

JUDICIARY COMMISSION ON CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

- (a) The general assembly recognizes that there is a tremendous need for response through the courts to the scourge of opiate abuse that has overtaken Vermont's children and families resulting in a tremendous increase in filings of child abuse and neglect and termination of parental rights cases in our courts throughout the State.
- (b) The general assembly recognizes that the allocation of resources in judicial proceedings devoted to child abuse and neglect and TPR cases (termination of parental rights), including attorneys, DCF, judges, staff, and operating expenses are controlled to a great degree by statute and do not always allow flexibility to meet Vermont's constitutional responsibilities to children and families in a timely and effective manner. The general assembly also recognizes that technology and other resources provide opportunities to increase efficiencies in processing cases, while improving timely access to judicial proceedings to families and children in need. And the general assembly recognizes that an effort to evaluate reform measures with input from all interested parties involved in the litigation of these cases will improve access to justice.
- (c) In order to develop specific proposals for consideration of the general assembly, the general assembly requests the supreme court, subject to the availability of funding to provide dedicated staff and research support, to appoint and convene a commission on child protection and parental rights cases, and judicial operations, to consist of members representing judicial, legislative and executive branches of government and persons representing the citizens of Vermont in a number to be determined by the court. The Chief Justice shall appoint the chair. The commission shall expire on June 30, 2017. The commission shall from time to time make recommendations by report to the senate and house committees on judiciary and appropriations, the house committee on human services and the senate committee on health & welfare. By January 15, 2017, the commission shall submit an interim report to those committees with specific proposals regarding subdivisions of this section with accompanying draft legislation to implement those proposals and a final report by May 1, 2017, which shall address all the following areas:
 - (1) Dedicated court staff, attorney, DCF, GAL and judge resources;
 - (2) Business reprocessing of child protection and parental rights procedures, laws and rules;
 - (3) Use of technology such as video to increase litigant access and reduce unnecessary expense to litigants including transportation, lost work time, lost school time and any other measure suitable in the judgment of the commission, while improving access and maintaining quality adjudication;
 - (4) Alternative hearing space recommendations including Saturday and weekday evening hearings and mobile courtroom;
 - (5) Flexibility in the use of resources to respond to the elastic, changeable demands for judicial and legal services in child abuse and parental rights cases; and

(6) Any other idea for the efficient and effective delivery of judicial services in child abuse and neglect and termination of parental rights cases.