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The Los Angeles County Children's Court: A Model Facility for Child Abuse and Neglect Proceedings

Paul Boland*

The traditional courthouse structure does not work for children who are victims of parental abuse and neglect.

Courthouses by design are imposing and intimidating places where adults are judged and held accountable for their misdeeds. In most courtrooms, the judge sits high atop a bench, garbed in a somber black robe, conveying an image of authority that is readily apparent to all spectators.

Traditionally, courthouses are also adversarial arenas where attorneys wage battle on behalf of their clients. The design of the counsel table in the courtroom reflects this adversarial relationship — allotting just enough space for the two opposing attorneys and their clients to sit during court proceedings.

While this conventional courtroom structure generally is well-suited for prosecuting adult criminals or adjudicating civil lawsuits, it has proven far less effective for conducting child abuse and neglect proceedings.

These design deficiencies have been noted by the National Center for Juvenile Justice, which currently is developing guidelines for juvenile court construction. Hunter Hurst, the Center's director, explained: "The traditional courthouse structure works well in criminal cases because the prosecutor and defense attorney usually are the only participants in court proceedings. It is less practical in juvenile court cases because you have more actors than just two attorneys."

Instead, juvenile court child abuse and neglect proceedings may involve ten to fifteen people — including the child, the child's attorney,

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a child advocate, the child's mother and her lawyer, the child's father and his lawyer, the county counsel, the judge, clerk, court reporter, bailiff, family members and witnesses.

"The purpose of these hearings is different too," added Hurst. "They are less adversarial because they focus more on concern for the child's welfare."

For the children involved in these cases, the courthouse can be a frightening and bewildering place, increasing their sense of helplessness and victimization. This problem is particularly evident in Los Angeles County.

Since 1978, the majority of child abuse and neglect cases filed in Los Angeles County have been heard in the downtown Criminal Courts Building — the same facility that handles most of the County's most serious adult felony cases, including the Hillside Strangler and the Night Stalker trials. Conducting child abuse and neglect cases in a facility designed to adjudicate adult felonies creates serious psychological problems for the children, their parents, attorneys and others involved in the proceedings.

Currently, the Los Angeles County Juvenile Court supervises almost 50,000 children who have been placed under court jurisdiction due to parental physical abuse, sexual molestation, severe neglect, and abandonment. The court places these children with relatives, foster families, or other suitable child care programs. The number of child abuse and neglect cases filed in Los Angeles County climbed from 7,000 in 1980 to 20,000 in 1990, nearly a 300 percent increase. Unfortunately, neither the number of Juvenile Court judges, nor the condition of courthouse facilities, has kept pace with the increased caseload.

When children who have been removed from the family home and placed in foster care come to the stark, grey Criminal Courts Building for court appearances, the County vans in which they are transported park alongside the Sheriff's large, black-on-white buses that bring prisoners to criminal court proceedings. On their way to a freight elevator that will take them up into the building, children often walk by jeering inmates through a poorly-lit, cavernous, concrete-walled parking garage. They enter a massive freight elevator and hear its heavy door slam behind them with a resounding thud.

Far too often, this experience frightens the children and makes them think that they are coming to court to be punished for some imagined misbehavior. This happened to one eight-year-old child who came to court, saw the words "Criminal Courts" spelled out on the side of the building, and asked a social worker: "Am I a criminal?"

Once inside the Criminal Courts Building, children are taken to a

second floor waiting area, where they often wait for hours until they appear in court. The original building design did not provide a separate area where these children could play, read, or engage in other activities while they wait. In recent years, the old County Coroner's inquest office was converted to a Shelter Care area, but this makeshift space is too small and crowded to adequately serve as a waiting area for victimized children.

Another small room at the courthouse serves as an interview space where children meet with their parents and attorneys. Court-ordered supervised visitations between alleged parental abusers and their children also take place in this room. Unfortunately, due to space constraints, the interviews and visitations often occur simultaneously.

