

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JUVENILE AND FAMILY COURT JUDGES

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ASSESSING TIME-CERTAIN CALENDARING DOCKETS

There is not one nationally utilized method of calendaring dependency court cases. Rather, there are four common calendaring methods used to schedule these case types. These include (1) Block time, (2) Time-certain, (3) Combination of block and time-certain, and (4) so-called “Cattle calls.” The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) Resource Guidelines strongly recommends that all dependency hearings be set for time-certain calendaring. Time-certain calendaring can help reduce wait times to 20 to 60 minutes for parents, children, and court stakeholders (e.g., CASA and agency attorney). This reduction in wait time can, potentially, allow for more cases to be heard, decreased workload for dependency stakeholders, and decreased additional stressors (e.g., loss of work days) for families.

To date, no research has been conducted on such systems based on the court experiences of those who utilize the system: parents and court stakeholders. The current study focuses on the Travis County Model Court for Children and Families. Because Travis County has implemented time-certain calendaring for over a decade, it was chosen to examine the timeliness and efficiency of such a calendaring system from the perspective of its consumers. The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, the study assessed efficiency of time-certain calendaring. Second, perceptions of court calendaring system were assessed via parents and court stakeholder surveys.

Time certain calendaring schedules a hearing at a specific time (e.g., 9:00am). The Resource Guidelines strongly recommends this calendaring structure to reduce wait times and better engage families.

Key Findings

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- Average wait time for hearings was 40 minutes.
- Parents who reported waiting less than an hour were more satisfied with their court experience compared to those who reported waiting 1-2 hours.
- Parents were less satisfied with their wait time, compared to their overall court experience.
- Stakeholders felt the current system reduces case continuances and were generally pleased with their overall court experience.
- More variability in stakeholder agreement about whether the current system increases efficiency or reduces wait times for parties.

RESULTS

Hearing Wait Time, Length, and Differences

On average, parties waited 40 minutes for their hearing to begin. The range in how long parties waited for their hearing to begin, however, was as little as two minutes to as long as 110 minutes. Furthermore, hearings, on average, were approximately 12 minutes in duration. Hearings were as brief as one minute and as lengthy as 47 minutes.

Results indicated that there was no significant difference in wait time by hearing type. This finding suggests that how long the parties waited for their hearing to begin was not dependent upon the type of hearing that was scheduled. Furthermore, there was no significant difference in hearing length by hearing type. Thus, hearing length did not increase or decrease depending on the type of hearing that was scheduled.

Parent Surveys

Parents indicated the highest level of agreement with the statement “the judge treated me with respect”, and lowest level of agreement with the statement “I am satisfied with the wait time for my hearing.” The majority of participants (89%) indicated preferring that their hearing be held during the day. Sixty seven percent of participants reported waiting less than one hour for their hearing to be heard, followed by 33% who reported their waiting time to be between one and two hours for their hearing. Roughly 24% of participants reported that their hearing was postponed for another day and over 47% of participants reported taking time off work to attend their hearing. Additionally, 33% reported needing childcare in order to attend their hearing.

Furthermore, results indicated that there were significant positive correlations between participants who reported satisfaction with their wait time and their satisfaction with the judge’s decision, their attorney, feeling respected by the judge, and overall satisfaction with court experience. In other words, as satisfaction increases so does the satisfaction with judge’s decisions, attorneys, feeling respected, and overall satisfaction with court experience.

Stakeholder Surveys

All professional stakeholders were provided an opportunity to participate in the survey. Overall, there was a high level of agreement with the statement “I believe the calendaring system used in my jurisdiction is effective in decreasing the number of case continuances.” Stakeholders were in less agreement regarding whether the current calendaring system is effective in reducing wait times for parties.

Research Snapshots highlight key elements of reports and projects that address the need for empirically-based research on systems change in the juvenile and family court system. For more information, please visit our website: www.ncjfcj.org

The mission of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges is to provide all judges, courts, and related agencies involved with juvenile, family, and domestic violence cases with the knowledge and skills to improve the lives of families and children who seek justice.

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