

Using Research to Improve the Quality of Dependency Court Hearing Practice: *A Study of Four Texas Courts*

Fall 2012

In Texas, youth who remain in care for more than a year enter Permanent Managing Conservatorship, and a permanency review hearing is held at least every six months that they remain in care. These hearings are a key opportunity for judges to spur progress toward permanency by cultivating collaboration and accountability between parties supporting the youth.

Organizations such as the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and Texas Appleseed have recommended best practices for these hearings. The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which these best practices in permanency hearings are implemented and explore the relationship between quality hearing practice and permanency outcomes. This study also illustrates how observational methods can be used to illuminate court practice and target areas for reform.

Based on structured observations of 74 hearings across 4 jurisdictions, we found a number of best practices are not consistently implemented.

Download the full report at <http://www.casey.org/courts>

Review hearings should include substantive discussion

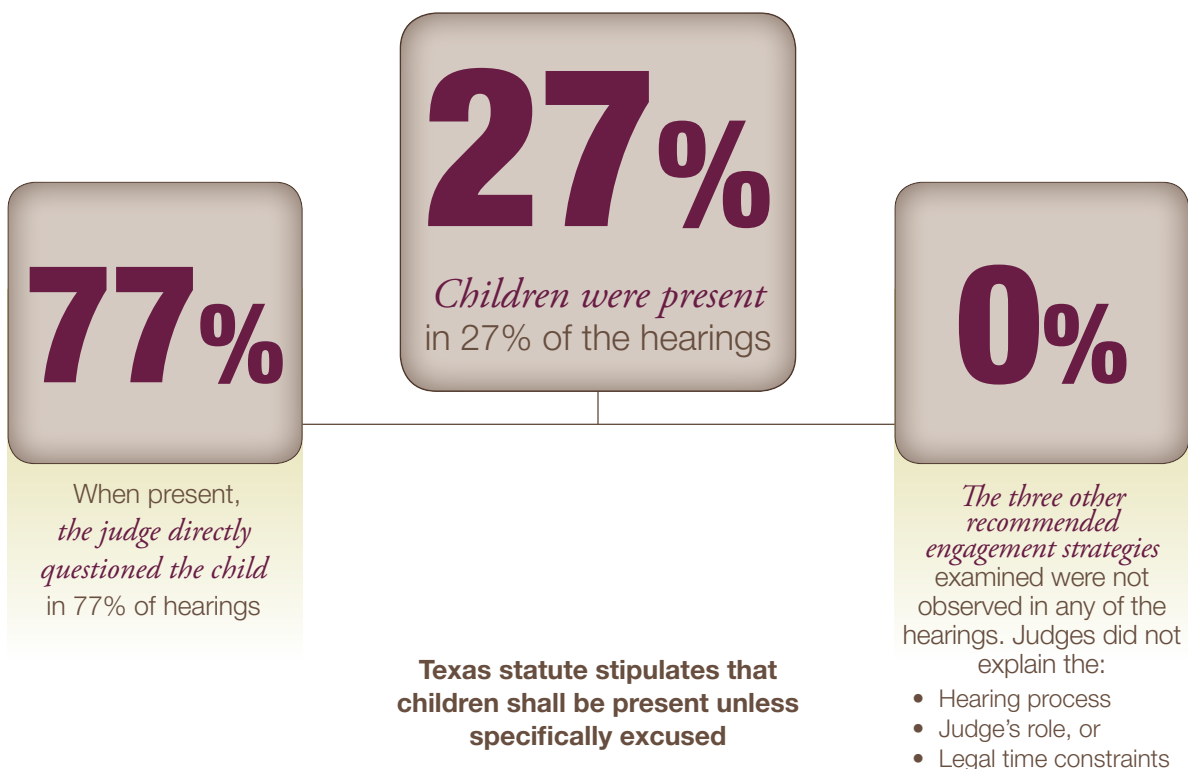
of key topics relevant to the case

Discussed		Not Discussed
30%	<i>Roles and responsibilities</i> of parties	70%
37%	Opportunities for <i>relative placement</i>	63%
56%	Adoption <i>efforts</i>	44%
63%	Educational <i>needs</i>	37%
64%	Permanency plan <i>reviewed</i>	36%
76%	<i>Next steps</i> in the case	24%

