

FAMILY COURT



CHIEF JUDGE MICHAEL K. NEWELL



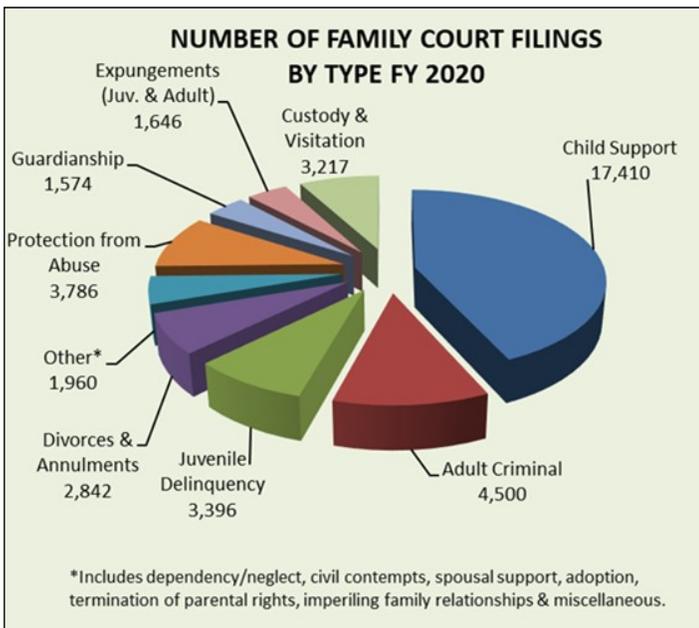
FAMILY COURT

Family Court continues to be guided by its mission: to provide equal access to justice for the families and children under its jurisdiction in a manner that is fair and efficient and that maintains the public's trust and confidence in an independent and accountable judiciary. We strive each day to build an atmosphere that ensures all members of the public are treated with courtesy, dignity, and respect.

With the onset of COVID-19, this year presented Family Court with many obsta-

cles that affected not only our processes and procedures, but our caseload, as well. However, with these challenges and obstacles, we discovered opportunities to make positive change that will improve Family Court for the future. Throughout the pandemic, Family Court continued to accept filings and hold hearings. From March 15th to June 15th, the Court processed 1,489 criminal/delinquency filings, 5,078 civil filings, and over 2,000 motions. Over 6,700 dispositions were entered during this same period and all without eFiling or electronic document management capabilities.

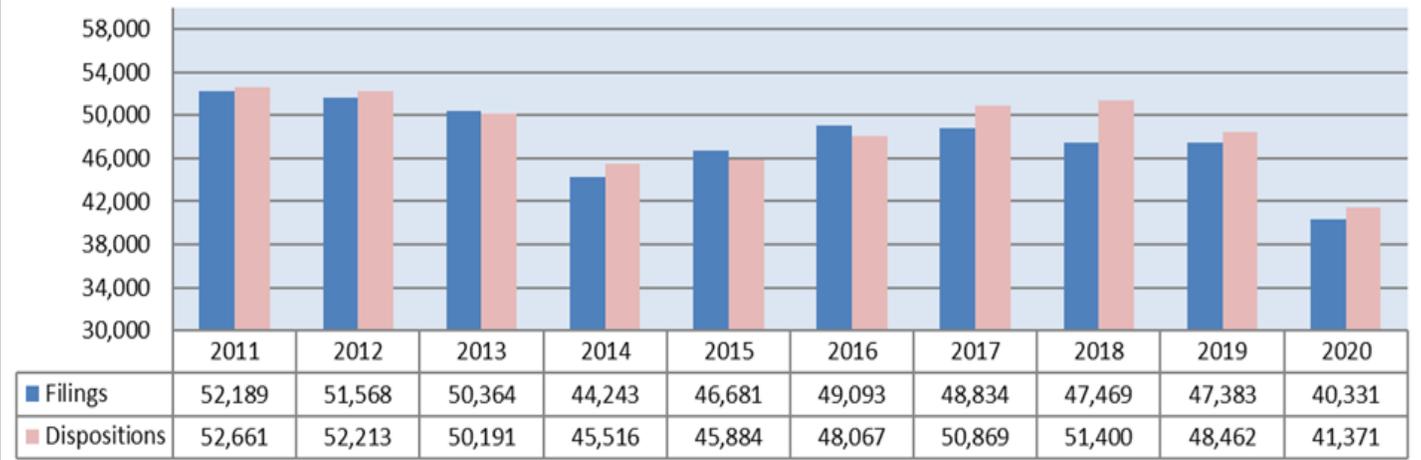
While the Court processed over 40,000 filings and issued over 41,000 dispositions for the fiscal year, this was a significant decrease of 14.9% and 14.6%, respectively, compared to the previous year. The Court's civil filings decreased by 16.8%, and its criminal and delinquency filings decreased



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FAMILY COURT CIVIL & CRIMINAL FILINGS & DISPOSITIONS BY FISCAL YEAR



by 6.1%. The downward trend continued among all three counties with New Castle’s overall filings decreasing by 17.1%, Kent’s decreasing by 12.6%, and Sussex’s decreasing by 12%. These decreases were most evident in March, April, May, and June while the Court was working at a limited capacity.

