

Sun to shine on state's juvenile proceedings through pilot program

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Previously private court sessions in Middletown will be open to public. Juvenile court proceedings that historically have been held in private will be open to the public under a new pilot program in Middletown that was announced Tuesday by the state Judicial Branch.

The program begins Feb. 16 and provides access to trials in which a child is alleged to be uncared for, abused or neglected or is the subject of a petition for termination of parental rights. Judges can deny or limit access to the proceedings under some circumstances, and court records involving juvenile proceedings will remain sealed.

An advisory board made up of judicial officials, attorneys, social workers, representatives from the Department of Children and Families and child-advocacy groups designed the pilot program in accordance with a public act passed by the General Assembly in June 2009.

Chief Court Administrator Barbara M. Quinn said the board "worked hard to balance the access rights of the public and accountability of government with the rights of the children who are in Juvenile Court - not of their own volition, but because of the actions of the adults in their lives."

The Middletown juvenile court is home to statewide child-protection trials, which generally involve children, parents, their attorneys, a DCF social worker and a DCF lawyer from the state attorney general's office. In many cases, the children do not appear in court. The docket, or schedule of cases, will be available through the state Judicial Branch's external affairs department and will contain only the child's first name and last initial.

Deborah Fuller, executive director of external affairs for the Judicial Branch, said there has been ongoing debate throughout the country as to juvenile proceedings, which have generally been closed to the public.

"There were a lot of children's advocates and advocacy groups that feel the system isn't doing what it should for these kids and is not given enough resources," Fuller said. "Some of them have come to the conclusion that opening it up and shedding light on the inadequacies there will be more public pressure to address those inadequacies."

DCF spokesman Gary Kleeblatt said, "The department supports the pilot and we are eager to see what can be learned from it."

Jeanne Milstein, Connecticut's child advocate, testified against the legislation that paved the way for the pilot, saying she feared publicity could harm children and that there are better ways to hold the system accountable. Milstein said Tuesday that she served on the pilot program advisory panel and was pleased some of the safeguards she recommended were put into place.

Attorney Sarah Eagan, director for the Center for Children's Advocacy Child Abuse Project, said more than 20 states have opened juvenile proceedings and none have reversed their decision.

"I think what goes on in the child-protection system is extremely important and extremely unknowable, not just to the public, but to stakeholders and a lot of people who are about kids and families," Eagan said. "We are dealing with some of the most vulnerable children and families in the community. Everyone can have a better sense of what's working and not working."

The advisory board will monitor the program, survey participants and report to the Judicial Branch and the Legislature by Dec. 31, 2010.