



IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF THE FOURTEENTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT  
OF THE STATE OF FLORIDA

ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER # 2004-00-02

RE: UNIFIED FAMILY COURT

Whereas, the Supreme Court of Florida endorsed the implementation of a unified family division consistent with the "Coordinated Management" model in the circuit court of Florida **In re: Report of the Family Court Steering Committee**, 794 So. 2<sup>nd</sup> 518 (Fla 2001);

Whereas, the Fourteenth Judicial Circuit is committed to developing and implementing a fully integrated, comprehensive approach to handling all cases involving children and families;

Whereas, Rule 2.050 (3), Florida Rules of Judicial Administration, directs the chief judge to develop an administrative plan for the efficient and proper administration of all courts within the circuit, and the plan shall include an administrative organization capable of effecting the prompt disposition of cases;

Whereas, the implementation of a management model which fosters the concept of "one family, one judge" to coordinate multiple cases involving one family will maximize court resources and avoid conflicting decisions; and

Whereas, it is necessary to establish procedures, which will effectively resolve disputes involving children and families in a fair and efficient manner;

Now Therefore, it is **ORDERED** and **ADJUDGED** the following procedures related to a Unified Family Court throughout the Fourteenth Judicial Circuit:

**I. JURISDICTION**

Court assignments related to family court within the Fourteenth Circuit shall include, at a minimum, the following types of cases:

- dissolution of marriage
- division and distribution of property and indebtedness arising out of a dissolution of marriage

- annulment
- support unconnected with dissolution of marriage
- paternity
- child support
- URESA/UIFSA
- custodial care and access to children
- adoption
- name change
- actions related to premarital, marital, or post-marital agreements
- civil domestic and repeat violence injunctions
- juvenile dependency (abused, abandoned, and neglected)
- termination of parental rights
- juvenile delinquency
- emancipation of a minor
- CINS/FINS (truants, runaways, and ungovernables)
- modification and enforcement of orders entered in these cases

## **II. JUDICIAL ADMINISTRATION**

The Administrative Civil/Family Judge provides oversight and supervision of family court cases and offers vision and direction to appropriate staff in such a manner as to accomplish the objectives of a coordinated management model as recommended by the Supreme Court of Florida. This court recognizes, however, the need for several additional staff members to assist judges in order to guarantee the goals of a unified family court system are accomplished within the Fourteenth Judicial Circuit. In this regard, continued effort will be made for additional funding as it becomes available.

## **III. CASE ASSIGNMENT**

In all counties of this circuit, there shall be established a means to coordinate those matters set forth in Section I (hereinafter: "family matters") that affect one family. Judicial assignments to accomplish this goal shall be as follows: In Bay County, four circuit judges shall be assigned to handle family matters, of which one shall handle contempt hearings to child support matters, delinquency, dependency and termination of parental rights, and URESA/UIFSA family matters. Additionally, one circuit judge will handle civil domestic and repeat violence proceedings as a portion of his or her docket. In all other counties in the circuit, the one family/one team approach shall be used when assigning judges to handle family matters.

In keeping with the Unified Family Court concept, if any family law case(s), as specified above, involve a child(ren) who is subject to a dependency proceeding, such case(s) shall be assigned to the juvenile judge. The juvenile judge shall then handle any future family law case involving said child while that child is involved in the dependency system.

#### **IV. ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS**

##### **A. CASE MANAGEMENT**

To the extent existing staff and resources can be allocated, the judges assigned to handle family law cases shall receive case management services and support to enable judges to assess, differentiate, and monitor the resources needed for handling cases, to be able to identify all related cases affecting the parties involved, and to monitor the movement of cases through the judicial process. Case management shall include initial review and evaluation of cases; case monitoring, tracking and coordination; and service referral, coordination and monitoring for compliance of court orders. The case managers shall oversee the circuit's family law self-help programs and also serve as civil domestic violence case coordinators.

##### **B. SELF-HELP PROGRAM**

Self-help programs are available in all six counties in the circuit. Two case managers currently serve all six counties. They provide procedural information to the public for filing actions involving various family law matters, provide community resource information and referrals, maintain pro se dockets, attend pro se hearings upon the request of the court, and generally review cases filed by unrepresented litigants and provide feedback to assist them through the court process.

