

Initiative Works to Improve the Practice of Family Law and the Image of the Matrimonial Lawyer



2010 Families Matter Symposium

Randall Kessler, chair of the American Bar Association Section of Family Law, has a client list that comes straight out of the pages of *People* magazine – Tamika Foster Raymond, wife of singer Usher, rapper Juvenile, New York Jets wide receiver Braylon Edwards, Nene Leakes of the *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, and Lance Briggs of the Chicago Bears, to name a few. Kessler is well known in

Atlanta for being the lawyer people call in the worst of times – when they want to end a marriage, battle a paternity suit, or get child support from an absent parent.

Now, in his leadership role with the Section of Family Law, Kessler has selected “Families Matter” as his platform, which is a joint project with the University of Baltimore School of Law Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC) to reform the practice of family law, minimize the harmful effects of family law proceedings, and improve the image of the matrimonial lawyer.

Family law cases constitute nearly half – or more – of trial court filings in most jurisdictions, exceeding the filings for either criminal or tort cases. The impact on individuals, communities, and society is profound. People often emerge from a divorce having disposed of a marriage but also having traumatized loved ones, exhausted the family’s resources, and diminished the well-being and self-esteem of their children and of each other.

Co-sponsored by the ABA Section on Family Law and CFCC, the Families Matter initiative is designed to respond to the need for deep and meaningful reform of the family law process..

How can we transform so radically a family court system from one that disrupts and tears apart families to one that helps heal them? Following a major national symposium in June, 2010, the Families Matter initiative has worked to identify legal practice methods and approaches that minimize the damaging consequences of family legal proceedings based on an interdisciplinary, holistic, and therapeutic approach. The Families Matter initiative is actively engaged in a number of activities designed to accomplish this mission:

- CFCC has published and distributed widely a special edition of its nationally recognized newsletter, the *Unified Family Court Connection*, that includes articles by a number of

Families Matter symposium participants, including Maryland Chief Judge Robert Bell and Chief Justice Leah Ward Sears (ret.) of the Georgia Supreme Court.

- CFCC is completing a final report of the Families Matter Symposium proceedings, which includes recommendations on a number of issues and subjects, such as case management, Unified Family Courts, self-represented litigants, interdisciplinary collaboration, court services, and family violence, among others.
- A Families Matter “promising practices” workgroup is working to develop a vehicle for disseminating promising local, national, and international practices relevant to the practice of family law.
- The Section of Family Law’s Spring 2011 and Fall 2011 CLE Conferences focused on Families Matter. The Fall CLE program included a plenary session moderated by Prof. Barbara Babb, CFCC’s director, on “Promising Practices in Family Law Cases.”
- Section of Family Law Vice Chair Scott Friedman and Council Member Edward Newman spoke to the National Conference of Bar Presidents and the ABA House of Delegates at the ABA’s Annual Meeting last summer. According to Friedman, the presentations were a resounding success that generated tremendous interest among bar presidents and attorneys from around the country, many of whom “gobbled up” CFCC’s special “Families Matter” edition of the *Unified Family Court Connection*.

The ABA Section on Family Law and CFCC hope to implement these steps nationwide, so that children and their families can receive more of the help they need from the family law process.