Essential topics such as these should be discussed at every review hearing

BEST PRACTICES

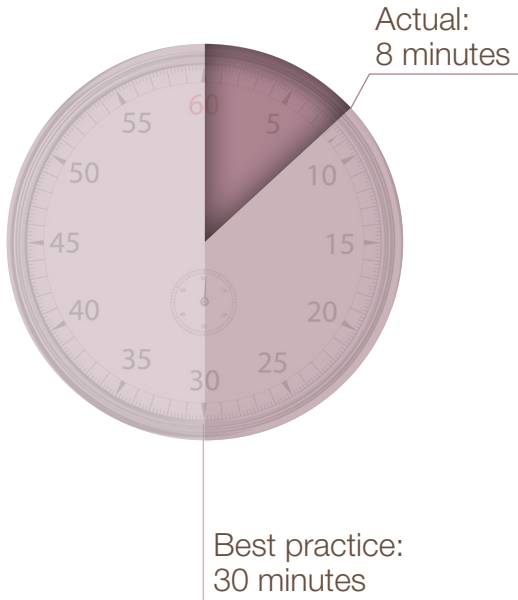
Age-appropriate children **should be present and engaged**



Review hearings should

allow sufficient time for discussion

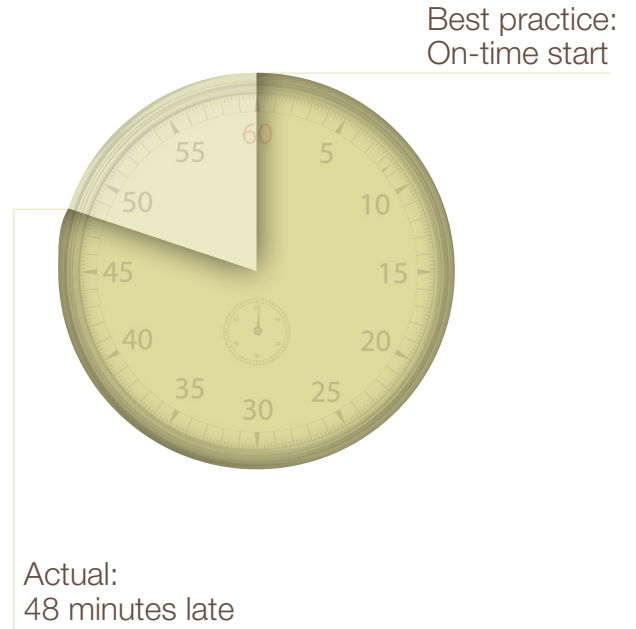
Average Hearing Duration



Hearings should start on time

to make it easier for parties to attend

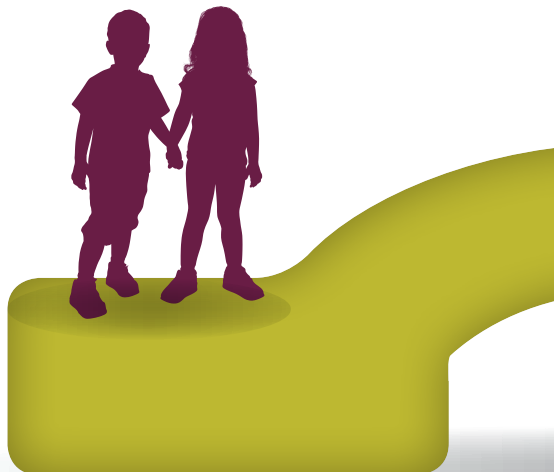
Average Hearing Delay



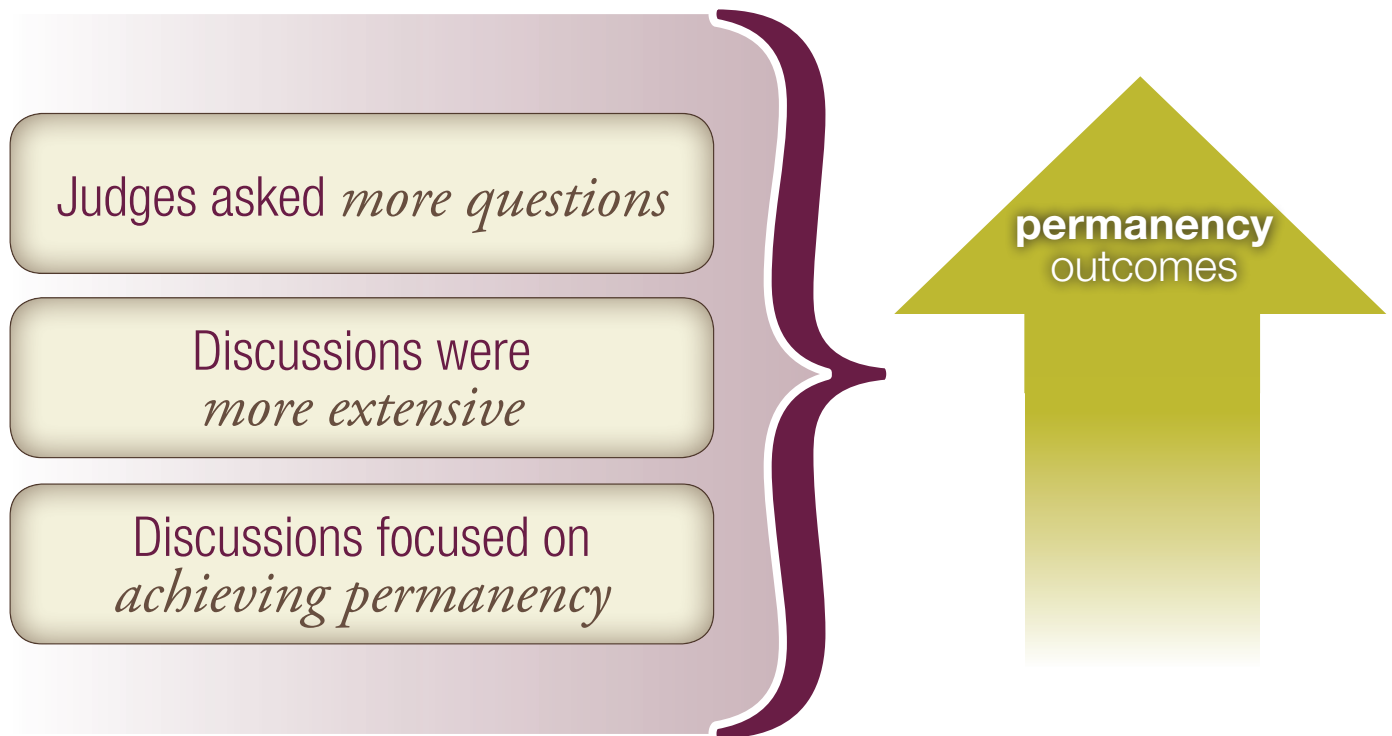
BEST PRACTICES

Only 42%

of hearings focused on finding a permanent home

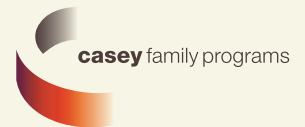


In two of the four courts, the following **hearing practices were associated with better permanency outcomes** as documented in a previous study



IMPLICATIONS

While this research should be considered exploratory, it demonstrates how observational methods can target areas for judicial reform, and it provides a basis to link practice to outcomes with more rigorous designs. Overall, implementation of many best practices was low, and there was substantial variation between judges, highlighting the need for judicial leadership in implementation of the hearing practices recommended by organizations like NCJFCJ and Texas Appleseed.



For more information on this study: <http://www.casey.org/courts>

For more information on hearing best practice:
<http://www.ncjfcj.org/resource-library/publications/child-abuse-and-neglect>