

In April 2015, the Montgomery County Circuit Court opened the Kids Spot Center, a fully staffed child waiting area.

The Center has served over 1,000 children in its first year of implementation. This Center responds to a community need, enhances access to justice, and offers a much needed service to court patrons.

Kids Spot Center Annual Report

Administrative Office of Montgomery
County Circuit Court

Executive Summary

In its 2015-2020 Strategic Plan the Maryland Judiciary underscores the importance of ensuring equal access to justice through the implementation of services that not only facilitate access to court processes but also help patrons complete their courthouse business in the most efficient and effective means possible.

Montgomery County Circuit Court supports these stated goals of the Judiciary and has demonstrated this support through the opening of Kids Spot, a child waiting area. Opened on April 15, 2015, this free-of-charge service offers parents and guardians an opportunity to address their legal matters without having to worry that their children are being subjected to the business of the court. Since its opening, the Center has served over 1,000 children (N = 1,139), with 83% between the ages 2 and 8 and an average age of 5 years. Customer feedback suggests that patrons are overwhelmingly satisfied with the service being offered reporting their children are well cared for in a fun, clean, safe environment. Montgomery County Circuit Court looks forward to continuing to operate Kids Spot and expanding its services well into the future.



The Maryland Judiciary’s 2015-2020 Strategic Plan underscores the importance of equal access to justice through the delivery of quality services to court patrons. An example of how Montgomery County Circuit Court has demonstrated this Judiciary goal is through the opening of a child waiting area in the courthouse. On April 15, 2015, Montgomery County Circuit Court welcomed patrons to the grand opening of *Kids Spot Center*, a child waiting area where children ages 2 to 12 can be play and engage in educational activities while waiting for their parent or guardian to complete business with the

court. Kids Spot Center was part of the design and construction of the Montgomery County Circuit Court Judicial Annex, which was completed in Spring 2014 and was funded by the FY2009 Montgomery County Government’s Capital Improvement Program (CIP). The successful implementation of the Center was due to the collaborative efforts of the Montgomery County Circuit Court, the Montgomery County Government, the Montgomery County Council, the Sheriff’s Office and contractual organizations focused on providing programs and services to address the needs of families.

OUR GOALS

Our goals for the Center are to:

- Provide a fun, safe haven for children while their parent or guardian attends to court-related matters in the most effective and efficient way possible; and
- Shield children from experiencing adult interactions in a courtroom that could be potentially confusing or upsetting to them.

OUR PROGRAM

Kids Spot Center is located on the first floor of the Montgomery County Circuit Court building, Room 1440. Children between the ages of 2 and 12 are welcomed to the Center between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m., as long as their parent or guardian is in the Circuit Court building. The Center is closed for lunch between 12:30 p.m. and 1:15 p.m.; children must be with their



guardian during this time. The service is not available to those who are serving jury duty or to county employees while they are on duty. There are no fees charged for using the Center.

Kids Spot Center is a large, brightly colored room with natural light. The room is filled with books, toys, and other arts and crafts activities to keep the children entertained. The Center is staffed by two experienced caregivers who have been carefully screened and are qualified to work with a mixed age group of children. The maximum capacity of the Center ranges from 10 to 16 children depending on the number of 2 year olds in attendance, when two staff members are present. When only 1 staff member is present, the maximum capacity is 6 to 10 children depending on the number of 2 year olds present. The Children-to-Staff ratio is determined by state regulation as follows:¹

Table 1 - Number of 2-year-olds and total number of children allowed at Child Care Center by the number of Available Staff

Number of available staff	Number of 2-year-olds allowed	Total number of children allowed
2	0-3	16
2	4-10	10
1	0-3	10
1	6	6

The Court informs the public about the Kids Spot Center through brightly colored displays throughout the courthouse, splash pages on its website, outreach to the local Bar Association, press releases and media alerts, and information sessions with judges, magistrates, and courthouse staff.

