

Judge Belton's Opening Statement

Good Morning.

I am Judge Wenona Clark Belton. I retired nearly three weeks ago after serving for ten years as a judge for the Juvenile Court of Fulton County, Atlanta Judicial Circuit, where, among other things, I served as the judicial lead for the Court Improvement Initiative, part of a multi-circuit initiative, coordinated by the state's Court Improvement Program, which is designed to engage and educate child welfare professionals, partners and stakeholders about best practices for more favorable outcomes.

I earned my law degree from the Georgia State University College of Law and my undergraduate degree from UMCP. I have served for the last three years as a Board member of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, one of the largest and oldest judicial membership organizations in the nation, which serves an estimated 30,000 professionals in the juvenile and family justice system and provides resources, knowledge and training to improve the lives of children and families seeking justice; I was recently elected to serve a second term.

I am a Child Welfare Law Specialist and have been certified for over ten years through the National Association of Counsel for Children. I also serve as a Cabinet Member of Get Georgia Reading, and am a member of the Children and the Courts Committee of the State Bar of Georgia. I am a Life Member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., whose motto is "service to all mankind."

Prior to my service on the bench, I was privileged to have served in a number of roles which prepared me to engage in child welfare work. I am a former foster parent and began my service in juvenile court as a CASA volunteer. Over the last 23 years, in Fulton County, I have served as a judicial staff attorney; represented the Department of Family and Children Services; served as the Clerk of Juvenile Court; I have represented indigent children in delinquency matters as a Public Defender. I know better than most the nature of the challenges the child protection agencies face—front line staff who are overwhelmed, underpaid, suffer from inadequate training, burnout, etc.

My observations are based upon 23 years of experience doing this work from several different perspectives—this system as it currently exists is not working.

The most challenging issues I routinely observed consist of the following:

- Delays in obtaining routine/specialized assessments;
- Barriers to identifying appropriate/reliable service providers;
- Ensuring appropriate services are provided in the appropriate platform—in-person rather than virtual;
- Insurance gaps and pitfalls—Routine denials by insurers for medically prescribed services/treatments, including dental and orthodontic services—insurance gaps, and a lack of appeals of routine denials;
- Lack of appropriate placements, especially for children who suffer from significant behavioral health challenges;

- Lack of creativity, collaboration without court intervention through court orders; working in silos-underutilizing or simply not being made aware of resources like AVLF, Georgia Justice project;
- Placing the burden on the children (and parents) to participate in services and chastising them when they fail; characterizing them as difficult and uncooperative
- Failure to ensure or provide oversight to enhance educational success and minimize poor outcomes for children as they navigate through the system and eventually reach the age of majority;
- Emphasis on policy rather than safety and protective factors;
- An inability to address the primary reasons children come into care—poverty, behavioral health challenges and substance abuse;
- Lack of specialized case plans when reunification is the permanency goal;
- Decision-making protocols, followup and follow through;complex case assignment;
- The only tool that judges have in their toolbox to help ameliorate these challenges is “reasonable efforts.”

This list is by no means comprehensive.

A colleague asked me many years ago, “why do you care so much?”

Because I watched a three-year old child in my care try to walk across town to return to his mother’s home;

Because when the state and the courts intervene in the most personal of cases, the children and families deserve our best;

Juvenile court judges, whether they acknowledge it or not, are lawyers for each party, social workers, care coordinators, mediators and cheerleaders. The decisions we make have a substantial impact on a family’s life.

I care, because I believe you treat others as you would want to be treated.

Thank you.