



Lincoln juvenile court judge gets state honor for new problem-solving court

[Lori Pilger](#) Oct 29, 2023



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KENNETH FERRIERA, Journal Star

In her fourth floor chambers last week, Lancaster County Juvenile Court Judge Elise White got an update on one family's case before heading into the courtroom for a Zoom meeting on the record with dad.

White and her court reporter headed into the courtroom a few minutes later, where 10 faces were in boxes on two big screens.

Welcome to Lancaster County's Safe and Healthy Families Court docket.

"Good morning, how's everyone doing today?" she asked.

Later, the judge explained that video hearings work because they expect parents to be working and raising their kids, so she doesn't want to make them haul them to the courthouse once a month. White said it also gives her a chance to see them in their homes, interacting, which is good for her, too.

On this particular Tuesday, dad said things had been going really well. He talked about a weekend trip to the pumpkin patch and how much fun he had watching his son flourish and grow "and see him be the awesome little kid that he is."

He said his son used to be kind of shy. But at the pumpkin patch he was talking to all the other kids.

White said what he was describing sounded like some of the things he learned in the Circle of Security parenting program, a course he took for court designed to help parents give their children a feeling of security and confidence to explore, learn, grow and build positive relationships.

"Actually, I did not connect those dots until you just said that," the dad said. "Yeah. I guess he feels more comfortable with us now to be able to go out and explore."

"I think that's a really positive thing to see," White said. "It's one thing to be able to learn about what kids need, but it's a totally different thing to be able to see that progress and him having that secure attachment. So I think that's a really cool example."

They talked about therapy that's working and about how things have been going with drop-offs and pick-ups.

"Where we're at now, it feels so nice," dad said.

They talk about an anticipated motion by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services for reunification. His son has been in foster care with relatives since July 2021, when a domestic assault led Lincoln police to his apartment.

By Thursday, White had approved the motion, which listed off all the work dad and mom had done since then: child-parent psychotherapy, domestic violence education courses, adult probation, Circle of Security and parenting evaluations.

They've also done random drug screenings and, more recently, overnight and daily visits with their son.

The work isn't easy or quick. But it has the potential to transform lives.

This month, the Nebraska Supreme Court recognized White with a 2023 Distinguished Judge Award for her service to the community for spearheading the problem-solving court, a first of its kind not only for Nebraska, but the country, she said.

Other domestic violence problem-solving courts either are initiated by protection orders being filed or by criminal cases. But there's nothing else child-welfare based, like the Safe and Healthy Families Court, White said.

And with so many stakeholders and community partners. She said the Administrative Office of Court and Probation and HHS have an agreement that has led to a team that has become experts in the field and continued training and education.

White said the court is designed to support child and parent survivors of domestic violence and hold perpetrators more accountable and modeled after family-treatment drug courts.

"We're trying to uplift both parents to be the best versions of themselves, rather than shaming for what's happened," the judge said.

And, unlike some problem-solving courts, this one is non-voluntary. If the case meets the criteria of a domestic violence-related child maltreatment case, it goes on the docket.



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"The reason behind it not being voluntary is because really the parties being harmed are children," White said.

Historically, she said, she doesn't know that child welfare did a good job engaging the abusers, instead focusing on the victims moving and getting a protection order to try to keep them away.

"What we're seeing is more engagement with the perpetrator of domestic violence," White said.

Accepting the distinguished judge award, she said that when she tells other judges domestic violence cases are her favorite cases on her docket, they look at her like she's crazy.

"Until I am able to show the really compelling data that we have gathered from the families we serve and the cross-disciplinary stakeholders working together to support these families," she said.

On her docket, 90% of cases are closed with children who had been taken out of the home back with their parents, compared with 75% in cases that don't go through the Safe and Healthy Families Court.

Parent surveys also show more positive perceptions of the process.

Presenting the award, Chief Justice Michael Heavican said White "has been a catalyst for change and instrumental in implementing successful practices in handling domestic violence and child abuse cases in Lancaster County."

He said her leadership has brought about a shift in culture that has improved outcomes for children and families through improving communication and collaboration between court professionals, HHS, advocates and the families involved in the court system.

"Since being appointed in 2020, Judge White didn't just change the system — she successfully transitioned how the system works by fostering relationships; appreciating the strengths everyone brings to the table, including the families; and positioning the child welfare system to better support domestic violence survivors and their children," Heavican said.

White is quick to give credit to the team and team meetings, which she called the "secret sauce."

"Getting this court up and running has been the product of an incredibly talented and passionate group of people who came together with the common goal of improving outcomes of families experiencing domestic violence," she said.

White said Judge Linda Porter, who retired in 2020, got the process rolling in 2017 as a subcommittee of the Through the Eyes of a Child court initiative, which led to a needs assessment in 2019 that showed areas where responses could be improved.

When Porter was nearing retirement, she told White she didn't want to see it die and asked her to take it over.

"So a lot of this has been about having a more community-centered response and trying to increase our knowledge base as a whole system," White said.

In April 2020, she took over the domestic-violence docket, which secured a Breakthrough Initiative Grant from the the Woods Charitable Fund a year later and was renamed the Safe and Healthy Families Court.

But even before she was a judge, White said it was an area she was interested in because she could see how much it touched so many families.

"And then the team just really has been tremendous in hitting the ground running," she said.