



CUYAHOGA COUNTY COURT OF COMMON PLEAS
DIVISION OF DOMESTIC RELATIONS

ADMINISTRATIVE JUDGE
LESLIE ANN CELEBREZZE

COURT ADMINISTRATOR
JAMES S. ZAK

JUDGES
HON. DIANE M. PALOS
HON. LESLIE ANN CELEBREZZE
HON. FRANCINE B. GOLDBERG
HON. TONYA R. JONES

November 2, 2023

Members of the County Council

Re: Budget Proposal

On behalf of the Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Court, Domestic Relations Division, I accept the proposed detailed budget for Fiscal Years 2024-2025 as conveyed in the Executives Recommended Biennial Budget.

Over the past two years we have reviewed how we can better serve our community and to advance new initiatives and goals that focus on our customers to improve their court experience, while operating within the framework of our budget. Our Court continues to focus on reducing the number of court visits, making court events meaningful and to improve the experience of all parties that we interact with daily.

Recently, The Domestic Relations Court, with funding from the **State Justice Institute and Ohio State Bar Foundation**, has partnered with the **Center for Justice Innovation** (formerly known as the Center for Court Innovation), Dr. Juan Carlos Arean with **Futures without Violence**, national domestic violence probation expert **James Henderson**, and local subject matter experts to develop the **Parenting After Violence (PAVE) Program Curriculum**. PAVE will address intimate partner violence in family court cases through a trauma-informed curriculum for men who have been abusive in their family. The curriculum will offer trauma-informed care and interventions, identify and address the underlying causes of violent behavior to end the cycle of violence, and provide guidance to parents in creating and adapting to a parenting model that works for their situation. **The project will result in increased safety and support for survivors and for the party that has committed violence, increased accountability, enhanced parenting skills, and ending the cycle of violence.**

Our Domestic Violence Department serves as an **Emeritus Mentor Court** to share its expertise and assist other domestic violence courts.

The Cuyahoga County Domestic Relations Court is authorized by statute to handle domestic violence civil protection orders (DVCPO). Understanding the complexities of domestic violence and committed to access to justice, the Court has developed a designated Domestic Violence Department that serves as a hub and resource center for these matters. The Domestic Violence Department assists litigants through the procedural process of obtaining a DVCPO.

Filings for DVCPOs have increased dramatically in recent years. 2023 is on pace to be a record year for the number of DV filings. In 2020 there were 612 filings; in 2022 there were 1,205 filings which is double the amount when compared to 2020. In 2023 we are currently at 1,138 filings and are forecasting over **1,300 by the end of December 2023.** In addition to the number of filings, DV employees have assisted over 4,496 outside inquires on the DV process and/or referrals. This record increase has put a dramatic amount of stress on an already burdened department. Trained staff and additional space are still needed to accommodate the overwhelming numbers.

Under the direction of Judge Tonya Jones, and partnering with a **Grant** from the **ADAMHS Board**, is continuing the **Families First Program, the first of its type in the State of Ohio.** It remains a trendsetting intervention program aimed at helping divorcing parents that are in the crux of substance abuse and mental health disorders. The program was created by Presiding Judge Tonya R. Jones for parents involved in a pending divorce case that have minor children.

Along with partnering agencies that assist in the identification and treatment of parents involved in contested divorce proceedings, the Families First Program Team comes up with innovative solutions for families. These families are most often times experiencing long-term issues with managing substance use and mental health disorders. The mission of the program is to continuously improve the relationship of the litigating parties and assist them in creating a cohesive, sustainable co-parenting relationship.

Essential elements of this program include judicial supervision, status review, treatment team, screening and assessment, evidence-based treatment services and mentored court visits. The program monitors compliance with medication and treatment services. Essential gap services are also provided to maintain stability for the family. The Families First Program has also assisted with housing assistance and resources, providing supervised parenting time, and essential transportation resources.

The program is voluntary and available to families in the process of divorce with one or both parents experiencing substance use, mental health, and/or co-occurring disorders. In 2021, responding to the Coronavirus Pandemic, Families First began receiving cases that have incidents consider as low-level domestic violence. This program has been in existence since October 2018 and has experienced tremendous growth since its inception. By the close of 2023, we will have assisted 70 participants, linking individuals with community resources to assist with healthy co-parenting. Between April and July 2023, Families First has added five new service providers with a heavy focus on providing individual services for the minor children of the participant parents.

Our Families First Program is an ongoing initiative that combines judicial supervision with identification and treatment of parents involved in contested divorce proceedings and experiencing substance use and mental health issues with the goal of improving the co-parent relationship. Essential elements of this program are judicial supervision, status review, treatment team, screening and assessment, evidence-based treatment services and mentored court visits. The program also provides assistance with housing, supervised parenting time, medication, treatment and essential gap services to maintain stability for the family. The program is voluntary and available to all families in the process of divorce and experiencing substance use, mental health issues and/or co-occurring disorders. This program has been in in existence for the past 3 years and has seen a tremendous growth since its inception. During this past year, The Families First Program has helped 26 parents and 25 children by linking individuals with community resources to assist with healthy co-parenting.

Our Recognized **Navigation Department Help Center** is designed to assist self-represented parties who now make up over 66% of cases. The Center served over 26,000 people in 2022, a 26% increase from 2021. A rapid

area of growth for our court, we realize that we are facing a challenge to continue to provide service to self-represented litigants.

With the continued increase of self-represented litigants and their need for information, the Domestic Relations Court merged three departments in 2021 under one umbrella titled **Navigation Services Help Center**. This provided more employees properly trained in multiple areas to assist parties and reduce job fatigue. Additionally, we are working with **Ohio Legal Help to implement a Virtual Help Center** which is designed to increase efficiency with self-guided interviews that allows the litigant to prepare their court case accurately online. The expected launch is Fall 2023. Litigants will be guided through a series of questions to help determine the exact forms and other documentation required to prepare their case. This intelligent filing solution provides consistent accurate information which ensures that users file the correct forms, dramatically reducing review and correction work. Help Center staff then can review and process the filing electronically which will allow the court to serve more individuals, more efficiently.

Court staff has attended **LEAD** Diversity and Inclusion a program that raises participants awareness regarding Diversity, Equity and Inclusion issues while building their leadership skills. Additionally, the Court is participating in the county's "Town Hall" on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion designed to develop employee's awareness and the importance and benefits of inclusiveness, racial justice, equity and diversity. This November employees will be participating in workshops sponsored by the Supreme Court of Ohio focusing on "Civil Treatment in the Workplace for Leaders". Our hope is to develop a DEI Steering Committee in 2024 and for our court to continue to learn and grow in this area for years to come.

I feel that it is critical to enabling the ongoing improvement of this Court to meet the changing needs of the public that the budget reflect the true needs of the Court, the safety of all who enter and that it provides fair remuneration for employees. We are asking that you approve the recommended budget that has been presented.

Thank you!

- **Our partners**

- ADAHMS Board,
- Applewood Centers,
- Autism Respite PLUS,
- A Useful Vessel Counseling and Resources,
- Bellefaire Jewish Children's Bureau,
- Change of Direction Youth Programming,
- Children's Rights Family Advocates,
- Domestic Violence and Child Advocacy Centers (DVCAC),
- Glenbeigh Hospital,
- Jay Berk PhD. and Associates,
- Laurelwood Hospital,
- Moore Counseling and Mediation Services,
- Metro Health Hospital,
- New Values Sober Housing,
- Oaks Family Care Center,
- Psychological and Behavioral Health Inc (Psych BC),
- Rebirth Counseling and Therapy Services,
- Tiffany Monroe Heard, PhD