



Parent to Parent: A Guide to Navigating Philadelphia's Child Welfare System

Part 3

“It’s About What You are Willing to do for Your Child”

Working on Your Case between Hearings

After the Adjudicatory hearing, you will be in Family Court about every three months. During those court hearings your attorney will present the evidence about what you have been working on (see the pamphlet “The Court Process”). In between hearings, you need to be doing the work to move your case forward. Almost all of the hard work you have to do in order to get your kids home happens *outside* of court! There are also important case planning meetings that happen in between hearings. This pamphlet will cover how to work on your Family Court case between hearings.

Working with DHS or CUA and Agencies

Always make sure that your lawyer and the DHS/CUA workers are able to reach you. In the event of an emergency with your child or if there is a change in your case, it is very important that everyone you are working with has your current phone number and address.

Keeping in regular contact with the DHS/CUA workers is good because they can tell you how your child is doing and what your next steps are. It is also a good idea to tell them how *you* are doing and about your progress. If you are having trouble with something you have been asked to do, they may also be able to help you solve the problem. Reach out!



Tanisha says, “Having a relationship with the workers is important, 100%. I kept calling with questions and I think I was being a pain, but [the DHS social worker] got that I cared, that I wanted this and towards the end, she was going to bat for us, saying to the Court we were good parents.”

Team Planning Meetings

The family team planning meetings happen every few months and they are a very important part of your case where decisions are made, and your individual goals are defined. At these meetings you have the chance to provide input and make requests. The “20 day” meeting is a great opportunity for you to explain why DHS got involved with your family and to point out all of the



strengths you have as a parent. The “90 day” meetings give you a chance to prove how much you have accomplished in between hearings. It is very important that you participate in all of the Single Case Plan (SCP) meetings so that you understand the plan and so that you can ask questions and ask for help meeting the goals if you need it. If you are unable to go to a meeting, ask to participate via phone. Be sure to tell your lawyer when and where the meeting will be and if you think you have to miss a meeting.

Important Note: Being part of the planning with DHS or CUA is both your right and your responsibility. **Even if you are incarcerated, you still have this right and it is still your responsibility.** Ask your lawyer for more information on how to make sure you can take part in these meetings. If you’re incarcerated in Philadelphia, you can ask to participate in your meetings by video conference.

Keep All Your Paperwork

It may seem like there is so much paperwork that you don’t need to keep track of anything yourself, but having your own records of things like your Single Case Plan (SCP), your child’s medical records, a calendar or log of visits with your child or phone calls you made and messages you left for DHS/CUA can be very helpful. Bring your records with you to court and to all meetings. The judge is unlikely to take your word when you talk about what you have accomplished. Bring proof. This goes for all of the paperwork that you have, especially records that are about services you may have been asked to complete, such as drug or alcohol treatment, mental health treatment, therapy or parenting classes and anything else. **Remember to carefully read everything you sign! If you have any questions, make sure to ask them!**

For examples of the types of records that you should consider keeping and how you might keep them, see the tools at the end of this guide.



Tanisha says, “Have all the paperwork. Black and white goes a long way....Keep everything documented.”

Visitation and Contact

Visits are the most important thing you can do in your case— you must continue to build your relationship with your child. Ask DHS/CUA and the court for as much visitation as you think your family needs. It is best not to miss any visits. However, illness, emergencies and other events sometimes makes it necessary to miss a visit. If you have to miss a visit for any reason, call the CUA worker as soon as you know you won’t be able to make it.

You have the right to have regular visits and contact with your child unless the Court orders otherwise. The law says visits should happen as often as possible. Visits are extremely important



for many reasons, but the number one reason is because your child needs you, now more than ever. Visits should be planned around the needs of your child. If your visits are supervised, talk with your attorney to understand what you need to do to make progress to unsupervised visits.

The court will look at the quality of contact with your child as proof that you have a healthy, positive bond together. Visits, phone calls, and letters are all good ways to bond with your child and to show the court and agency workers that you are committed to your child. Parents who are incarcerated or parents of children in placement that is far away still have visitation rights.

Important Note: CUA can help you with transportation to visits, like providing tokens, so be sure to ask for help if getting to visits is a problem.

When keeping track of visitations, it is a good idea to include things like where the visit was, who else was there, how long the visit lasted, what activities you and your child did, and how you and your child acted with each other. If a visit doesn't happen as scheduled, write that down and include the reason the visit didn't take place.



Linda's newborn girl, Kayla, was placed in a foster home. The court was concerned about Linda's ability to care for a fragile newborn while struggling with addiction, and she was only allowed to visit her daughter once a week for two hours supervised at the agency. It was very hard for Linda to see Kayla so little. Linda felt so sad every time the worker told her it was time to go that sometimes she felt it might be easier if she didn't visit Kayla at all. But Linda went even though it was hard. As Linda told us, "You don't want your child to think like—and she was still brand new, she wasn't thinking like this yet... I mean you want them to know you're still there and you didn't leave." Soon her good visitation history led to her visits being increased.

The Hard Work of Meeting Requirements and Following Court Orders

Sometimes parents are asked by DHS/CUA or the court to take classes or go to treatment even if they feel they don't need it. Parents can discuss with their lawyer how to get unnecessary goals off of the Single Case Plan or how to argue about it at court, but sometimes you will lose that argument.

It can be unfair and it is understandable if you are angry, but remember the ASFA time clock is ticking. ***Sometimes as a parent you have to do things you don't want to do to maintain custody or reunite with your child.***

Remember, in order for reunification to remain the goal, you must show the Court and DHS/CUA that you are committed to fixing the situation that caused your child to be placed outside the home—a major part of that is following through on court orders and case plan goals. Also, once a court has ordered something, it really helps your case if you do it, even if you don't



feel that it is needed. It shows the court that you are willing to do whatever it takes to get your child back.



