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Practice Tips: Preparing Clients for Agency Conferences

Parents involved in child welfare and the Family Court are often invited to conferences/meetings during the course of their cases. These conferences may be formal meetings with specific protocols or parents may be asked to participate in informal meetings. Support and advocacy for clients are essential at these meetings, but preparing clients ahead of time can also have a great impact on the outcome of the meeting. Here are some general tips for preparing clients for conferences and navigating these meetings:

- After ACS initiates a Family Court case, there will be multiple conferences held throughout the case. ACS policy may prohibit attorneys from participating in most meetings. **Social workers, parent advocates, service providers and friends/family members may attend and advocate for the client.**
- **Find out about the meetings.** It's difficult to find out about every meeting. At the initial court appearance, you should ask your client to inform you about meetings. You should also ask the ACS and foster care workers about upcoming meetings. This requires perseverance. Attorneys can request, on the record, that the agencies inform us about the meetings.
- **Your client can invite people to the conference for support.** In a room full of agency workers, family and friends may help a parent stay calm. Your client should invite any resources who are interested in being considered foster parents or visit hosts.
- Even if you cannot attend, **you can prepare your client for these meetings.** Your client should know the meeting's purpose and agenda, format of the meeting, invited players, and documents they may be asked to sign.
- **Discuss strategies for handling a tense or difficult meeting,** such as stepping outside the meeting to take a break and re-focus.
- **Bring written information** about any programs or services the client attends to the meeting. As with everything, bring copies! If the client is already in services, it will help minimize the number of referrals the agency makes.
- When the facilitator discusses the "ground rules," **suggest that participants talk to the parent rather than about them,** while they are sitting there. You should model this approach.
- **Prepare your client for a discussion of the neglect and abuse allegations.** Every parent should speak with their legal team prior to discussing or responding to the allegations in the

meeting. If the team advised not to discuss the allegations, help your client to communicate the reasons (i.e. "on advice of my lawyer" and "due to the pending criminal court case") and help move the discussion to service planning and visits.

- **Ensure that the family's strengths are also discussed.** Encourage your client to talk about family and friends involved in her family's life, her connections to the community, schools, religious organizations, and any services she obtained on her own. If you can highlight strengths early on, it will set the tone for the rest of the meeting.
- **Talk to clients about how to present their needs productively.** Unfortunately, sometimes seeking help for problems can result in additional allegations against the client. During the initial conferences, ACS is still conducting an investigation and can ask to amend the petition against a client based on what they learn during their investigation. However, parents often do need help, which you can help frame without compromising their legal case
- **Anticipate a reasonable service plan and discuss what your client is willing and able to do.** For example, if the allegations are drug abuse, discuss drug assessment, treatment and testing options. With excessive corporal punishment allegations, discuss a range of options from anger management classes to individual therapy. If the services ACS requests are too numerous, require a parent to travel to multiple providers, conflict with work or school schedules, or are not reasonable, help your client speak up at the conference. You don't want your client to sign a service plan that will fall apart immediately.
- **Help a client disagree with unreasonable or inappropriate services.** Parents should not agree to services that they don't understand, they don't need, or that are impossible to do. There may be a place in a service agreement to express these disagreements so be sure to fill that out. While you can prepare a parent to respectfully disagree, you may suggest a client speak with their attorney following the meeting to resolve any disagreements.
- **Request to *explore* a service recommendation.** If ACS recommends something that the client does not know if he should agree to, such as a drug test or a psychiatric evaluation, he can ask to postpone the decision until he speaks with his attorney.
- **Hold the agencies accountable for concrete timeframes.** The service plans require timeframes for the implementation of each service. Ask for very specific dates and then follow up.
- **Take advantage of the conference by asking for help with concrete problems** like Public Assistance or the shelter system. If a parent needs a letter for PA or housing help, make that part of the service plan with a date attached to it. Providing Metro Cards should be part of the service plan if the parent needs transportation assistance.
- **Know what happened in court and about current court orders.** Be aware that the participants may not have been in court. The more information people have about what the Judge decided helps make the service plan accurate. Bring court orders related to Orders of Protection, visiting and Orders to explore relatives for foster care or Visit Hosts.
- **Push visiting.** In addition to advocating for frequent visits, your client may present people who

are willing to supervise visits besides the agency caseworkers. Ask about upcoming appointments or events (i.e. school meetings, doctor's appointments, family gatherings) involving the children, and ask for the parent to be included.

- **Ask questions out loud.** You may not be able speak privately with your client during the meeting. You should ask questions about service recommendations or remind a client about something their attorney advised them about in front of the group. You can ask to explain a service recommendation in your own words to the parent to make sure they understand it fully.
- **Consider sharing copies of the Service Plan generated at this conference.** The service plan is not often provided to the Court, but if your client agrees, you can use it to present your client in a positive and participatory light to other parties or to ask the Court to hold the agency accountable for what they have agreed to do for the client.