

**ORDER GOVERNING EARLY CHILDHOOD COURT**

**WHEREAS**, pursuant to Article V, section 2(d) of the Florida Constitution and section 43.26, Florida Statutes, the chief judge of each judicial circuit is charged with the authority and the power to do everything necessary to promote the prompt and efficient administration of justice; and

**WHEREAS**, pursuant to the chief judge's constitutional and statutory responsibility for administrative supervision of the courts within the circuit and to create and maintain an organization capable of effecting the efficient, prompt, and proper administration of justice for the citizens of this State, the chief judge is required to exercise direction, *see* Fla. R. Jud. Admin. 2.215(b)(2), (b)(3); and

**WHEREAS**, the purpose of Early Childhood Court is to increase the likelihood of reunification of families and permanency for children through targeted treatment interventions and close judicial supervision; and

**WHEREAS**, this specialized division will enable consideration of the unique nature of the issues related to young children in the dependency system, the need for appropriate treatment in an environment conducive to wellness, as well as the continuing necessity to ensure the protection of the child;

**NOW, THEREFORE, I**, Frederick J. Lauten, in order to facilitate the efficient operation of the administration of justice, and pursuant to the authority vested in me as Chief Judge of the Ninth Judicial Circuit of Florida under Florida Rule of Judicial Administration 2.215, hereby order the following, **effective immediately**, and to continue until further order:

1. The Ninth Judicial Circuit Early Childhood Court Program for Orange County (“Program”) is hereby established.

2. **Eligibility Criteria:** Families where children have been sheltered as a result of an allegation of abuse, abandonment, neglect, violence or substance abuse. Children must be less than five (5) years of age at the time of referral to the Program and be placed by the Department of Children and Families in Orange County. Parents who have perpetrated an egregious act of violence against the child or committed violent or sexual criminal offenses may be ineligible for participation at the sole discretion of the Early Childhood Court judge.

3. **Referral Process:** A referral form must be completed and submitted to the Early Childhood Court Coordinator (Coordinator). The parent(s) must schedule and complete a screening with the Coordinator.

4. **Participation:** The Program will provide participating families with additional services through its community partnerships to help parents complete case plans with the Department of Children and Families while addressing the unique needs of young children involved in Dependency cases. As part of the Program the families will engage in treatment for substance abuse and/or mental health issues as well as life skills and parenting classes as ordered. Assessment and treatment will be made available to the parents and children.

5. Early Childhood Court will be in session one (1) day, bi-weekly, as directed by the Early Childhood Court judge. Cases will be staffed and reviewed on a bi-weekly basis until the family completes the Program. The dependency case will continue to be reviewed in Early Childhood Court according to state mandates to ascertain compliance with the case plan.

**DONE AND ORDERED** at Orlando, Florida, this 11<sup>th</sup> day of August, 2015.

\_\_\_\_\_/s/\_\_\_\_\_  
Frederick J. Lauten  
Chief Judge

Copies provided to:

Clerk of Courts, Orange County  
Clerk of Courts, Osceola County  
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