



Illinois Family Violence Coordinating Councils

Visitation Exchange Centers Project Summary Report

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Introduction

Family violence does not always cease when a couple is legally separated or divorced. In fact it often escalates. In addition, child custody and the exchange of children for visitation becomes a new forum for continued abuse, monitoring and stalking of the victim. It is generally recognized that the most dangerous time for a victim of domestic violence is after she leaves. The continued contact with the abuser during visitation exchanges only increases that danger and allows for access to the victim. Some victims will even return to abusive relationships because of threats to take or hurt the children during visitation exchanges.

Often the court system has attempted to remedy the situation by ordering the exchange of children in a public place, such as a police department or fast food restaurant or at the home of a designated family member. Typically, these exchanges have led to high conflict situations resulting in law enforcement intervention. Therefore, many communities have developed Visitation Exchange Centers (VEC).

Visitation Exchange Centers are designed to provide a safe, monitored, neutral environment for parents to exchange their children for court ordered visitation. The VEC minimizes the potential for violence and manipulation and in turn reduces the need for law enforcement involvement. Additionally, the VEC helps to protect children from being victims of or witnesses to abuse or violence and provides a secure, positive environment to interact with parents.

Purpose of the Visitation Exchange Project

The safe exchange of children affects many domains of the court, including domestic relations, parentage courts, child support courts, domestic violence courts, probate, mental health, and child protection. Issues of safety, child development, and positive family relationships require a unified approach. This project was formed to create a report on the visitation exchange of children in families with domestic violence. It is based on a fundamental understanding and respect for the needs and rights of children and parents to interact with each other in an appropriate and sensitive environment, and consideration for the needs of the courts. The report on visitation exchange will identify and survey existing sites; address safe access between a community's children and parents; and address visitation exchange locations as venues for interventions in child protection, domestic relations, and domestic violence.

The Process of the Visitation Exchange Project

The passage of the **55 Illinois Compiled Statutes 82**, *The Neutral Site Custody Exchange Funding Act* has been the impetus for an increase in established visitation exchange sites. Therefore, the current focus of the project is to visit the seven functioning sites outside of Cook Illinois Family Violence Coordinating Councils - Visitation Exchange Centers Project 2006

County, complete individual reports on each site, create a summary report and hold a Round Table.

To gain insight into each of the visitation exchange centers, interviews were conducted with key stakeholders at each of the following VEC:

- DuPage County Family Center Neutral Exchange Program
- Madison County Kids' Corner
- McLean County Family Visitation Center
- Peoria and Tazewell Counties Visitation Center
- Rock Island County Safe Passage Program
- St. Clair County Visitation Exchange Centers
- Will County Visitation Exchange Center

**While three Visitation Exchange Centers are located in Cook County, due to the unique nature of the Cook County system, the Cook County centers will be interviewed and reports generated in fiscal year 2007.*

After each site visit a report on the VEC was written and sent to all the individuals interviewed for their comments and corrections. The reports were then revised based on feedback and then re-distributed to everyone interviewed.

The report will include a comparison of services and policies of the current sites; security provided by centers; reporting to the courts; and offer illustrations of emerging trends nationally and unique characteristics of Illinois centers.

The purpose of the Round Table is to share the results of the project with communities that currently have or are interested in establishing a visitation exchange center and to begin a mechanism for networking between existing and future sites.

Components of a Visitation Exchange Program

Generally, there are universally accepted components of visitation exchange programs. They are:

- The facility has separate parking lots and entrances so that custodial and non-custodial parents have less opportunity for contact. The separate parking lots and entrances also allow for better monitoring by security.
- The arrival and departures of the custodial and non-custodial parents are staggered. Again, this eliminates any need for contact between the parents, leading to a decrease in manipulation by the abuser and a better environment for the children.
- An assessment and implementation of appropriate security measures to meet the safety needs of the child and parents. This can include measures such as: security officers present at the center, access to 911 for staff, cameras in the facility and/or parking lots, and photographs taken of parents and children.

- A defined reporting process to the court for compliance and non-compliance of court orders and exchange program policies and procedures.
- Record keeping policies and procedures. Records should include monitoring parents' participation in exchanges, compliance with court orders, drug and alcohol abuse, behaviors of the children and any referrals for additional services.

