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## Symposium Editor's Note

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# Symposium Editor's Note

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BARBARA A. BABB

I am honored to guest edit this second Family Law Quarterly Symposium on Unified Family Courts. I have supported and contributed to the American Bar Association's efforts to create and strengthen unified family courts for many years and in many capacities—as a speaker on the Unified Family Courts Presidential Showcase Panel at the ABA Annual Meeting in New Orleans in 1994; as the Family Law Section's Liaison to the Standing Committee on Substance Abuse and as Co-Chair of its Unified Family Courts Committee from 1997 until 2000; as a member of the Planning Committee for the 1998 ABA Unified Family Court Summit and as a speaker at the Summit; as a contributing author to the first Family Law Quarterly Symposium on Unified Family Courts; and currently as a member of the ABA's Unified Family Court Coordinating Council.

The articles in this Symposium issue address the subject of unified family courts from both a national and an international perspective, as well as offer creative approaches to resolve existing problems within family law adjudicatory systems. I have written and spoken extensively about the need to create unified family courts, providing both an interdisciplinary framework and a blueprint to establish those courts.<sup>1</sup> Unified family courts by my definition consist of the following components: 1) a specialized court structure that is either a separate court or a division of an existing court and that is established at the same level and receives the same resources and support as a generalist court; 2) comprehensive subject-matter jurisdiction over the full range of family law cases, including juvenile delinquency and child welfare; 3) a case management and case processing system that

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1. See generally Barbara A. Babb, *Fashioning an Interdisciplinary Framework for Court Reform in Family Law: A Blueprint to Construct a Unified Family Court*, 71 So. Cal. L. Rev. 469 (1998); Barbara A. Babb, *Where We Stand: An Analysis of America's Family Law Adjudicatory Systems and the Mandate to Establish Unified Family Courts*, 32 FAM. L. Q. 31 (1998).

includes early and hands-on contact with each family law case and a judicial assignment system that results in the family appearing before one judge for the completion of one case or one case management team; 4) an array of court-supplied or court-connected social services that meet litigants' nonlegal needs that exacerbate family law problems; and 5) a user-friendly court that is accessible to all family law litigants, including the large volume of pro se litigants.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these components, I have advocated that unified family courts embrace notions of therapeutic jurisprudence and an ecological, holistic approach to the family's problems.<sup>3</sup>

By adopting this therapeutic and ecological model for court reform in family law and for family law decision-making, I have sought to provide a blueprint for a court which most accurately portrays the concept of and the purpose behind a unified family court. Resolving legal disputes with the aim of improving the lives of families and children requires creating a court system to enhance the system's potential to maximize the benefits of court intervention. To accomplish this, the court system must allow for the contemplation of legal outcomes intended to produce more effective functioning on the part of families and children. Courts must aim to protect families and children from present and future harms, to reduce emotional turmoil, to promote family harmony or preservation, and to provide individualized and effective family justice. While there is no one ideal court design adaptable for every jurisdiction engaged in creating a unified family court, court reform must proceed with a specific vision and mission. More effective resolution of family legal matters within a unified family court context can strengthen individuals' and families' functioning, a benefit to the entire society.

I am deeply indebted to the Symposium issue's authors for their commitment, courage, and creativity. I am also very grateful to my colleague, Professor Linda Elrod, for inviting me to organize this second Symposium issue. I extend my sincere thanks to the student editors and the administrative staff at Washburn University School of Law, as well as to my own research assistants at the University of Baltimore School of Law, Kathleen Day and Grant Murchison, and to my administrative assistant at the University of Baltimore's Center for Families, Children and the Courts, Sharon Curley. Finally, I am most appreciative of the efforts of the American Bar Association and ABA Publishing to promote unified family courts. I encourage the ABA to begin to plan the second Unified Family Court Summit.

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2. See generally Babb, *supra* note 1, *Fashioning an Interdisciplinary Framework*.

3. See *id.*