

DuPage County Family Center Neutral Exchange Program

DuPage County is located in northern Illinois, west of Cook County. According to the US Census Bureau, the 2004 estimated population is 928,718 with a land area of 334 square miles. In 2004, 1,868 Emergency Orders of Protection, 403 Interim Orders of Protection and 880 Plenary Orders of Protection were entered into the Law Enforcement Administrative Data System (LEADS).

The following information was gathered through an interview process with local key stakeholders describing the formation, procedures and needs of the DuPage County Family Center Neutral Exchange Program. The following people were interviewed for the purpose of this report:

- **Honorable Rodney Equi**, Presiding Judge, Family Court, *18th Judicial Circuit*
- **Sheila Murphy-Russell**, Director, *DuPage County Family Center*

Development of the Dupage County Family Center Neutral Exchange Program

DuPage County began exploring the possibility of implementing an exchange program in December 2000 with the passage of state statute Public Act 91-0811 (**55 ILCS 82**) that gave county boards the authority to assess a filing fee on all civil cases to fund exchange programs.

DuPage County had already been providing supervised visitation through a grant from Illinois Department of Human Services since September 1998. This is an access and visitation program for parents who were never married in order to provide an opportunity for non-residential parents to visit with their children. As part of this program, a Leadership Council was established that included representatives from law enforcement, judges, and social service agencies to provide support and information sharing regarding the program.

The Leadership Council identified the need for an exchange program due to the large number of high conflict divorces and domestic violence related cases. The concept of the exchange program was to provide a safe environment that would protect the children of families both physically and emotionally.

The Director of the Family Center visited the exchange program at Heritage House in St. Louis, Missouri and received assistance in setting up the DuPage County Family Center Neutral Exchange Program. The DuPage County judges and attorneys were in support of the Exchange Program because it gave them another alternative when handling cases with visitation issues. Law enforcement and the chiefs of police were also supportive of the Exchange Program because it would help to eliminate the need for law enforcement intervention during visitation exchanges that were occurring in police departments and fast food restaurants.

First, a proposal was presented to the Health and Human Service Committee of the DuPage County Board and subsequently to the entire Board. In January 2001, the DuPage County Board established a filing fee for each civil case to provide funding for the Exchange Program. The Circuit Clerk began collecting fees in January 2001 and the DuPage County Family Center Neutral Exchange Program opened in June 2003. Funds collected before it opened were used to prepare the site. Currently, the Exchange Program serves about 60 families a month.

Program Administration

The DuPage County Department of Human Resources administers the DuPage County Family Center Neutral Exchange Program.

Site/Location

The DuPage County Family Center Neutral Exchange Program is located at the DuPage County Family Center in Wheaton. Four programs share the space and the overhead costs of the facility.

The site has two separate entrances with a locked hallway between the two waiting areas. A receptionist is located at each door and a uniformed security officer is present inside the building. The hours for exchanges are Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays from 4:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., Saturdays from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and Sundays from 3:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

Security

There is a uniformed security officer at the DuPage County Family Center Neutral Exchange Program during exchanges.

Funding

The DuPage County Board approved an \$8.00 fee for each civil case filing. The DuPage County Family Center Neutral Exchange Program shares overhead costs with the three other programs located at the Family Center.

The Family Center also received donations from a bank and a home improvement store to help furnish the waiting areas and install cabinets.

Staffing

There are three DuPage County contractual social workers that staff the DuPage County Family Center Neutral Exchange Program. During exchange hours there are two social workers and two receptionists from the Family Center present.

Protocols/Procedures

Types of cases

All families that use the DuPage County Family Center Neutral Exchange Program are court ordered and have either an order of protection that includes the neutral exchange site or a separate neutral exchange order.

Parents who wish to use the Exchange Program but do not have a court order can file a motion with the court at the Circuit Clerk's Office and request a hearing. Once a hearing is granted, the judge may issue a court order for the exchange to be made at the Exchange Program.

Procedures

Intake

- The court order has contact information for the Exchange Program and states that the parents must call to schedule an intake.
- Both parents are interviewed separately. Information gathered includes contact information for parent, relationship between the parents, ages and names of children and brief social history.

- Other information gathered is on court proceedings including orders of protection, status of visitation and history of family violence.
- Each parent reviews and signs the Exchange Program rules.
- A picture is taken of each parent and the parent's driver's license is copied (a picture of the child is taken prior to the first exchange) and added to the file for identification purposes.

Exchange Process

- The custodial parent and child arrive through the west entrance 15 minutes before the exchange. The custodial parent then stays 15 minutes after the exchange.
- The non-custodial parent arrives through the east entrance at the time of the exchange and leaves immediately with the child.
- When returning the child, the non-custodial parent and child arrive 15 minutes before the exchange and the non-custodial parent remains 15 minutes after the exchange.
- The custodial parent arrives at time of exchange and leaves immediately with the child.
- Each parent has an identifying bar code that is scanned when they arrive and depart which records the times of check-in and check-out.
- The Exchange Program has forms for the parents to complete if there are specific instructions or information for the non-custodial parent such as medication for the child or homework instructions. Information shared between parents at the Exchange Program must be related to the child. The staff will only pass written instructions between parents but will not pass on verbal instructions or messages to parents.
- When children do not want to go with the other parent, staff relies on the relationship between the parent and child to encourage the child to go. The staff person will take the child to see the other parent and often when they see the other parent they are willing to go. If the child does not want to go after talking with the parent the visit is cancelled and the facilitator notes what the child said in the file notes.

Records and Reporting

A status report is submitted to the court after the first 90 days a family has participated in the Exchange Program. Subsequently, reports are only submitted if parents do not comply with the court order or the Exchange Program policies. Reports are faxed the next day to the judge for review and placed in the court file for the next status hearing. If there is significant non-compliance the judge can schedule a hearing and can alter the court order.

Additionally, exchange histories on each case are maintained in a database. A file containing court orders, intake information, receipts indicating check-in and check-out times, progress notes, observation records from each exchange, and court reports are maintained for each family.

Other Services Provided

Services available at the DuPage County Family Center include mediation for never married parents, court ordered supervised visitation for never married parents with child support cases, court ordered parent education for never married parents and parents going through a divorce.

Data Collection

Data collected by the DuPage County Family Center Neutral Exchange Program includes demographic information such as ethnic backgrounds, education, income and occupations of the parents.

Advisory Committee

The DuPage County Family Center Neutral Exchange Program advisory committee meets twice a year. The Director plans to add additional members to the committee including family law attorneys working with families using the Exchange Program.

Promotion/Marketing

The DuPage County Family Center Neutral Exchange Program has brochures describing services provided that are displayed in the Domestic Relations Office in the courthouse used by mediators, evaluators and attorneys. The brochures are also distributed to courtrooms, judges, domestic violence advocates and the Circuit Clerk's Office. Information about the Exchange Program is published in the DuPage County Bar Association newsletter.

The Director of the Family Center meets with the domestic relations judges monthly to discuss information and issues for the four programs of the Family Center. This provides an opportunity to inform the judges of the service provided by the Exchange Program.

Needs

The Family Court Presiding Judge and Director of the Family Center expressed interest in future services that could include neutral exchange sites in more locations, free counseling for families, pro bono attorneys available for parents, support groups for children, and skill based conflict resolution groups. These services could assist families and their children in dealing with difficult situations.