

# A haven for children from turmoil of family court

July 17, 2010 by JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER / [jennifer.kelleher@newsday.com](mailto:jennifer.kelleher@newsday.com)



The 1961 building on Old Country Road in Westbury was designed for two judges. Today, it has eight judges plus four referees and six support magistrates who juggle 26,000 cases per year.

This is the Nassau Family Court building, which handles some of the most sensitive and dramatic cases - matters involving children and families. It is no place for children.

The one-elevator, three-story building is crowded with people waiting to enter tiny courtrooms. Prisoners pass through narrow hallways, where fights sometimes erupt.

Things are calmer on the first floor, where drawings of farm animals adorn pink walls. That's where a children's center provides a refuge from the troubles upstairs - a place where toddlers can play with dolls and infants can sleep in cribs.

Parents involved in court proceedings upstairs can drop off children as young as 6 weeks and as old as 12 years, for just a few minutes or for the entire day. The center is one of 34 in the state's unified court system.

Court officers, and posters throughout the building, guide parents to the children's center, which is operated by the North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center, with headquarters in Roslyn Heights.

"It's a safe haven in a stressful environment," said Sandy Wolkoff, who directs an early childhood development program at North Shore Child and Family Guidance.

Upstairs, judges typically don't want children subjected to the harsh details that can emerge from cases involving neglect, abuse, custody, visitation, juvenile delinquency and domestic violence.

"These are not simple matters," said Nassau County Family Court Supervising Judge Hope Schwartz Zimmerman. "They're complicated because they deal with all the family issues."

Family law attorney Patricia Miller Latzman said the children's center is especially helpful for families who cannot afford child care and have no choice but to bring their kids to court. There is no charge to use the children's center.

Family Court is "a tough place to be. It's a very volatile place," she said. "People are not happy there. The [building] is terrible, but you'll never find better people working there."

Court staff try their best to ensure the best possible outcome for each case "despite the fact our building is so stretched and antiquated," Schwartz Zimmerman said. "It's the worst building, but best run."

Latzman, of Port Washington, said the children's center gives parents a sense of calm and dignity when they're at their most trying moments.

The center's staff has two full-time teachers and between five and nine volunteers. Wolkoff's office coordinates with Winthrop-University Hospital, which assists by providing pediatric residents. The center is funded by the state's unified court system, with matching grants from Wolkoff's organization.

Twenty-six of the state's 34 children's centers are in family courts, said Rob Conlon, statewide program manager. Others are located in various types of courts, including housing and civil. In Suffolk, the children's center is in District Court in Central Islip.

The Westbury center can accommodate up to 14 children, who stay for as long as their parents need to deal with court matters, said Beatrice Monsanto, the center's teacher supervisor.

On a recent afternoon, two toddlers pushed around toy trucks on a colorful rug. An aide helped an older child who needed an insulin injection.

Without the center, "they would be in the corridors," Schwartz Zimmerman said.