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Pinellas County Domestic Violence Court To Debut With Emphasis on Compliance

CLEARWATER – Utilizing a \$300,000 grant from the Office of Violence Against Women and collaboration with local officials, the Sixth Judicial Circuit will initiate Pinellas County’s new Civil Domestic Violence (DV) Court next month, emphasizing that respondents comply with conditions of orders in DV cases.

Civil DV Court will provide special dockets dealing with allegations of abuse and/or violence by a spouse, other family member or intimate partner. The special dockets – including cases of sexual and dating violence – are heard on Wednesdays at the courthouse in St. Petersburg and Thursdays at the courthouse in Clearwater.

Such cases – commonly referred to as “Return Hearings” – offer an opportunity for petitioners to seek final injunctions for protection against domestic violence. The eight circuit judges who serve in the Family Law Division will handle the DV calendars on a rotating basis.

Each year, more than 3,500 persons go into Pinellas courts to allege abuse by spouses, domestic partners or date relations.

Circuit Judge Jack Helinger, the circuit’s administrative judge in the Family Law Division, said, “We have allocated more court time to offer a better opportunity to have these cases heard, and we have better prepared and educated all judges and non-judicial staff in the court.” When protective orders are continued or issued after the return hearings, the respondents who are assigned counseling responsibilities will be given dates to come back to court and show they are complying with or have completed terms of the protective order.

Accused abusers are often ordered to deal with their problems by enrolling in a batterer’s intervention program or undergoing mental health and/or substance abuse evaluations. Such assignments are designed to halt the repeat patterns of many DV cases. Respondents will now have to return to court to show that they are complying with the conditions. Newly hired case managers (one fulltime and one part-time) will track the cases and schedule compliance hearings.

In addition, the grant provides funds for a magistrate, who will be at the courthouse on the days of the return hearings to deal with matters that relate to children affected by the alleged abuse. The parties no longer will have to return to court to argue matters of child custody or visitation. The parties will be sent from the return DV hearing to a hearing before the magistrate to work through these issues.

“Recognizing the impact that domestic violence has on relations – particularly on families and children,” Judge Helinger said, “the DV court will provide the framework to better address the underlying issues.”

A third element of the program is a contract between the Pinellas Board of County Commissioners and CASA (Community Action Stops Abuse), the St. Petersburg agency that strives to stop domestic violence through advocacy, empowerment, and social change. The agency places victim advocates in the offices of the Pinellas Clerk of Court to support abuse victims when they seek protection orders. The advocates help the victims understand the different types of abuse, fill out necessary paperwork, answer questions and direct them to needed services or shelters.

In order to make sure the grant-funded resources deal with cases involving family abuse and sexual and dating violence, the court has set up separate calendars at the Pinellas Criminal Justice Center to deal with repeat, non-intimate domestic violence cases and cases with allegations of stalking.

Opening of the DV court comes after a year of planning and preparation that began last year, shortly after the Office on Violence Against Women approved the award of \$299,310 from the U.S. Department of Justice Court Training & Improvement Fund. Judge Helinger said that “With the DV grant and the work of many people in the court system, we have reviewed and improved how we address the issue of domestic violence and its effect on other Family Law cases.”

About a year ago, a task force – Pinellas County Collaboration to Prevent Domestic Violence – was set up to review and recommend changes in procedures and protocols for handling DV cases. Representatives of the offices of the court-related agencies, local legal aid groups, the Haven of RCS, CASA, Sheriff, other law enforcement agencies, domestic violence treatment providers, and the local community served on the task force.