



Supreme Court of Appeals State of West Virginia

News

Administrative Office
1900 Kanawha Blvd., East
Bldg. 1, Room, E-316
Charleston, West Virginia 25305
(304) 340-2305 Jennifer Bundy
(304) 340-2306 April Harless
(304) 558-1212 FAX
Web Site: www.courtswv.gov
Facebook: [wvjudiciary](https://www.facebook.com/wvjudiciary)
Twitter: [WVCourts](https://twitter.com/WVCourts)
SmugMug:
<https://wvcourts.smugmug.com/>
Email: Jennifer.Bundy@courtswv.gov
Email: April.Harless@courtswv.gov

Juvenile Justice Commission Celebrates Tenth Anniversary

For immediate release Tuesday, December 14, 2021

Photos at

<https://wvcourts.smugmug.com/Photo-Galleries/2021/Events/December-14-2021-JJC10thAnniversary/>

CHARLESTON, W.Va. – The Juvenile Justice Commission, originally created to investigate a tragedy, has worked for a decade to ensure the court system fulfills its duty to provide justice in a way that protects the children over which it has jurisdiction, speakers said Tuesday at a celebration of the commission’s tenth anniversary.

“We are here to say thank you for the love and support you give to our most precious resource, our children,” Chief Justice Evan Jenkins told commissioners at the celebration preceding the commission’s quarterly meeting. “To Ben’s mother, God Bless. It is amazing to see the positive change that can come from such a tragic loss.”

Former Supreme Court Justice Margaret Workman established the commission after 19-year-old Benjamin Hill died at the Industrial Home for Youth in Salem. Although an initial autopsy was inconclusive, Justice Workman pledged to find out how and why he died.

Unfortunately, the commission’s extensive investigation was also inconclusive. “But we made a commitment that we would not stop,” said Juvenile Justice Commission Director Cindy Largent-Hill, who has led the commission staff since its creation.

The initial purpose of the commission was to examine the Division of Juvenile Services’ operations and programs. Over time, the scope of its mission expanded, and it now reviews facilities and programs operated or contracted by the Bureau of Juvenile Services and the Department of Health and Human Resources, looking for strengths, struggles, and gaps in West Virginia’s juvenile justice processes. The commission has worked to implement and supervise past court orders and agreements relating to state juvenile correctional facilities, and it has also worked to promote a more appropriate framework to adjudicate mentally incompetent children.

“I’m so grateful for the changes that have been made,” Nancy Szilvasi, who raised Benjamin, said at the meeting Tuesday. “I wrote so many letters to people in power and never heard back.” Turning to Justice Workman, she said, “Thank you for reading my

letter and taking action. I can't thank you enough. It meant the world to me that someone cared."

Ms. Szilvasi, a retired social worker, recounted the story of Benjamin's life and death and thanked the commission for continuing to protect children.

Commission Chairman Phillip Stowers told Ms. Szilvasi, "Thank you for reminding us of our duty and about justice. It runs deep in this organization that we have a duty to children circuit judges remove from their homes."

Although the executive branch operates and contracts with juvenile facilities, youths are sent there by court order, so courts have responsibility for their care. Removing a child from a home is traumatic, but sometimes the best interest of a child requires that, said Judge Stowers, a judge in the Twenty-Ninth Judicial Circuit (Putnam County).

"Our duty is to protect the child and make sure we don't make their situation worse," Judge Stowers said.

The commission gave commemorative Blenko vases to Ms. Szilvasi and to former Justice Workman.

"I didn't come here to be honored, I came here to honor you all," Justice Workman said. "I wanted to create something that would get something done. You all have done that. You have improved the lives and futures of juveniles when they are placed. I deeply appreciate the work you have done and will do on the commission."

Justice Tim Armstead also thanked the commission for its work. "The most important responsibility our court system has is to care for our children."

Justice William R. Wooton said, "I've been a long-time admirer of the work of Cindy Largent-Hill. I'm glad you are with the commission, and I appreciate the work you have done your whole life." Ms. Largent-Hill is a licensed social worker with a master's degree in counseling whose career includes children's mental health, working in a residential treatment facility for boys, and being the former Deputy and then Director of the West Virginia Division of Juvenile Services.

Justice John Hutchison; Thirteenth Judicial Circuit (Kanawha County) Judge Joanna Tabit; Eleventh Judicial Circuit (Greenbrier and Pocahontas Counties) Judge Jennifer Dent; former commission chairman Omar Aboulhosen, now a federal magistrate judge in the Southern District of West Virginia; and Jeffrey M. Pack, Commissioner of the Department of Health and Human Resources' Bureau for Children and Families, were among those who attended the celebration.

The commission is comprised of various disciplines within the court system, the WV Department of Education, the National Association of Social Workers, churches, and community organizations. For more information about the commission, see <http://www.courtswv.gov/court-administration/juvenile-justice-commission/History.html>.