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## Program to allow public at previously-closed juvenile trials

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By WALT GOGOLYA, Press Staff

MIDDLETOWN — A new program aimed at promoting transparency and openness in the court system will allow members of the public to attend previously-closed juvenile trial proceedings.

The Child Protection Session at the Middlesex Judicial District Courthouse, 1 Court St., will be the site of the new pilot program set to begin Feb. 16, and will increase access to Juvenile Court.

Chief Court Administrator Barbara M. Quinn established the pilot program in the city with the assistance of the Juvenile Access Pilot Program Advisory Board and the Rules Committee of the Superior Court, according to information provided by the state judicial branch.

“The advisory board has worked diligently over the past several months to set up the pilot program in accordance with the public act,” Quinn said. “At the same time, we have worked very hard to balance the access rights of the public and the 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 adults in their lives.”

Attorney Sarah Eagan, who serves as child-abuse project director of the Center for Children’s Advocacy and as co-chairman of the Advisory Board, said the program will shed a much-needed light on the child protection system while still maintaining the dignity of families and children.

The need for the program was a result of Public Act 09-194, which requires increased public access to trial proceedings in which a child is alleged to be uncared for, neglected, abused, or is the subject of a petition of termination of parental rights. All trial proceedings for these types of cases will be presumed open to the public, except as provided by a standing order or by law, according to a statement released by the state judicial branch. A presiding judge can also decide, on a case-by-case basis, that access to all or any portion of the proceeding be denied or limited if good cause is shown.

The advisory board will monitor the implementation of the pilot program and submit recommendations to the Judicial Branch and the Legislature by Dec. 31.

Juvenile cases are currently heard behind closed doors on the third- and fifth-floor courtrooms of Middletown Superior Court house and are overseen by three judges, court officials said.

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