Additionally, no attorney consultation rooms exist in the Criminal Courts Building, so parents and court-appointed lawyers are forced to discuss intimate family issues in public hallways within earshot of dozens of other people awaiting their own court hearings. Nor is there a separate waiting area for parents and other family members involved in Juvenile Court proceedings. Instead, hundreds of people each day spend hours sitting on uncomfortable wooden benches in the crowded, noisy, smoke-filled, windowless corridors outside the courtrooms.

The courtrooms that handle child abuse and neglect proceedings are equally ill-suited for their current function. Like many traditional courtrooms, these were built to handle adult felony trials. They are panelled in dark wood, have high ceilings, and have a raised judge's bench that intimidates children. More than half the space in each courtroom consists of a public gallery which remains unoccupied because child abuse and neglect proceedings are confidential. Two of the courtrooms on one floor are not really courtrooms at all, but makeshift court facilities fashioned out of unventilated storage areas.

For years, Los Angeles Superior Court judges, County officials, and child advocates have pointed out the serious problems inherent in handling child abuse and neglect cases in the Criminal Courts Building. In 1974, Los Angeles County Supervisor Edmund Edelman, with the support of then-Los Angeles Superior Court Presiding Judge Alfred McCourtney, initiated efforts to create a separate facility to handle these court cases. More than 15 years later — in June 1990 — the County began construction on the first courthouse in the nation specifically designed to handle child abuse and neglect cases.

The \$59.7 million Los Angeles County Children's Court is cur-

rently under construction in Monterey Park and is expected to be completed in 1992. Construction of the twenty-five-courtroom facility, located at the intersection of the San Bernardino and Long Beach Freeways, should significantly improve the welfare of abused and neglected children. The design and construction of the Children's Court is a cooperative development of California Partnerships and Kajima International, a major architectural, engineering, and construction firm.

The building's design is the result of more than two years of work by the Children's Court Design Committee. In June 1988, Superior Court Presiding Judge Richard P. Byrne appointed a panel of judges, public officials, and child advocates to the committee to ensure that the new court building would be child-sensitive and family-oriented.

In May 1989, Kajima selected Moore Iacofano Goltsman, a design firm based in Berkeley, California, to assist in devising the child and family-sensitive features of the courthouse. Under the direction of designer Susan Goltsman, the firm interviewed hundreds of children, lawyers, judges, parents, social workers, child advocates, and others to determine the best possible design for the Children's Court. Based upon these interviews, Goltsman developed several basic design concepts. She determined that the Children's Court must be dignified, yet friendly and sensitive. It must be a place where abused and neglected children feel welcome and comfortable, and where a court appearance does not become yet another traumatic, unpleasant experience for a child.

"Traditional conceptions of an austere courthouse where people are judged by their misdeeds must be tempered by the need to demonstrate sensitivity and respect for society's most sensitive citizens — our children," Goltsman concluded. "The courthouse must communicate serious messages to abusive parents. But it must also respond to children's needs, and avoid creating an atmosphere in which children feel they are being punished."

In keeping with this architectural philosophy, the Children's Court will feature a number of innovative design elements to create an environment conducive to the needs of children and their families. The courthouse will be an L-shaped building that opens onto a courtyard to make it less imposing than a traditional courthouse. The facade resembles a house, with a peaked roof motif. Inside the courthouse, plants, art-work, and natural construction materials will be used to soften the feel of the building. Windows will be built along lengthy corridors to create a less forbidding and institutionalized environment. Children awaiting court hearings will be able to play in an outdoor playground or in a specially-designed indoor Shelter Care area. Shelter Care will be divided into two sections: one for younger

children, the other for adolescents. Both areas will provide space for children to engage in numerous activities of their choice.

The primary care area will contain space for youngsters to nap, play games, read, watch movies, create art projects, learn about science, and take part in other activities. The adolescent area will contain an aerobics studio, music and dance space, games area, quiet study and rest area, conversation pit, and a personal care and make-up area. The Shelter Care area will also contain private rooms where attorneys, social workers, child advocates, and others involved in court hearings can interview children and parents.

