

The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges

Did you know that the NCJFCJ is the oldest judicial organization in the United States? The NCJFCJ was founded in 1937. It was established by a group of judges with the goal of improving the effectiveness of juvenile courts. Today, with almost 3,000 members, serving 30,000 court professionals, and a staff of over 50, it provides technical assistance to judges, lawyers, probation officers, and administrators all over the country. NCJFCJ estimates its work impacts over four million children and families. It has been responsible for many of the improvements in our local juvenile court in Santa Clara County and was the inspiration for the creation of the Juvenile Court Judges of California (JCJC).

I was assigned to our juvenile court as Presiding Judge in 1984. It was my dream assignment, and I stayed for over 20 years. In my first year on that court, I received a telephone call from a staff member at the National Council. He congratulated me on my assignment and asked if I would attend a presiding judge's conference in Reno. I accepted.

The conference was the most exciting I had ever attended. It included presiding judges from around the country, about 25 in all. We were led by the presiding

judge from Hamilton County, Ohio (Cincinnati). The task was to write a book about deprived children.



The meeting was spirited. We heard from everyone in the room as we debated the role of the juvenile court and the juvenile court judge. We learned about the differences between how juvenile courts ran across the country. In many states the judge is appointed or elected to the juvenile court, and it is a lifetime appointment. In other states the judges may rotate from one assignment to another as we do in California. In some states the presiding juvenile court judge is responsible for appointing the chief probation officer and overseeing that department's operations.

Much of this was new to me, but the discussion about the purpose of the court and the role of the juvenile court judge was not. It was clear that these judges believed they were working to improve outcomes for our country's most vulnerable children. Most were

passionate about their work and their comments were inspirational.

I have been heavily involved with the NCJFCJ for over 40 years. Santa Clara County was designated a Model Court, and our team would meet with other Model Courts and share best practices. Our team consisted of lawyers, judicial officers, social workers, probation officers, and court personnel. Each team established goals for court operations and shared them with other teams. At each meeting the teams voted for the most useful accomplishment. Our mediation program was voted the best improvement in court operations and many other courts adopted mediation in child welfare cases. The Chicago model court team reported that the idea had significantly improved their court operations and expressed their gratitude in several letters.

The NCJFCJ also enabled me to meet judges who served their career in what they loved – working with children and families. Some became my best friends.

There are not many juvenile court judges in California who are members of the NCJFCJ. Because California has an excellent educational system for judges, few see the need to join the NCJFCJ. That is unfortunate as the NCJFCJ provides valuable resources to juvenile court judges and their courts. Your membership will benefit you and your court.

To become a member, contact the Executive Director Joey Orduna Hastings at jhastings@ncjfcj.org.



Judge Leonard Edwards is retired from the Santa Clara Superior Court. His e-mail is judgeleonardedwards@gmail.com.