Child support filings continued to represent the highest volume of filings for Family Court, but still saw a decrease of 20.4% statewide. Juvenile delinquency filings also decreased overall; however, there was an upward trend in juvenile felonies. In New Castle County, felony filings increased for a third year in a row by 3.2%. Sussex County saw an uptick in felony filings for the first time in five years by 2.3%. There were also some upward trends in the adult criminal category. New Castle County saw a continued increase of adult criminal violation of probation filings by 26.1%, and Sussex County saw an increase in Protection from Abuse (“PFA”) contempt filings by 4.4%. Juvenile violation of probation filings decreased statewide by nearly half of what was filed last year, at 47.7%. On the civil side, Family Court began accepting minor name change filings this year and received 137 petitions statewide.

In Fiscal Year 2020, Family Court continued to participate as a National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (“NCJFCJ”) Implementation Site. Family Court was chosen last year as an Implementation Site to enhance our Court Improvement Program (“CIP”) work, improve outcomes for children and families, and support our ever-evolving child welfare practices. As an Implementation Site, we have received individualized assessments, training, and technical assistance from NCJFCJ over this past year. This assistance has included a statewide training on NCJFCJ’s *Enhanced Resource Guidelines: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse and Neglect Cases*, and facilitation of a virtual strategic planning session with child welfare stakeholders. This planning session was held to prioritize areas of focus for stakeholders and to assist in the planning and implementation for the various projects and initiatives included in the next five year CIP Strategic Plan.

This past year, Family Court entered the sustainability phase of the Family Court Enhancement Project. The project has focused on improving practices in domestic violence, custody, and visitation matters. Through work completed by a Domestic Violence Coordinator,

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Family Court has improved upon its PFA processes, case processing practices, and the overall courthouse experience for litigants. The Family Court continued the tradition of celebrating its successes during Domestic Violence Awareness Month with a Family Court staff and stakeholder “round table” discussion

ing well and many litigants are taking advantage of this new filing capability. Prior to the pandemic, Family Court had established a technology committee whose focus was on initiatives that expand the use of technology in order to increase access to justice for litigants. This committee will be reviewing the COVID-19 technology related process changes for potential long term improvements to our litigants’ experiences.



Architect's rendering of proposed Sussex County Family Courthouse in Georgetown.

Family Court continued its efforts in FY 2020 to construct new Family Court buildings in Kent and Sussex Counties. The current buildings are undersized, undignified, and unsafe. These projects are critical in providing Family Court and the citizens of Delaware with adequate, secure, and dignified facilities. Governor Carney, in his State of the State Address, committed to the building of Family Court courthouses for Kent and Sussex Counties and the design process will begin in Fiscal Year 2021.

on domestic violence initiatives and updates. The Domestic Violence Coordinator also aided in the implementation of virtual hearings, the creation of litigant self-help materials, and the addition of self-help materials to Family Court’s website in response to COVID-19.

This past year, the Honorable Andrew Southmayd was reappointed to his sixth term as a Commissioner in Sussex County while the Honorable Danielle Blount and the Honorable Kim DeBonte were both reappointed to their second terms as Commissioners

Family Court continues to incorporate technology in its ongoing effort to enhance access to justice for self-represented litigants. The eCourtroom technology that is available now in each county has provided litigants and attorneys the opportunity to present evidence electronically during court proceedings. In response to COVID-19, Family Court quickly implemented a robust virtual hearing process in all three counties through the use of the Zoom platform. Because of the pandemic and a need to allow for electronic filing, Family Court also implemented an electronic system to accept all filing types. Although Family Court does not currently have an eFiling system, our in-house efforts have been work-



Architect's rendering of proposed Kent County Family Courthouse in Dover.