In addition, the Children's Court includes separate visitation rooms where children who are dependents of the court will be able to have supervised visits with their parents, brothers, sisters, and other relatives whom they have not seen since they were taken into protective custody. Parents, family members, and other people will await court hearings in separate public waiting areas containing space for parents to change children's diapers and room for children to play and nap.

Substantial space will also be allocated to a Mediation Center. In specially-designed conference rooms, professional mediators will meet with parents, children, social workers, and others in an effort to resolve court cases through a non-adversarial process.

For cases where litigation is necessary, the building's twenty-five courtrooms will provide a far different — and significantly less intimidating — setting than traditional courtrooms. The rooms will be smaller, with nine-foot ceilings, instead of the thirty-foot ceilings in the Criminal Courts Building courtrooms. Additionally, the judge's bench will be raised only six inches above standard table height, instead of the typical eighteen to thirty-six inches.

In situations where children are fearful of testifying in front of alleged abusive parents, closed circuit television will enable judges to take a child's testimony in chambers, and allow a parent to simultaneously view the testimony in the courtroom. Technological advances will also permit teleconferencing in cases. Physicians and other health and mental health professionals, located in distant medical centers and offices, can be interviewed by judges and attorneys without leaving their place of work. In certain cases, teleconferencing will permit lawyers at the courthouse to speak with children at a shelter care facility, sparing the child the stress of coming to court.

Separate interview rooms will be located adjacent to the courtrooms, where attorneys who represent parents will be able to interview their clients and witnesses. Space will also be provided for the

citizen volunteers that work for the Child's Advocate Office. The volunteers help children understand how Juvenile Court proceedings work and provide other forms of support to the children.

In addition to providing court facilities, the Children's Court will house offices of the Department of Children's Services and County Counsel, and a Sheriff's lockup area for parents who are in custody.

The child-sensitive and family-oriented design of the Children's Court is not the only feature that distinguishes the building from traditional courthouses. Construction of the nearly sixty-million-dollar facility is the result of a unique partnership effort that includes the Los Angeles County Superior Court, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, State government, the business community, local community organizations and academia.

To finance construction, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors agreed to contribute \$2.86 million annually for twenty-five years, from the Criminal Justice Facilities Temporary Construction Fund, and \$1 million annually for twenty years from other Los Angeles Superior Court projects. The State of California provided a \$600,000 grant to finance a preliminary child-sensitive design for the Children's Court. Additionally, the Board of Supervisors has established a target of one million dollars to be raised by the private sector. To attain that goal, the Rotary Club of Los Angeles created the Children's Court Committee to lead the fund-raising effort. The committee established a non-profit corporation, Child Victims in Court Foundations ("CIVIC"), to supplement and enhance the design of the building for abused and neglected children in Los Angeles County.

In addition, the Superior Court is developing a partnership with California State University at Los Angeles, which is adjacent to the Children's Court. The partnership's aims are to enhance research and knowledge about child abuse and neglect and to furnish reciprocal educational experiences for University students and the Children's Court's professional staff. The agreement calls for a mutual sharing of both resources and facilities. Graduate students representing a range of disciplines - early childhood education, child welfare, health services, mental health and public administration - will perform internships at the Children's Court and conduct research studies. The University will offer courses to the Court's professional staff, and the University's various clinics and programs will be available to the parents and children seen in the Children's Court.

The result of these labors will be realized in 1992, when construction of Los Angeles County Children's Court is completed. Superior Court judges, County officials, and child advocates believe that this innovative courthouse will establish new standards for juvenile court construction and inspire judges and government officials in other ar-

reas of the country to construct similar facilities. The new Children's Court will make a strong and positive statement about Los Angeles County's commitment to the welfare of its children. It will be a radical departure from the traditional courthouse structure — but a departure whose time has been coming for many, many years.