##### **C. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

The Administrative Civil/Family Judge shall work with other judges to develop a policy to ensure that cases involving civil domestic and repeat violence are identified and managed in a manner that is organized, timely and sensitive to the special dynamics involved in these cases.

##### **D. ALTERNATIVE DISPUTE RESOLUTION**

Alternative dispute resolution (ADR) is presently funded in Bay County for litigants who qualify as indigent involved in all contested dissolution of marriage, paternity, child support and contested modifications proceedings. ADR is also available for indigent parties in dependency and termination of parental rights cases. The court, and any staff member designated by the court to conduct case management, should screen cases before a referral to ADR is made to ensure that cases with allegations of domestic violence and parties with prior injunctions for protection are identified. The court shall determine whether a referral to ADR is appropriate if the parties involved have a history of domestic violence.

The judges in each county of the circuit encourage dispute resolution of family law matters through the use of mediation. Upon receipt of adequate funding, it is the goal of the circuit to provide ADR services in all family law matters in all six counties of the circuit.

#### **E. GUARDIAN AD LITEM (GAL)**

Guardian ad Litem Programs exist in all six counties of the Fourteenth Judicial Circuit. GAL provides invaluable assistance to the judges handling juvenile cases and is routinely appointed in dependency cases where a need is recognized.

#### **F. GENERAL MASTERS/HEARING OFFICERS**

The Circuit has a part-time Title IV-D Child Support Hearing Officer. The Fourteenth Circuit supports the use of general masters and hearing officers for all family matters and will continue to seek funding for such positions as it becomes available.

#### **G. CUSTODY EVALUATION**

When such referrals are made, it is the policy of the Fourteenth Judicial Circuit to use appropriately credentialed custody evaluators.

#### **H. SUPERVISED VISITATION**

Supervised visitation centers are currently available in Bay County for visitation resulting from a dissolution or marriage, paternity or dependency case. Supervised visitation is available in the remaining counties of the circuit; however, referrals must be made through the Department of Children and Families and the parties must be involved in an active dependency case. It is the goal of the circuit to encourage the creation of new visitation centers in other strategic locations throughout the Fourteenth Judicial Circuit to provide maximum access to families who, because of transportation problems, are unable to travel to Bay County.

#### **I. EDUCATION PROGRAMS FOR PARENTS**

Pursuant to section 61.21, Florida Statutes, all parties to a dissolution of marriage proceeding with minor children or a paternity action which involves issues of parental responsibility shall be required to complete the parent education and stabilization course, approved by the Department of Children and Families, prior to the entry of the court's final judgment.

#### **J. COUNSELING SERVICES/TREATMENT PROGRAMS**

Currently, family and group counseling services used in family law matters include batterers' intervention programs and mental health and substance abuse programs. Under the leadership of the Administrative Civil/Family Judge, the Fourteenth Judicial Circuit will develop strategies to ensure availability of counseling services and treatment programs to litigants in the Family Law Division in all counties of the circuit. At a minimum, the strategies should ensure that compliance is monitored when services are court-ordered.

## K. SECURITY

The judges are acutely aware of the special security problems attendant to family law matters. In order to effectuate the highest level of safety for litigants, court personnel and the general public which frequents the courthouse, each judge remains cognizant of safety systems within the courthouse and liaisons with local law enforcement.

## L. TECHNOLOGY

The ultimate success of a unified family court system within a large geographical area such as the Fourteenth Circuit is directly associated with a state of the art information retrieval and exchange system. The circuit utilizes local area networks within each county and has developed a wide area network (WAN) which serves four of its six counties - Bay, Jackson, Calhoun and Gulf Counties. Through this WAN the court can access, through Internet and video teleconferencing, these four locations and can conduct court business in an efficient, effective and economical manner.

Moreover, the Bay County Clerk of Court is developing an imaging system so that case files can be viewed on-line allowing each document within a case file to be examined via the computer. Also, all six county Clerks are part of the Court Case Information System (CCIS) which provides on-line access to cases throughout the six-county circuit. While the CCIS system does not yet provide document scanning, it does allow for judges and staff to review previous and current case histories which assists the court in making decisions.

**DONE AND ORDERED** in Chambers in Bay County, Florida, this 21 day of  
January, 2004.

  
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**JUDY M. PITTMAN, CHIEF JUDGE**