Tanisha says, “At first it was like, ‘Why do we need to be here?’ But actually listening to other people’s stories, and see they were positive, it was like, ‘Why can’t we be positive, too?’ Even the stuff you think, ‘I shouldn’t have to do that,’ you have to do it. This isn’t about you; it’s about your child, what you are willing to do for your child.”

Parenting classes:

One of the things that many parents are asked to do is to participate in a parenting class. Though at first you may feel that you already know how to be a parent, you may find that you can still learn something or that you enjoy the support of the other parents in the group.



For Linda, “The good thing was the parenting classes. It’s my first time being a mom, and the classes they showed me how I was doing so many things right, the things they taught me. It made me proud of myself.”

If you do not think that the parenting class you are referred to is the right one for you, ask your CUA worker or your attorney to help you get into a different class that is a better fit. You can also call 215-PARENTS (215-727-3687) to find a parenting class. Some classes may be for parents of older kids, young kids, medically needy kids, or kids who have mental health issues or cognitive limitations. Some parents may also be approved for parenting classes that are hands-on, where you attend with your child for several hours a week.

Drug Treatment:

Depending on the allegations in your case, DHS/CUA or the judge may also ask for you to have a drug and alcohol evaluation. You may be asked to be evaluated at the Clinical Evaluation Unit (CEU) at the court. This evaluation will often include a drug screen and an interview. The interviewer will ask questions about your drug and mental health history. Based on the drug screen and the interview, DHS/CUA or the judge may require you to complete drug/alcohol treatment or dual diagnosis (substance abuse and mental health) treatment. Treatment takes time, so get into treatment immediately -- do not delay.

Important Note: If you are already in treatment, bring the name and phone number of your treatment provider to the assessment.

Please note that the judge will look at drug/alcohol problems very seriously, so if you do not address a drug and alcohol issue through appropriate treatment as CEU has advised, it will hurt your case. You may want to give the drug/alcohol and/or mental health treatment a try – and you may even be glad that you did.



Linda recommends that parents “use this as an opportunity. I actually think that [going through this] helped the situation, like, made me look at things a lot differently and kind of helped me because I did have a drug problem and this made me realize just how strong I am, that I went through it and my daughter’s home.”

Mental Health Treatment:

Depending on your case, DHS/CUA or the judge may also ask you to have a mental health evaluation and/or to get some mental health treatment, like individual therapy, or family therapy. The court may refer you to Behavioral Health Services (BHS), a unit located at 1501 Arch St., to do an assessment, refer you to further evaluations if needed, and connect you with a mental health treatment provider. There are many treatment providers throughout Philadelphia and BHS should help you find one that works for you.

Important Note: If you are already in treatment, bring the name and phone number of your treatment provider to the assessment. You should also keep a record of the dates you have attended treatment.

The judge will want to see proof that you are going to therapy. Prior to court hearings speak to your attorney about whether you should ask your counselor or therapist for a letter or documentation of your therapy attendance. One way the court verifies that you are attending your therapy sessions is through a release of information giving your permission for other people to have access to what is normally confidential information. Please read all Releases of Information to make sure you understand them. If you have questions about the release, ask your lawyer.

Can Mental Health Treatment Help You?

The parents who helped put together this guidebook said that therapy can be helpful, even if it is not court ordered. Going through the court system and working to get your child back can be a hard and stressful experience. Being able to talk to a professional about what you are going through can be a great thing. **If you want to get treatment and you are not involved with court, you can also contact Community Behavioral Health (888-545-2600).** If you have a mental health issue, it is important that you get treatment for it without delay—the ASFA time clock is ticking.



Conclusion

You can do this! Believe in yourself and in your ability to get through this process and get your family back together.



Tanisha says that it is important to believe that your family can make it through this. “You have to believe in yourself, that you can do this even when people tell you, you can’t. If you’re willing to put your head down, to say ‘my child is more important’ even when it’s hard and you’re tired, then you can. You have to believe that you can get them back and be whole again.”



Keeping Track of Important Information

Visit log (paper or notebook where you keep track of all visits with your child):

Visits are the most important thing you can do for you and your child while your child is out of your home. Keeping a log of the visits will make it easier for you to remember **how the visit went, what you and your child did, and how your child was doing**. You should also write down **when a visit is cancelled** and the **reason it was cancelled**.

Example: 1/17/14 10am-11am at Agency. Dani was happy to see me and we colored in the book I brought her, at the end she didn't want to go but I told her I will see her next week. Asked the agency worker about longer visits and he said if things are good we can talk about it

Call log (paper or notebook where you keep track of all calls in your case):

It is important to keep track of phone calls you make and receive or any messages you leave about your child's case. You may be asked when or if you called someone and having that information written down can make it a lot easier to remember important details, such as when a visit is scheduled for, or what information a worker would like you to find.

Keeping a call log can be very simple, all you need to do is **write down the date and time** of the call or message, **the person** you called or who called you, and something to help you remember **what the call was about**.

Calendar (It is best if you can use one calendar for all of this that you can take everywhere, maybe a phone or an appointment book)

List of things to put on your calendar

- Visits!
- Family Service Plan/ Single case plan meetings
- Any meetings with caseworkers
- Dates of any evaluations or assessments you need to attend
- Any meetings with your lawyer
- Next court date
- Your child's school meetings, medical appointments, important events
- Your treatment programs and classes
- Examples might be parenting classes, drug treatment, anger management, support groups