



Highlights of [-GAO-04-685T](#), a testimony before the Chairman, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Family Court, established by the D.C. Family Court Act of 2001, was created in part to transition the former Family Division of the D.C. Superior Court into a court solely dedicated to matters concerning children and families. The act required the transfer of abuse and neglect cases by October 2003 and the implementation of case management practices to expedite their resolution in accordance with timeframes established by the Adoptions and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA); a plan for space, equipment, and other needs; and that the Superior Court integrate its computer systems with those of other D.C. agencies. The act also reformed court practices and established procedures intended to improve interactions between the court and social service agencies in the District. One such agency, the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), is responsible for protecting children at risk of abuse and neglect and ensuring that services are provided for them and their families. Both social service agencies and the courts play an important role in addressing child welfare issues.

Representative Tom Davis, Chairman of the House Committee on Government Reform, asked GAO to assess the Family Court's efforts to comply with ASFA requirements and the D.C. Family Court Act of 2001, and its efforts to improve communication with CFSA.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-GAO-04-685T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cornelia M. Ashby at (202) 512-8403 or Ashbyc@gao.gov.

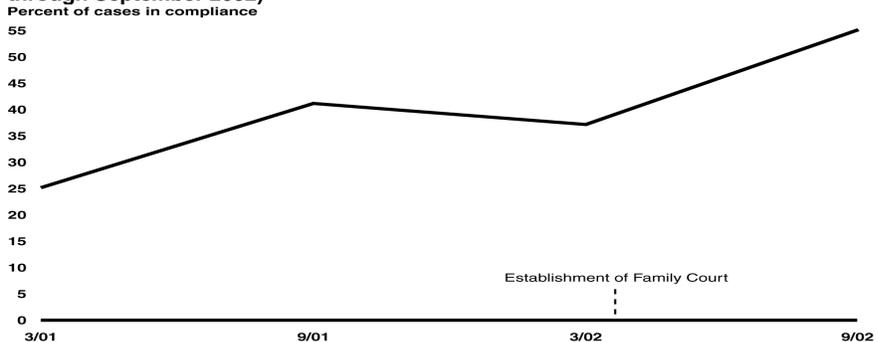
D.C. FAMILY COURT

Operations and Case Management Have Improved, but Critical Issues Remain

What GAO Found

The Family Court met timeframes for transferring cases and decreased the timeframes for resolving abuse and neglect cases. As of October 2003, only 34 of the approximately 3,500 cases that were to be transferred to the Family Court from other divisions of the Superior Court remained outside the Family Court. For children removed from their homes, the median days to begin disposition hearings declined by 202 days to 39 days, or about 84 percent between 2001 and 2003. However, the Family Court has not met the ASFA requirement to hold permanency hearings within 12 months of a child's placement in foster care for all cases. Timely permanency hearings were held for 25 percent of cases in March 2001 and 55 percent in September 2002.

Percent of Cases Complying with ASFA's Permanency Hearing Requirement (March 2001 through September 2002)



Source: Council for Court Excellence.

Support from Family Court judges and top CFSA management has been a key factor in improving the working relationship between CFSA and the Family Court. However, Family Court judges and CFSA officials noted several hindrances that constrain their working relationship. For example, some CFSA caseworkers said that some Family Court judges overruled their service recommendations.

Progress has also been made in acquiring permanent space for the Family Court and exchanging data with District agencies. According to the Chief Judge of the Superior Court, all public functions of the Family Court and 76 percent of the support functions will be consolidated in the new space. The construction project is scheduled for completion in 2009 and will require timely renovations in existing court buildings. To comply with the D.C. Family Court Act of 2001, the Superior Court and the District are exchanging some data and making progress toward developing the ability to exchange other data. In August 2003, the Superior Court began using a new computer system and is providing CFSA with information on scheduled court proceedings. Further, the District has developed a model to enable the exchange of data among several District agencies, but it has not yet resolved many critical systems issues.