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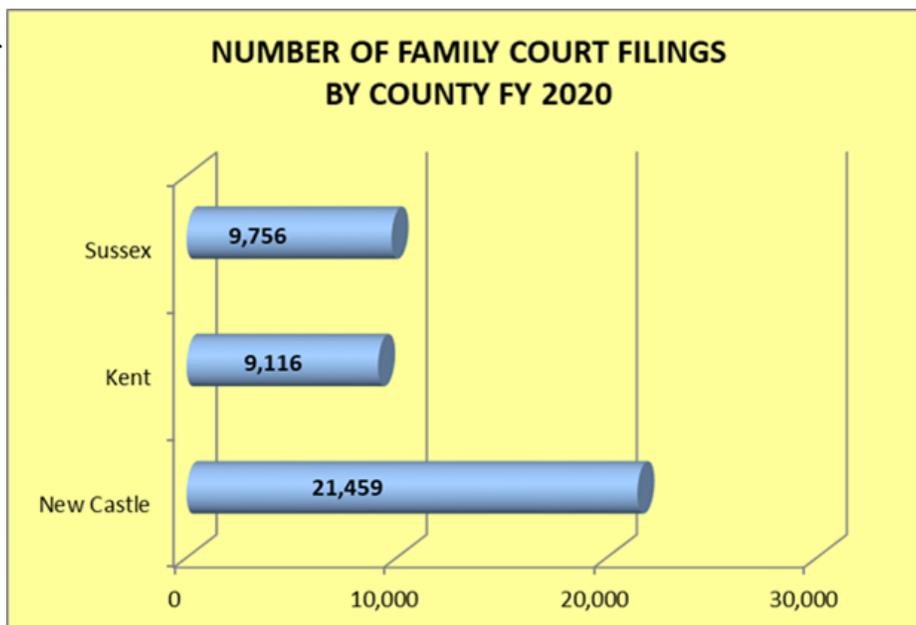
in New Castle County and Sussex County, respectively. Family Court welcomed a new Commissioner this year as the Honorable Francis Mieczkowski, III took the oath of office in June to serve in New Castle County. Commissioner Mieczkowski replaces the Honorable Susan P. Tussey, who retired this past year.

Finally, on June 11, 2020, the Judges, Commissioners, and administration signed and issued a Statement of Unity in response to the protests and racial unrest in the country and the State of Delaware. The Court denounced racism and committed to conversation and action to effectuate change. The Family Court established the Council on Racial Equity (“C.O.R.E.”) comprised of judicial officers and employees which developed the mission statement of C.O.R.E. to “eliminate systemic and institutional racism that serves as a barrier to accessing and achieving justice for litigants of color, and to promote a supportive and inclusive environment for employees that is dedicated to celebrating diversity by removing any social, cultural or other inequities that stifle professional development. Our primary goal will be racial equity and equal justice for all.” C.O.R.E. will continue to meet and address these important societal issues during the upcoming fiscal year.

The Family Court is privileged to serve all Delawareans and particularly children, our most vulnerable citizens. The Court has a large caseload and

hears some of the most intimate and sensitive issues that affect families, parents, and children. Our Judges, Commissioners, administration, and staff strive to ensure equal access to justice for our citizens and are dedicated to the Court’s mission. We

are proud of what we have accomplished during the past fiscal year and look forward to doing even more in the year ahead. ♦



FAMILY COURT



FAMILY COURT JUDGES

Front Row (from left to right): Judge Janell S. Ostroski; Judge Michael W. Arrington; Judge Natalie J. Haskins; Judge Paula Ryan; Judge Mark D. Buckworth; Judge Jennifer B. Ranji; Judge James G. McGiffin, Jr.;

Middle Row (from left to right): Judge Joelle P. Hitch; Judge Louann Vari; Judge Kenneth M. Millman;

Back Row (from left to right): Judge Arlene Minus Coppadge; Judge Peter B. Jones; Chief Judge Michael K. Newell; Judge Robert B. Coonin; Judge Mardi F. Pyott.

Not Pictured: Judge Felice Glennon Kerr; Judge Mary S. Much.

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FAMILY COURT COMMISSIONERS

Front Row (from left to right): Commissioner DeSales Haley; Commissioner Para Wolcott; Commissioner Danielle S. Blount; Commissioner Emily Farley; Commissioner Loretta Young; Commissioner Samantha Lukoff; Commissioner Craig Fitzgerald;

Middle Row (from left to right): Commissioner Kim DeBonte; Commissioner Sonja Wilson; Commissioner Theresa Sedivec; Commissioner James Maxwell;

Back Row (from left to right): Commissioner Jennifer Mayo; Commissioner David Jones; Chief Judge Michael K. Newell; Commissioner Andrew Southmayd; Commissioner Gretchen Gilchrist.

Not Pictured: Commissioner Francis Mieczkowski III.