Overview of the Visitation Exchange Centers Interviewed

	DuPage County	Madison County	McLean County	Peoria & Tazewell Counties	Rock Island County	St Clair County	Will County
Center Opened	June 2003	December 2005	September 1999	August 1999	Fall 2001	January 2000 & Jan 2001	July 2001
Program Administration	DuPage County Dept of Human Services	Children First Foundation	The Children's Foundation	10 th Judicial Circuit	Bethany for Children & Families	Children First Foundation	12 th Judicial Circuit
Funding	Filing Fee * \$8.00	Filing Fee * \$4.00	Safe Havens Federal Grant	Filing Fee * \$8.00	Reg fee \$25, Each parent \$5.00 per visit	Filing Fee * \$5.00	Filing Fee * \$5.00
Site Location	DuPage County Family Center	Madison County Facility	The Children's Foundation	Lakeview YWCA	First Baptist and Newcomb Presbyterian Churches	St. Elizabeth and Touchette Regional Hospitals	River Valley Justice Center
Hours of Operation	Wed. 4-9 pm Thurs. 4-9 pm Fri. 4-9 pm Sat. 8 am-12pm Sun. 3-8 pm	Fri. 5-7:45 pm Sun. 5-7:45 pm	Mon.-Sun. 9 am-9 pm	Thurs. 5-8 pm Fri. 5-8 pm Sat. 9 am-5 pm Sun. 1-8 pm	Fri. 5:30-6:15 pm Sun. 4:30-6:00 pm	Wed. 4- 7:45 pm (St. Elizabeth) Fri. 5- 7:45 pm Sun. 5- 7:45 pm	Wed. 5-9 pm Fri. 5-7 pm Sun. 5-7 pm
Average # of families served a month	60 families	10 families	7 families	25 families	24 families	63 families	15 families
Number of Staff Present During Exchanges	2 facilitators 2 support staff	1 staff	1 to 2 staff	4 staff	1 staff 4 volunteers	1 staff	2 facilitators
Other services Provided	Supervised visitation, mediation, and court ordered parenting education	No additional services provided	Supervised visitation, transportation, parenting/child groups, therapy and crisis nursery	Supervised visitation	Supervised visitation, mediation, counseling, and parent education groups	No additional services provided	No additional services provided

	DuPage County	Madison County	McLean County	Peoria & Tazewell Counties	Rock Island County	St Clair County	Will County
Center Security	Security Officer	Security Officer	Cameras and panic buttons	Staff at the desk monitors and calls 911 if needed	Walkie-talkies and cell phones	Security Officer	Sheriff's Deputies
Advisory Committee	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
Reporting to Court	An initial report is sent after the first 90 days and subsequently if there is non-compliance with the court order or Program rules	Reports are provided when there is non-compliance with the court order or Program rules	Reports are provided on a quarterly basis unless there is an issue with non-compliance that needs immediate attention	Upon request of the judge or if there is non-compliance with the court order or Center rules	Upon request of the judge or if there is non-compliance with the court order or Program rules	Reports are provided when there is non-compliance with the court order or Center rules	When requested or if there is non-compliance with the court order or the Center rules

***55 Illinois Compiled Statute 82 - Neutral Site Custody Exchange Funding Act** gives county boards the ability to assess a filing fee of up to \$8.00 per civil case to assist in funding visitation exchange sites

Highlights from the Interviews

During the visitation exchange center interviews, it was clear that not every center operates exactly the same. Each system has its own unique characteristics and issues. The following are aspects of each system specific to particular communities.

Transportation Provided for Clients—McLean County Family Visitation Center

The staff of the Center is able to provide transportation, when needed, to clients of the Center.

Educational Component—Peoria and Tazewell Counties Visitation Center

The staff at the Center provides education on positive co-parenting and communication skills to both the custodial and non-custodial parents during the time they wait for the exchange to occur.

Status Report Submitted After the First 90 days—DuPage County Family Center Neutral Exchange Program

A status report is submitted to the court after the first 90 days of supervised exchanges. This provides the judge information for status hearings and keeps the court informed of initial compliance. Subsequently, additional reports are submitted to the court if there are issues of non-compliance with either the Center's rules or the court order.

Monthly Meetings with the Domestic Relations Judges—DuPage County Family Center Neutral Exchange Program

Program staff meets with the domestic relations judges monthly to discuss information and issues of the Program. The meetings provide an opportunity to inform the judges of services and create better coordination and communication between the Program and the court.

Two Sites for Exchanges—St. Clair County Visitation Exchange Centers

After opening the original exchange site at St. Elizabeth Hospital in Belleville it was determined that an additional site was also necessary to meet the needs of the community. Therefore, one year later a second site was opened at Touchette Regional Hospital in Centreville.

Multiple Referral Sources—McLean County Family Visitation Center

Families are not only referred to the McLean County Family Visitation Center by the court, but from attorneys, domestic violence programs, other social service agencies and family self-referrals as well. In addition, families must have experienced or are experiencing domestic violence, physical abuse, sexual abuse, or stalking issues.

Exchanges in Two States—Rock Island County Safe Passage Program

Due to the geographic nature of the Quad Cities and funding, the Safe Passage Program offers visitation exchange in Rock Island, Illinois and Davenport, Iowa. Each site operates every other weekend and families are able to access both sites.

