



**THE SUPREME COURT OF MISSOURI
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Photos will be available upon request

**SUPREME COURT RECOGNIZES 31ST JUDICIAL CIRCUIT
FOR HOLDING TIMELY CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT HEARINGS**

SPRINGFIELD, Mo. – On behalf of the 31st Judicial Circuit, Presiding Judge Thomas E. Mountjoy accepted the Permanency Award, presented by Supreme Court judge Zel M. Fischer and Deputy State Courts Administrator Gary Wait during a special ceremony this morning at the Greene County Courthouse in Springfield. This is the first time the 31st circuit has won the Permanency Award.

The Permanency Award is given to circuits for successfully holding timely hearings during fiscal 2010 in child abuse and neglect cases in which children removed from their homes are to be reunited with their families or are to be placed in another permanent home as soon as possible.

“Timely hearings are critical when children are removed from their homes and are to be reunited with their families or are to be placed in other permanent homes as soon as possible,” Fischer said. “The nature of these cases can make it very difficult to hold timely hearings unless the officials involved exert strong and continuous efforts to do so, and those courts that achieve the highest success deserve recognition for their difficult achievement.”

Wait added, “The success this circuit has achieved is a testament to the leadership and hard work of judges, juvenile officers, clerks, children’s division workers and other support staff. In the five years since we have instituted the awards, the timeliness of hearings throughout the state has increased. Of the more than 38,000 required hearings, 98 percent of them were held on time. This is an increase of 6 percent from 2006, when we instituted the award.”

The hearing time frames apply to six types of hearings and vary depending on the type of hearing. For example, courts should hold a hearing to determine whether a child safely

can return home within three business days from the date the child is taken into protective custody. Another time frame provides that courts should hold a permanency hearing to decide a child's permanent placement within 12 months from the date the child is taken into protective custody. These time frames were developed based on recommendations from the Commission on Children's Justice.

In evaluating what circuits qualify for the permanency awards, the circuits first were placed in size classes based on the total number of hearings that were due to be held during a particular time period. A circuit then had to rank among the top two in its size class to qualify. The 31st circuit is one of 17 judicial circuits that will receive the award this year. The remaining circuits will be honored during the coming months.

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