

## November 16, 2021 – Judge Jeri Beth Cohen

Judge Cohen kicked off the meeting by thanking all the GALS and letting them know they are “so special in our hearts.”

- A reunification case plan is a reunification case plan!
  - Children may be placed in a stable home with lots of resources, nurturing, etc.
  - Most parents don’t have the same resources as foster parents -- many struggle financially and with their own trauma.
  - Children should be in a safe home with family if they are capable -- this doesn’t necessarily mean it is the best home for them.
- Don’t be afraid to speak up in court.
  - The Judge needs the most appropriate and thorough information.
  - You must make sure your voice is heard -- it doesn’t mean the Judge will always agree with you.
  - State your case forcefully and respectfully, and don’t take it personally if the Judge doesn’t rule your way.
- Make sure all parties are working together in co-parenting.
  - The biological parents should meet the foster parents early in the process.
  - They need to work together for a common goal.
  - This can work together, even if they understand adoption is a possibility.
  - Co-parenting is a mind set and a process.
- Substance abuse, mental health issues, and domestic violence
  - Although the petition may only list 1 of the above issues, there are often other underlying issues. Usually with D.V., there is also a mental-health or substance-abuse issue.
  - Parents will need appropriate services. It may not be effective if they are only treating one issue and the other is left unaddressed.
  - Push for drug testing and an assessment.
  - Try to get people with substance-abuse issues into drug court. It is a structured process with dedicated, experienced professionals.
- SB 80 requires frequent MDT staffings.
  - If there is disagreement, it goes to Regional.
  - Be present, forceful, and respectful.
  - Bring concrete evidence.
  - Have your GAL attorney present the evidence to the Judge.
  - Older children should be at the staffings.
  - Once a Judge rules, there is not much you can do.
- If a child needs their own attorney, please ask the Court to appoint one.
- Don’t be afraid to advocate for TPR.
- Read Chapter 39 -- understanding the legal process makes you a better GAL
- Just because a child was originally put in a placement doesn’t mean that’s the best placement for the child.
- Ask for a concurrent case-plan goal.
- Every change of placement should have a transition plan and all should be working together as a team to make the transition easiest for the child.
- Refer parents to drug court when possible. Drug Court incorporates best practices with dedicated professionals.
- When you are a witness:
  - Be prepared, be respectful, and know your file.
  - Listen to instructions from the Judge.
  - No facial expressions, rolling eyes, or using loaded language.

- Tell your story in a neutral manner without bias.
- Talk about the facts.
- You need to speak to both parents.
  - The impression you make on the parents the first time you meet them will set the tone -- give aura of empathy and working together.
- Don't pre-judge what has happened to the child based on the petition.
- Believe everyone has potential.
- Don't draw immediate conclusions.
- **Drug Court**
  - If you need help or have issues, you can reach out to Diana Diaz (Clinical Director -- [ddiaz@jud11.flcourts.org](mailto:ddiaz@jud11.flcourts.org))
    - Drug court doesn't give up on people after just a few weeks.
  - Parents cannot recover from opioid addiction without meds.
  - Opioid withdrawal is difficult.
  - In the beginning of a case, it should be heard every week or 2.
  - The early stages of a case in Drug Court are very difficult to have compliance.
- Try to get people with substance-abuse issues into Drug Court.
  - Very often, the defense attorneys object because of all the extra eyes on their client.
  - Drug Court cases are heard more often and require more court time.
  - If a parent is willing to go to drug court and their attorney objects, bring it to the attention of the Judge.
  - 70% of parents who participate in Drug Court get their children back and only 30% re-enter.