

# Unified Family Court may solve domestic woes

This spring, the American Bar Association plans an invitation-only conference in Philadelphia to discuss Unified Family Court as a national movement, a system whereby a family in turmoil would be assigned to a single court and single judicial team that would handle family matters ranging from child abuse and delinquency to divorce, custody and support.

But don't look for a change just yet in the way the family-court system operates.

Currently, the concept is being implemented in piecemeal style throughout Pennsylvania, according to **Elizabeth Bennett**, a Radnor, Chester County, attorney. Bennett co-chaired the children's rights team of the Pennsylvania Bar Association, which drafted rules for the practical application of the Unified Family Court concept.

Implementing a Unified Family Court, like other bureaucratic changes, will take money, time and a willingness to change. "Any time you have a major institutional change, it's especially difficult in the government or political sphere — bureaucracies where people are not motivated to change," says Bennett.

In a recent issue of his newsletter, "Matrimonial Matters," Allentown attorney **John Mondschein** states: "An estimate is that 10 states are currently using this system. Reform activity headed in the direction of adoption of the program is found in about 20 states, Pennsylvania being one who has approved the move through the Pennsylvania Bar Association. While we wait for enabling legislation to come from Harrisburg, some Pennsylvania counties are tinkering with their own systems."

Mondschein, who serves on the local committee to revise family law in Lehigh County, believes the changes could — and should — begin locally. "The idea would be to create a second county-court system to handle only family law and juvenile matters," he says. "Judges would be required to have family-court



Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Bennett

Attorney Elizabeth Bennett helped draft rules for the Unified Family Court concept.

experience. They would be there because they would want to be there."

Mondschein also suggests a team approach to Unified Family Court. "You would have three judges on the bench of family court. Each would have a mediator, hearing officer and social workers," he says. "When a case comes into the system, it would go to a team."

Bennett says, "The concept proposes the restructuring of family court, creating one division for dependency, delinquency, divorce and all domestic matters — abuse, divorce, custody. Within that division, there would be adjudication units, judges, masters and support staff, to which families would be assigned. You wouldn't be bounced around from courtroom to courtroom."

The primary goal of a Unified Family Court is to shrink the amount of time, tears and money a family spends in the legal system. "It would reduce the litigation burden on the family, both emotional and financial," Bennett explains.

Money would go toward taking care of the children's physical needs instead of to protracted court battles; parents could maintain a more even emotional keel, which ultimately benefits the children.

— Tina Cantelmi Bradford and  
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Please see "Medea's Passions Unfit for Today's Legal System" on page 11.