the family's needs, financial circumstances, and legal requirements.

7. The court is responsible for managing its cases with due consideration of the needs of the family, the litigants, and the issues presented by the case.
8. There should be a means of differentiating among cases so that judicial resources are conserved and cases are diverted to non-judicial and quasi-judicial personnel for resolution, when appropriate and consistent with the ends of justice.
9. Trial courts must coordinate and maximize the need for subsequent court action.
10. The Court's role in family restructuring is to identify services and craft solutions that are appropriate for long-term stability and that minimize the need for subsequent court action.
11. Court services should be available to litigants at a reasonable cost and accessible without economic discrimination.
12. Courts should have well trained and highly motivated judicial and non-judicial personnel.

The following twelve elements are essential to a model family court:

1. Case Management – supervising, coordinating, directing, and overseeing the process and progress of a case.
2. Self Help Programs – Providing intake, screening, and procedural guidance to self-represented litigants in family law cases.
3. Domestic Violence – Ensuring that cases involving domestic violence are identified and managed in a manner that is organized, timely and sensitive to the special dynamics involved in these cases.
4. Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) – Offering alternatives to reduce the trauma of traditional adversarial litigation process.
5. Guardian ad Litem – Utilizing guardians ad litem in all family cases involving abused, abandoned or neglected children, and children at risk of harm.
6. General Magistrates/Hearing Officers – Using quasi-judicial officers to expedite hearings and expand judicial resources.
7. Custody Evaluation – Providing the court with evaluative information in proceedings involving custody disputes.
8. Supervised Visitation – Promoting the utilization of qualified programs for supervised visitation and/or monitored exchange.
9. Education Programs for Parents – utilizing education programs for parents involved in family law proceedings.
10. Counseling Services/ Treatment Programs – Assuring the availability of crisis intervention and long-term counseling/treatment programs and ensuring the compliance is monitored when such services are court ordered.
11. Security – Providing adequate and sufficient security personnel and equipment to ensure the family divisions ate safe environments for judges, non-judicial staff, and the public.
12. Technology – Providing computer hardware, systems and training to access information essential to case management and coordination, to print forms and notices immediately, and to generate statistical reports, to provide public and inter-agency access to records, and to allow teleconferencing and appearance of witnesses by electronic means.

Click here for a link to the State Court's Brochure on Unified Family Court
http://www.flcourts.org/gen_public/family/bin/ufcbrochure.pdf