

Peoria and Tazewell Counties Visitation Center

Peoria and Tazewell Counties are located in central Illinois. According to the Census Bureau, the 2004 estimated population of Peoria County is 182,418 with a land area of 620 square miles and Tazewell County population is 129,132 with a land area of 649 square miles. In 2004, Peoria County entered 1,033 Emergency Orders of Protection, 7 Interim Orders of Protection and 427 Plenary Orders of Protection into the Law Enforcement Administrative Data System (LEADS). In 2004, Tazewell County entered 898 Emergency Orders of Protection, 16 Interim Orders of Protection and 412 Plenary Orders of Protection into LEADS.

The following information was gathered through an interview process with local key stakeholders describing the formation, procedures and needs of the Peoria & Tazewell Counties Visitation Center. The following people were interviewed for the purpose of this report:

- **John Flynn**, Court Administrator, *10th Judicial Circuit*
- **Ginny Hanley**, Coordinator, *Peoria and Tazewell Counties Visitation Center*
- **Honorable Jerlyn Maher**, Associate Judge, *10th Judicial Circuit*

Development of the Peoria and Tazewell Counties Visitation Center

Due to conflict occurring during visitation exchanges and increased safety concerns for victims of domestic violence, then Chief Judge Bruce Black convened a Steering Committee in 1999 to look at the possibility of developing an exchange program. The Committee included the Chief Judge, representatives from the Bradley University Departments of Education and Social Work and the Peoria County Sheriff's Department.

The original Visitation Center began in August 1999 with a grant from Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services for court ordered supervised visitation for never married parents with child support cases, but it did not include visitation exchange. In 2001, the County Board approved a filing fee for civil court cases to assist in expanding the existing supervised visitation program to include visitation exchange. The family court cases being referred to the Peoria and Tazewell Counties Visitation Center include approximately 50% paternity, 30% domestic violence and 20% divorce. Ninety percent of the cases begin as supervised visitation and last for at least 3 months and then, if appropriate, progress to visitation exchanges. The other 10% of cases are visitation exchange. As the program grew, it relocated from the courthouse to the Lakeview YWCA in order to accommodate the caseload. The Peoria and Tazewell Counties Visitation Center currently serves 25 families a month.

Program Administration

The 10th Judicial Circuit oversees the Peoria and Tazewell Counties Visitation Center. The Visitation Center staff are contracted employees of the court.

Site/Location

The Peoria and Tazewell Counties Visitation Center is currently located at the Lakeview YWCA facility. Since there is only one entrance and parking lot the arrival and departure times of the parents are staggered. Exchanges are available Thursdays and Fridays from 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m., Saturday 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday 1:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

Security

The Peoria and Tazewell Counties Visitation Center provides no onsite security. One staff person is assigned to the sign-in desk and monitors parents arriving and leaving. If a client becomes disruptive, the staff has been trained to call 911 for assistance.

Funding

The Peoria and Tazewell Counties Visitation Center receives an annual grant from Illinois Department of Health Care and Family Services for court ordered supervised visitation in paternity cases and collects an \$8.00 filing fee in Peoria County on each civil case to fund the exchange portion of the Visitation Center.

Staffing

The Peoria and Tazewell Counties Visitation Center has at least four staff members present during exchanges. They include a coordinator, a staff member assigned to the front desk and a minimum of two facilitators. There are 11 part time facilitators and 2 part time coordinators to perform the duties of the exchanges. All staff have a college degree and experience in social work or providing social services. The Visitation Center has a one-hour staff meeting every other week to discuss cases and procedures. New staff observes visits before facilitating visits on their own.

Protocols/Procedures

Types of cases

Families are referred to the Peoria and Tazewell Counties Visitation Center by the court and families must have a court order to participate. Most non-custodial parents using the Visitation Center are actually court ordered to have supervised visitation and then progress to unsupervised visitation with supervised exchanges if they have been in compliance with the court order and the visits have occurred without incident.

Procedures

Intake

- All new families are screened by the courthouse liaison, which includes a criminal history for families with orders of protection. First, the liaison explains the process of the Visitation Center and provides the parents with a copy of the rules. Second, the liaison discusses the hours available for exchange, confirms the time of exchange, and schedules the first exchange date. Third, the liaison contacts the coordinator at the Visitation Center and provides information regarding the parents including criminal history and the date the first exchange will occur.
- During the first exchange, the Visitation Center staff does an intake with each parent separately.
- The parent is then required to bring a copy of the court order and identification to each visit.

Exchange Process

- The Visitation Center provides an educational component to both the custodial and non-custodial parent, which includes positive co-parenting and communication skills.

- The custodial parent arrives 15 minutes before the exchange with the child and remains 15 minutes after the exchange. During the wait time, the parent participates in the educational component.
- The non-custodial parent arrives at the time of the exchange, picks up the child and immediately leaves.
- When returning the child to the custodial parent, the non-custodial parent arrives 15 minutes before the exchange, remains 15 minutes after the exchange and receives the educational component.
- The custodial parent arrives at time of exchange, picks up the child and immediately leaves.

Records and Reporting

The Visitation Center provides a report to the court when the judge requests one. The report is sealed and only for use by the court. The judge may use the report as a tool when deciding whether parents should continue with the Visitation Center or if they are able to have exchanges unsupervised. The reports cannot be used by either party as a litigation tool.

Additionally, when a non-custodial parent misses two visits without notifying the Visitation Center they are sent a letter from the court liaison terminating the visits and a report is sent to the court for the judge's review.

If the custodial parent misses two visits the court liaison sends them a letter stating that they in violation of the court order and a report is sent to the court for the judge's review.

Other Services Provided

The Peoria and Tazewell Counties Visitation Center provides supervised visitation.

Data Collection

The courthouse liaison tracks specific data for the Peoria and Tazewell Counties Visitation Center. Data collected includes information on income, age, level of education, race, marital status and occupation of the parents.

Advisory Committee

Currently, there is not an advisory committee, although one was convened when the Peoria and Tazewell Counties Visitation Center was originally developed.

Promotion/Marketing

The Peoria and Tazewell Counties Visitation Center has developed brochures that describe services provided and lists the phone numbers for the Visitation Center and the courthouse liaison. They are available at the Visitation Center, the courthouse and several social service agencies in the community.