REGISTRATION

Upon arrival, parents and guardians are welcomed with a smile by Kids Spot Center staff . The Kids Spot registration process takes about 15 minutes. A registration form must be complete.² The form contains information about the child’s needs as it relates to any medical conditions, allergies, medications, etc. Since some court patrons are at the court for child custody, they are requested to provide their information on existing custody issues. Throughout the registration process, Kids Spot Center staff engages the children in age-appropriate activities to help them get settled.

Kids Spot Center has the *Ident-A-Kid* system that is used to check-in and link each parent/guardian to his/her child. A name tag with a photo of the parent/guardian with his/her child is produced for each parent/guardian and child. The tag is placed on the back of each child. Parents and guardians are required to wear their Kids Spot photo tag visibly at all times while they in the courthouse. Other Center policies and guidelines that parents/guardians are required to following include:

¹ Code of Maryland Regulations:, 13a 16.03d; revised 4/14/14.

² The registration form is available in Spanish, and bilingual Center staff is available to assist Spanish-speaking patrons during the registration process.

- ✓ Remain in the courthouse while their children are at the Center,
- ✓ Notify Center staff if they change locations,
- ✓ Pick up their children prior to Center closing, and
- ✓ Abide by all Center guidelines.

Parents are also given emergency procedures in the event that the courthouse must be evacuated. Children are escorted by Kids Spot Center staff and Sheriff's deputies to a safe location until they can be reunited with their parents/guardians. Parents/guardians are to pick up their children at this location. Center staff brings with them an emergency kit and all of the pertinent registration information to ensure that children and parents/guardians are reunited.

STAFF

Kids Spot Center is currently staffed by a Lead Child Specialist and a bilingual Child Specialist who plan and organize activities for a mixed age group of children. A Program Coordinator directs the overall operations of the Center. As the number of visitors increases, the Court has the ability to increase the number of staff members thus allowing more children to use the Center at a given time.

The Center staff are employed by Family Services, Inc. under a contract with the Montgomery County Circuit Court. Center staff members are trained to follow all requirements of the Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) governing child care centers in the state. Center staff has been trained in child welfare services including but not limited to: mandated reporter training, emergency medication awareness/administration, incident reporting protocol, and first aid and CPR for infant/child/adult. Staff also receives specialized training in trauma informed care.

SAFETY AND SECURITY

The safety and security of children while they are at the Kids Spot Center is paramount. Montgomery County Court Administration oversees the operations of the Center. Court Administration staff review weekly and monthly reports including "ouch reports" of any injuries and exit surveys. Bi-monthly meetings also occur between Court Administration and Center staff to ensure that all are aware of safety and security concerns.

With regard to the security of Kids Spot, the entry door to the Center remains locked at all times. The Center's emergency exit door is equipped with an alarm. Security cameras have been installed at the entrance and at all angles within the Center for real-time monitoring by the court's Sheriff's Department. A distress alarm is also installed to summon immediate assistance. The only adult(s) who are allowed in the Center are those who registered a child(ren) or their identified designee(s).

If participating in court proceedings, parents/guardians are required to inform the judge, magistrate, or courtroom clerk that they have a child/ren at Kids Spot Center. This notification enables

