

Will County Child Visitation Exchange Center

Will County is south of Cook County and is one of the fastest growing counties in Illinois. According to the Census Bureau, the 2004 estimated population of Will County is 613,849 with a land area of 837 square miles. In 2004, 1,413 Emergency Orders of Protection, 60 Interim Orders of Protection and 573 Plenary Orders of Protection were entered into the Law Enforcement Administrative Data System (LEADS).

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

- **Ann Dralle**, Board Member, *Will County District #3*
- **Jeff Hanley**, Lieutenant, *Village of Shorewood Police Department*
- **Barbara Kneysberg**, Coordinator, *Child Visitation Exchange Center*
- **Kurt Sangmeister**, Court Administrator, *12th Judicial Circuit*

Development of the Will County Child Visitation Exchange Center

The process of developing an exchange center began in 2000, following the passage of the state statute Public Act 91-0811 (**55 ILCS 82**) that allowed county boards to create a filing fee for civil court cases to fund visitation exchange centers.

The Coordinator of the Twelfth Judicial Circuit Family Violence Coordinating Council (FVCC) presented to then Chief Judge Rodney Lechwar the concept of an exchange center. A need for an exchange center was identified because families with domestic violence and high conflict divorce cases were experiencing unsafe situations when exchanging their children for visitation. The only option for the court was to order the visitation exchange to occur in a public place. Police department parking lots and fast food restaurants were commonly used because it was a public place and it provided some sense of security. However, there was a stigma associated with exchanging children in parking lots and often altercations occurred between parents at the time of the exchange.

The Chief Judge, law enforcement personnel and private attorneys were strong supporters of the project from the beginning because a center would provide a safe alternative to public places. Thus, the court administrator was directed by the Chief Judge to develop a proposal for an exchange center. The court administrator worked with the chair of the judiciary committee of the Will County Board in the passage of the proposal. The judiciary committee approved the project and it was then approved by the full board. The proposal included a filing fee for civil cases in order to fund the exchange center. The Will County Child Visitation Exchange Center opened five years ago, in July 2001 and currently provides services to 15 families.

Program Administration

The 12th Judicial Circuit administers the Will County Child Visitation Exchange Center.

Site/Location

The Will County Child Visitation Exchange Center is located at the River Valley Justice Center in Joliet. This is also the home of the Juvenile Detention Center (JDC). The JDC was an

appropriate choice for the Visitation Exchange Center because it has two separate parking lots and entrances. There is also a locked hallway between the two sides of the building so parents are not able to access the other side.

The Visitation Exchange Center is open for exchanges on Wednesdays from 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. and Fridays and Sundays from 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.

Security

The Sheriff's Department provides deputies for security at the Will County Child Visitation Exchange Center. Hallway doors are opened with a swipe card and deputies have radios to communicate between the front and back of the building to assist in coordinating exchanges.

Funding

The Will County Board passed a \$5.00 filing fee for each civil case in order to fund the Will County Child Visitation Exchange Center. This is the only funding they receive. Salaries for deputies and part time staff are paid with these fees. The facility and the office are in-kind donations by the County.

Staffing

The Will County Child Visitation Exchange Center employs two part time staff and two deputies from the Will County Sheriff's Department. Currently, staff members have completed a 40-hour domestic violence training.

Protocols/Procedures

Types of cases

Only families with a court order can use the Will County Child Visitation Exchange Center. If the use of the Visitation Exchange Center has not been court ordered, but a parent feels they need a more safe exchange environment, they can file a motion with the court at the Will County Circuit Clerk's Office and request a hearing. Once a hearing is granted, the judge may issue a court order for the exchange to be made at the Visitation Exchange Center.

Procedures

Intake

The court gives the parents the contact information for the Visitation Exchange Center and each parent contacts them to set up an appointment for intake and schedule exchanges:

- Both parents are interviewed separately by Visitation Exchange Center staff before the first visit and an information sheet is completed which includes the parent's contact information and any additional persons listed on the court order who are allowed to make exchanges (such as grandparents or other relatives).
- Each parent brings their copy of the court order that specifies custody and the schedule for visitation. A copy is made for the file.

Exchange Process

- Both parents are asked to arrive 10 to 15 minutes before the exchange. Although they arrive at the same time, the parents use separate parking lots and entrances. The non-custodial parent uses the front entrance and enters through a metal detector.
- The child is then escorted through the building with one Visitation Exchange Center staff member and one deputy. The custodial parent leaves immediately.
- An Intake/Return Sheet is completed for each exchange. The form lists the name of the facilitators, the deputies on duty, and the time each parent entered the building.
- The non-custodial parent receiving the child then signs the sheet to indicate that they have received the child. Also noted is the time the exchange occurs as well as any explanation if the exchange was delayed. Space is provided for additional comments such as medication required for the child, or homework to be completed. The facilitator can also make comments on this form including timeliness of parent or any behaviors of the parent that seem unusual.
- When the child is returned, the facilitator checks the sheet and confirms if medications, homework, etc. has been returned with the child.
- The custodial parent signs the form indicating the exchange was completed and records the time.
- Parents must call if they are going to be late. If the parent is later than 15 minutes, the parent dropping off the child can cancel the exchange.

Records and Reporting

There is no formal reporting process with the court. The facilitator makes any appropriate notes about the exchange on the Intake/Return Sheet and adds it to the child's file at the Visitation Exchange Center. If an incident occurs that requires notification of the court, an incident report is completed on a Court Report Form and is sent to the Circuit Clerk's Office to be entered into the court file and reviewed by the judge at the next status hearing. If the incident is a significant break in the Visitation Exchange Center's rules the coordinator takes the report directly to the judge for review. The judge can set a hearing and modify the court order such as having a grandparent complete the exchange.

Other Services Provided

No other services are provided by the Will County Child Visitation Exchange Center.

Data Collection

Currently, data is not collected by the Will County Child Visitation Exchange Center.

Advisory Committee

The Will County Child Visitation Exchange Center does not have an advisory committee.

Promotion/Marketing

Brochures about the Will County Child Visitation Exchange Center are currently available in the courtrooms that hear family law cases, the Circuit Clerk's Office, the State's Attorney Office and the local police departments. Future marketing plans include presentations at monthly meetings of family law attorneys and the chiefs of police meetings as well as making brochures available at all police departments, churches and Regional Offices of Education.

Needs

An additional site, in another part of the county, is being considered because of the distance some parents currently have to travel. There is a possibility of using the new Sheriff's office substation in Mokena as a second site.