

## **St. Clair County Visitation Exchange Centers**

St. Clair County is located in the southwest portion of Illinois, about 20 minutes east of St. Louis, Missouri. According to the US Census Bureau, the 2004 estimated population of St. Clair County is 259,132 with a land area of 664 square miles. In 2004, 700 Emergency Orders of Protection, 21 Interim Orders of Protection and 92 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 St. Clair County Visitation Exchange Centers. The following people were interviewed for the purpose of this report:

- **Katherine Claudson**, Director, *Children First Foundation*
- **Honorable Annette Eckert**, Circuit Judge, *20<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit*

### **Development of the St. Clair County Visitation Exchange Centers**

The exchange site was an effort of Judge Annette Eckert and the Twentieth Judicial Circuit Family Violence Coordinating Council (FVCC). The exchange site was implemented because incidents were occurring during exchanges between parents with high conflict divorces and domestic violence issues. The community wanted a safe place where children could be exchanged for visits and a place where parents did not have an opportunity to interact with each other. An exchange center would give family court judges an alternative to assigning visitation exchanges at police stations and fast food restaurants. In addition, it would cut down on law enforcement intervention since they are often called for disturbances during exchanges.

Then Chief Judge Stephen Kernan was supportive of the exchange site proposal and approved a committee to help establish an exchange center. The committee included the Violence Prevention Center of Southwestern Illinois, TASC, St. Elizabeth's Hospital, law enforcement departments, Children First Foundation and the Twentieth Judicial Circuit FVCC. In January 2000, the first site of the St. Clair County Visitation Exchange Centers opened in Belleville. It was later determined that a second site was necessary to meet the needs of the community. An additional site opened in January 2001 in Centreville. The two Centers currently serve 63 families a month.

### **Program Administration**

The Children First Foundation was designated to administer the St. Clair County Visitation Exchange Centers and receives funding from the Twentieth Judicial Circuit to operate the Exchange Centers. Quarterly reports are sent to the St. Clair County Mental Health Board (which acts as the supervisory agency) including financial activity and information such as number of exchanges. The reports are then given to the County Auditor's Office.

### **Site/Location**

One of the St. Clair County Visitation Exchange Centers is located at the St. Elizabeth Hospital in Belleville. The hospital donated space for the Exchange Center because they believed it fit their goal of providing services in the community. The hospital has two entrances and two separate parking lots. The second site is located at Touchette Regional Hospital in Centreville.

It also has separate entrances and parking lots. The hospitals provide two meeting rooms for the exchanges.

Exchanges are provided Wednesdays at St. Elizabeth's from 4:00 p.m. to 7:45 p.m. and at both sites on Fridays and Sundays from 5:00 p.m. to 7:45 p.m.

### **Security**

A security officer arrives at both Exchange Centers at the beginning of the exchanges and remains until all the parents have left the facility and parking areas. Staff is trained to use a breathalyzer machine if they suspect someone is intoxicated. In addition, the hospital is also equipped with video cameras.

### **Funding**

The St. Clair County Board passed a \$5.00 filing fee for each civil case in order to fund the St. Clair County Visitation Exchange Centers. The Exchange Center also received a one-time start up grant of \$5,000 from the Illinois Bar Association in May 1999 and a \$15,000 grant from the United Way of Greater St. Louis in October 1999.

### **Staffing**

The Children First Foundation hires and trains staff and oversees the exchanges. There is one social worker and a security officer present for each exchange session. The staff receives training at the St. Clair County Visitation Exchange Centers on policies, program rules, agency orientation, the database, and domestic violence. In addition, graduate students from MSW programs usually assist (one or two may be present).

### **Protocols/Procedures**

#### *Types of cases*

A court order is required for parents to use the St. Clair County Visitation Exchange Centers. Parents who wish to use the Exchange Centers 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 one of the Exchange Centers.

#### *Procedures*

##### **Intake**

Parents are ordered to use the Exchange Centers by the court and are told to contact Children First Foundation to set up an intake:

- Copies of the court orders are mailed or faxed to the Children First Foundation.
- Intakes are done in a group orientation session at the Children First Foundation office in Belleville. Parents are never in the same group and orientation intakes are done on an as needed basis.
- The intake session is one hour and includes completing personal information forms that include contact information and a review of the rules and procedures, which they sign and receive copies.
- A picture of the parent is taken along with the child at the first visitation exchange for identification purposes.

- Only the parents are allowed to pick up the child unless the court order lists any additional persons.

### Exchange Process

- The non-custodial parent arrives 15 minutes before the exchange through one entrance.
- The custodial parent arrives with the child at the appointed time and enters through a separate entrance. The staff confirms the non-custodial parent has arrived and the custodial parent leaves.
- Staff walks the child to the non-custodial parent.
- The non-custodial parent and child wait 15 minutes before leaving. There are art supplies, books and child-appropriate videos available during this time.
- The process is then repeated when the child is returned.
- The non-custodial parent and child arrive 15 minutes before the exchange.
- The custodial parent arrives at time of exchange, picks up child and leaves.
- The non-custodial parent waits 15 minutes before they leave.

### *Records and Reporting*

The court reviews cases annually. Additional reports are prepared and sent to the court if a client is not in compliance with the court order or they are not following the policies and procedures of the Exchange Centers. The report is reviewed by the judge and filed for next status hearing. If the judge feels it is necessary a status hearing will be scheduled.

### **Other Services Provided**

There are no other services provided by the St. Clair County Visitation Exchange Centers. However, other community resources are given to parents at orientation.

### **Data Collection**

The St. Clair County Visitation Exchange Centers collect limited demographic data on parents.

### **Advisory Committee**

Initially, the St. Clair County Visitation Exchange Centers had an advisory board, but currently one is not in existence. The Board of Directors of Children First Foundation provides oversight for the Exchange Centers. The Board includes family attorneys, family judges, mental health professionals, educators, and social service administrators.

### **Promotion/Marketing**

Marketing is focused on the courts since most cases derive from court referrals. Brochures regarding the St. Clair County Visitation Exchange Centers are distributed to family court judges, family law attorneys, local social service agencies and are also available at the courthouse.

### **Needs**

The St. Clair County Visitation Exchange Centers is exploring providing parent education during the wait time before and after exchanges.