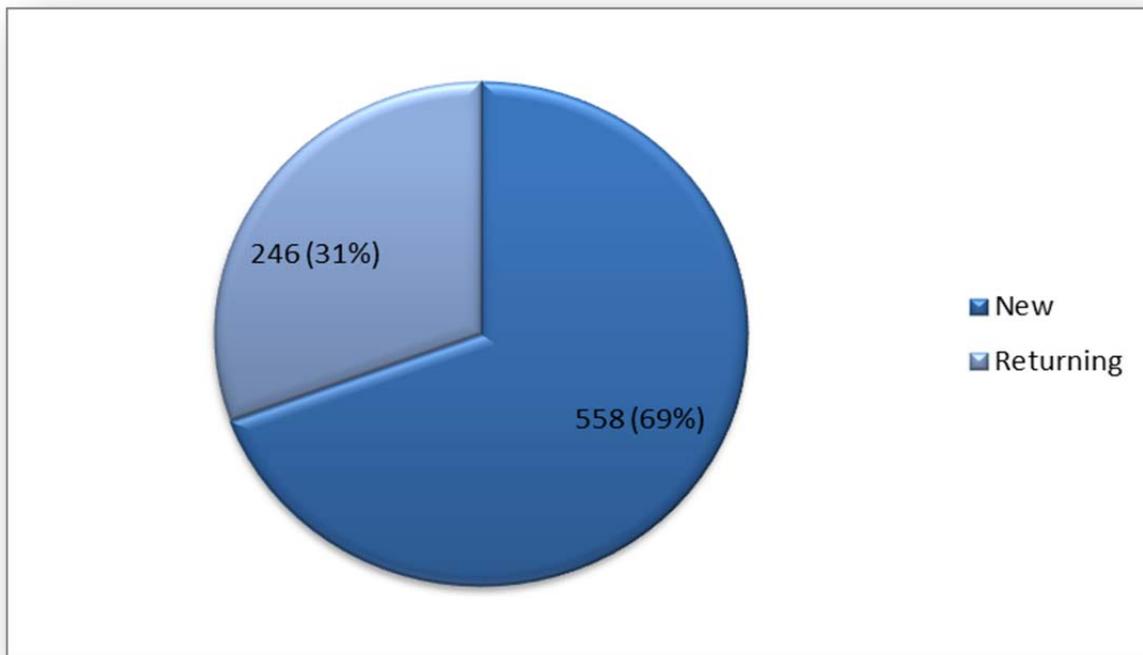
the judges/magistrates to manage custody exchanges or potentially volatile situations by controlling parental interaction and pick-up of children from the Kids Spot Center. The Center staff is instructed to immediately alert the Sheriff's Courthouse Security Team when custody issues unfold in the premise or unauthorized individual(s) enter the center.

The Court holds an annual evacuation drill where Kids Spot Center staff and any visitors participate in safe evacuation of the facility. Montgomery County's Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security assesses the effectiveness of the drill and provides feedback to improve processes.

VISITS TO THE CENTER³

Between April 15, 2015 and April 18, 2016, the Kids Spot Center received a total of 804⁴ visits from families (parent(s)/guardian(s) and child(ren)). Parents and guardians who provided referral information (N = 667) were primarily informed about Kids Spot Center from court signage (57%) followed by a referral from inside the courthouse (40%).⁵ Of these visits (N = 804), 558 (69%) are considered new visits and 246 (31%) returning visits (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Visits to Kids Spot Center: New Visit versus Returning Visit



Data Source: Kids Spot Center registration forms.

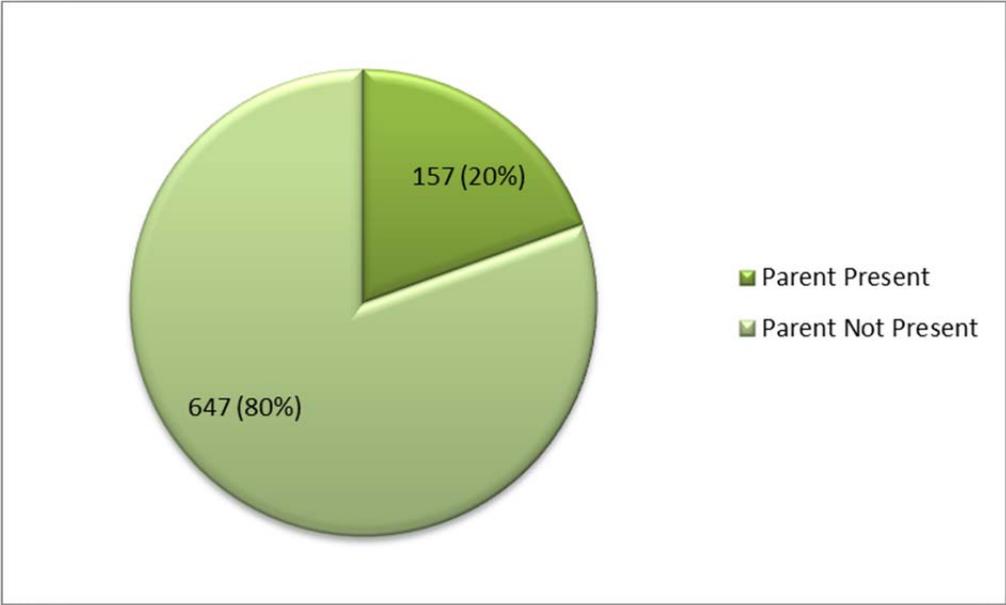
³ A visit to Kids Spot Center is defined as having occurred once for a given day regardless how often the parent/guardian checked in at the Center (for example, in the morning only versus morning and afternoon) that day. Family is based on unique registration ID.

