



Highlights of [GAO-04-234](#), a report to Congressional Committees

D.C. FAMILY COURT

Progress Has Been Made in Implementing Its Transition

Why GAO Did This Study

The D.C. Family Court Act (P.L. 107-114) mandated that GAO examine the performance of the D.C. Family Court. GAO addressed the following objectives: (1) What procedures were used to make judicial appointments to the Family Court and what effect did qualification requirements have on appointment timeframes? (2) How timely was the Family Court in meeting established timeframes for transferring and resolving abuse and neglect cases, and what impact did magistrate judges have on the workload of judges and other personnel? (3) What progress has the D.C. Courts made in procuring permanent space? (4) What progress have the Superior Court and District agencies made in sharing data from their computer systems? To address these objectives, GAO analyzed court data on its timeliness in resolving cases, reviewed the Family Court Act, applicable District laws, and reports required by the act; reviewed documents regarding the Family Court's progress in acquiring permanent space and those related to sharing data from the computer systems of the Superior Court and the District; and interviewed relevant District, Superior Court, and Family Court officials.

In commenting on this report, the Superior Court agreed with our conclusions and cited additional progress. The Deputy Mayor for Children, Youth, Families, and Elders clarified the roles and responsibilities of various District offices.
www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-234.

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.

What GAO Found

The Superior Court and the District of Columbia used established procedures to appoint magistrate and associate judges to the Family Court, but an issue related to qualification requirements and other factors delayed appointments. One nominee expressed some reluctance to meeting Family Court training requirements. A second nominee was found to have had delinquent tax filing issues a few years prior to his nomination. The Senate Committee charged with approving the nominees determined that these issues were adequately resolved, but chose to defer their confirmation until other Superior Court nominees were approved. The Family Court met its statutory deadlines for transferring cases into the court from other Superior Court divisions and closed 620, or 19 percent, of these cases (see table). The court has also decreased the timeframes for resolving abuse and neglect matters and magistrate judges have played a key role in handling cases. Several factors, however, such as shortages of substance abuse treatment services, posed barriers to achieving Family Court goals.

Frequency of Reasons for Closing Abuse and Neglect Cases Transferred to the Family Court		
Reason for case closure	Number of cases	Percent of cases
Permanency goal achieved		
Reunification	210	34
Adoption	174	28
Guardianship	52	8
Custody	42	7
Child reached age of majority (21 years old)	79	13
Emancipated child^a	43	7
Court case closed/continued for services^b	15	2
Child deceased	5	1
Total	620	100

Source: D.C. Superior Court.

^aAn emancipated child is a youth who know longer wants, or who refuses to accept, services.

^bIncludes cases where the court has reached an agreement with the District's Child and Family Services Agency to continue the provision of services after the court case is closed.

To accommodate the operations of the Family Court, D.C. Courts—comprised of all components of the District's judiciary branch—has made progress in procuring permanent space for the Family Court. This new space, expected to be complete in late 2009, will consolidate 76 percent of the Family Court functions and associated personnel. The Superior Court and the District of Columbia have made progress in exchanging data from their respective information systems. In August 2003, the Superior Court implemented the Integrated Justice Information System, which is used to manage its cases and exchange data with other agencies. Although the District has developed a model to enable the exchange of data between various District agencies and the court, it has not fully resolved several critical issues we reported in August 2002. The District plans to address these issues as it incorporates solutions into the plans it is developing to modernize District agency computer systems.