Group Orientation Sessions—Madison County Kids’ Corner, St. Clair County Visitation Exchange Centers

These programs provide group orientation sessions to go over policies, procedures and complete an intake on each parent. Parents participate in separate orientation groups, in order to provide a more safe orientation process.

40-Hour Domestic Violence Training for Staff—Will County Child Visitation Exchange Center

The staff of the Will County Child Visitation Exchange Center has received the 40-hour domestic violence training. Due to the fact that most cases received by the Center involve domestic violence, the 40-hour training has been extremely helpful for staff with client contact, understanding orders of protection and coordination with the court system.

Needs Identified

Several needs were identified by the Visitation Exchange Centers. They are currently looking for resources to help fill these needs and are interested in learning more from the other centers on how they address the varying issues.

- ***Funding.*** While the funding sources varied from center to center, centers universally discussed the need for additional funding. Some are concerned about the possibility of certain funding sources drying up and cutting allocations to their center, while others felt they could expand services and hire additional staff with more funding.
- ***Marketing.*** The sites discussed the need to develop a marketing strategy to promote their centers more effectively with the court and criminal justice systems as well as the community. It is important for the community to be aware of the importance and need of the center as well as gain an understanding of what is being done to address the needs of victims and their children. In addition, better marketing would lead to an increase in facility usage as well as additional donations.
- ***Coordination with the Court System.*** Since the centers are relatively new, many are revising and adjusting policy and procedures as needed. Therefore, many are still trying to work out frequency as well as the most effective means of communication regarding exchanges and compliance with the court orders.
- ***Advisory Committee.*** While some sites currently have advisory committees, others expressed an interest in forming or revitalizing past committees. A multi-disciplinary advisory committee can help facilitate system problem-solving, enhance communication among the various components that relate to the center and help clarify the roles of each aspect of the system.

- ***Coordination with Other Sites.*** Centers expressed an interest in developing networking possibilities with other sites in the state as a way to learn from each other and share the insight each center has gained.
- ***Additional Sites.*** Many of the various Visitation Exchange Centers felt that additional centers, in other parts of the county or neighboring counties would be beneficial for the needs of the communities it serves. Some families have barriers to using the current site due to issues such as; a lack of transportation, cultural barriers and the time spent driving to and from the sites. Additional facilities may increase the number of families served.
- ***Transportation.*** Many sites, particularly ones without a good public transportation infrastructure, stated that transportation to and from the center for both parents is often a major challenge.
- ***On-going Training for Staff.*** On-going training for staff on issues such as safety, child abuse, domestic violence and how to handle difficult clients would be helpful for staff to continue to meet the needs of the clients.
- ***Addition of Supervised Visitation.*** While some sites already provide supervised visitation others expressed an interest in expanding services to include supervised visitation. There is a need in most communities for trained staff and space for supervised visitation services. The philosophy and purpose of visitation exchange centers tend to be a good fit with supervised visitation services.

Emerging Trends

On a national basis, Visitation Exchange Centers are exploring questions about how their centers relate to the court systems.

- If they provide a service to the courts, what type of accountability do they have?
- How should centers communicate with the courts when there is incomplete information or parents may not be appropriate for reasons of substance abuse or mental health?
- When centers report to the court, what should be the content of the report?
- What if the staff feels there is a risk of imminent harm to a child or a parent? When and how do they alert the court?

Additional conversations are occurring around other issues, such as:

- What type of information should be kept in the files of parents using the centers? What type of documentation is necessary?
- How should staff be trained on record keeping?
- How much training should staff have on the dynamics of family violence, child development, safety strategies, etc.?

- What are the liability issues for centers regarding turning a child over into an unsafe situation, such as a parent who seems impaired?
- Should centers be providing services, such as education, transportation and counseling?
- What type of coordination or co-locating with established family service programs is occurring when implementing new centers in order to provide multiple services?

The Illinois Family Violence Coordinating Councils will continue to monitor emerging trends and provide resources to Illinois centers.

Looking Toward the Future

The interviews of the Visitation Exchange Project are just the first step in trying to understand, document and disseminate information about the trends related to visitation exchange programs in Illinois. The programs are part of a fluid process, one that is still in development. In addition, many communities are identifying safe exchange as a need and are looking for ways to open a center. As new programs begin and others mature, new challenges and trends will emerge. For these reasons, the Visitation Exchange Project will continue.

The creation of a learning network and the establishment of regular gatherings will provide and facilitate opportunities for problem-solving, education, support and networking among the visitation exchange centers. The opportunities will foster collaboration and strengthen the common goals of the centers: providing a safe, secure, neutral location for parents to exchange children, away from violence and abuse.