



Private Dependency Petition Diversion initiative empowers families

In 2017, DHS began the Private Dependency Petition Diversion initiative, an opportunity to connect parents and caregivers with resources to strengthen their families while avoiding deeper child welfare system involvement. This initiative was implemented as a result of research conducted by the [first class](#) of DHS Child Welfare Data Leadership Fellows.

Private Dependency Petitions are typically filed by parents, guardians, schools or police to bring concerns around issues a youth is facing – such as access to mental health treatment, habitual truancy or parent/child conflicts – to the attention of a hearing officer or judge. While these petitions can sometimes be the most effective way to convince a young person and family to address these concerns, filing the petition results in the family being assigned an Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF) caseworker who will become involved with the identified youth and the rest of the family.

Often, there is a misconception that filing a petition will result in the child being placed outside the home, or that an outside placement will somehow “fix” the identified problems. However, placement has unintended consequences: disengagement from the school and community, increased school attendance concerns, more concerning behaviors, and exposure to more peers who influence the youth in a negative way. Child welfare placements are designed to protect young people from child abuse and neglect and should not be thought of as a consequence to concerning behaviors.

To prevent CYF involvement for some families and to streamline access to supports, the Private Dependency Petition Diversion initiative matches an Integrated Program Services (IPS) resource specialist with eligible families who have filed a petition to offer alternatives. If the family accepts, the resource specialist will work with them to learn their needs and expectations and link them to supports. This may include referrals to behavioral health providers, drug and alcohol services, school assistance, or family mediation. The resource specialist will also attend the application hearing and provide the court with information related to next steps.

Private Dependency Petition Diversion is voluntary, and assignment to a resource specialist is the course of action when the petition alleges either habitual truancy (under section 5 of the juvenile dependency procedural rules) or habitual disobedience (under section 6 of the juvenile dependency procedural rules). The application for a petition will first be heard by a hearing officer who will decide if the application is accepted and, if accepted, the matter will be scheduled before a judge.

“Our goal with the Private Dependency Petition Diversion initiative is to help families avoid ongoing court or CYF involvement; however, even if the family decides against Private Dependency Petition Diversion services, we are available to explain confusing terminology or discuss other options that the family may not have previously considered,” said Kelley Smithula, resource services specialist. “Systems can be extremely complicated, and sometimes the best thing we can do is offer information and support to help families find the solution that works best for them.”

To learn more about the Private Dependency Petition Diversion initiative, contact Erin Williams at Erin.Williams@allegHENYcounty.us.