

House Bill 1354, entry-level law enforcement officers now will be required to participate in education and training in response to, and investigation of, domestic violence cases, as well as training in investigation for evidence-based prosecutions. Originally, the bill mandated 16 hours of education and training, but the final version of the bill leaves the exact standards and levels of training to the discretion of the N.C. Criminal Justice Education and Training Standards Commission and the N.C. Sheriffs' Education and Training Standards Commission. Both commissions were required to

implement the training by March 1, 2005, and report to the General Assembly on the exact standards implemented and dates they were implemented. Active officers are required to receive similar training.

According to Derek Poarch, Chair of the Education and Training Committee of the North Carolina Criminal Justice Education and Training Standards Commission, every law enforcement officer currently receives a minimum of 12 hours of training in domestic violence response as part of basic law enforcement training. This training is offered

Family Court—A New Vehicle for Addressing Domestic Discord

To help bring all of the legal issues surrounding domestic violence into one courtroom, the N.C. Child Well-Being and Domestic Violence Task Force recommended the establishment of unified family courts for every district in the state. Launched in 1999 in North Carolina, the Family Court concept has been implemented in eight judicial districts serving 16 counties—Anson, Burke, Caldwell, Catawba, Cumberland, Durham, Greene, Halifax, Lenoir, Mecklenburg, New Hanover, Pender, Richmond, Stanly, Union, and Wayne counties.

Under the family court model, families are assigned to a case manager who helps the family work out as many legal issues as possible through such avenues as mediation, counseling, and drug abuse treatment programs before turning to the courts, according to the N.C. Administrative Office of the Courts. When a court hearing does become necessary, the model calls for cases to be considered by a single judge where possible.

Family court judges have jurisdiction over a wide range of legal issues, including child abuse and neglect charges, domestic violence, child custody and visitation rights, divorce and related financial issues, and mental health issues such as involuntary commitments. As such, assignment to the court carries with it a heavy training commitment for judges and staff on wide-ranging topics, including case management, child

development and family dynamics, and domestic violence. The local chief District Court judge administers the family court, assisted by a family court administrator and one case manager for every two family court judges. One goal of the court is timely resolution of cases, with the aim of completing cases within one year of filing.

This comprehensive approach to resolving family issues increases the workload for the courts, and the added expense is one reason the model has not been implemented more broadly. However, some jurists have moved forward with the model without waiting for the General Assembly to appropriate additional dollars. For example, in Wake County, Chief District Court Judge Joyce Hamilton has created a system known as “one-family, one-judge” in divorce and family-related civil cases to streamline the cumbersome process of filings and hearings before different judges and courtrooms.

Using existing resources, the judge reassigned one of her judicial assistants to serve as a case manager, a task she describes as “more than a full-time job.” Hamilton notes that implementing the model has imposed a huge drain on her staff, and she currently is seeking family court funding so Wake County can continue its “one-family, one-judge” system. The new system “has made a huge difference,” Hamilton says. “We’ve come a long way, but we still have a long way to go.”

—*Renee Elder and Mike McLaughlin*