⁴ Four VisitorIDs could not be validated and were excluded for this analysis.

⁵ Ten parents or guardians indicated that they were referred from both court signage and a referral from inside the courthouse.

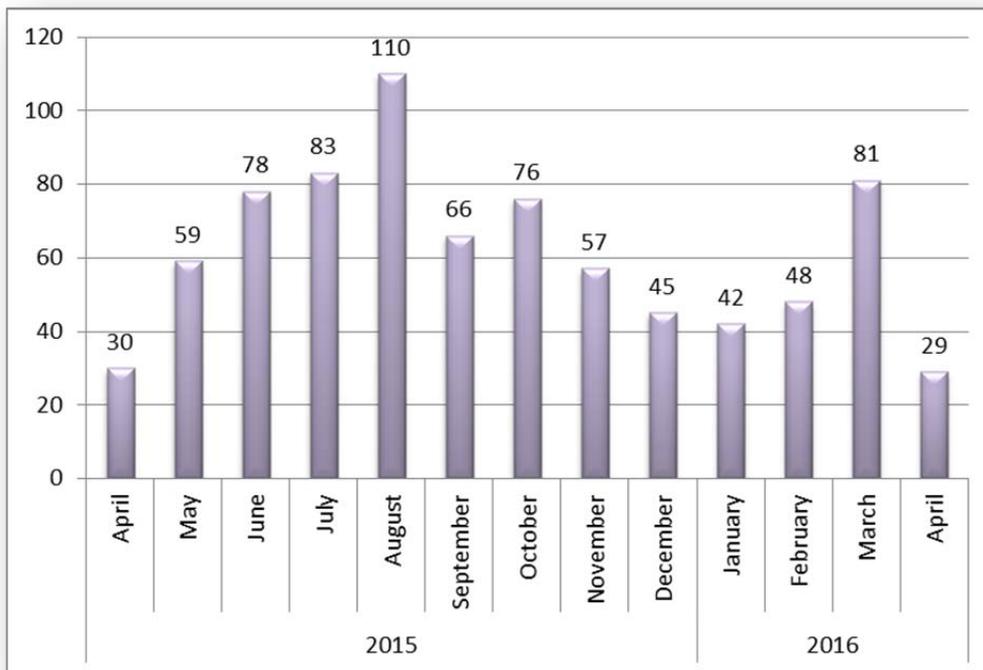
As shown in Figure 2, for 647 (80%) of these 804 visits, children played at the Center without their parent or guardian present whereas 157 (20%) visits had parents or guardians who remained at the Center while the children played.

Figure 2 - Visits to Kids Spot Center: Children who Stayed at the Center with or without Parent/Guardian



Data Source: Kids Spot Center registration forms.

Figure 3 - Visits to Kids Spot Center: Number of Visits by Month



Data Source: Kids Spot Center registration forms.

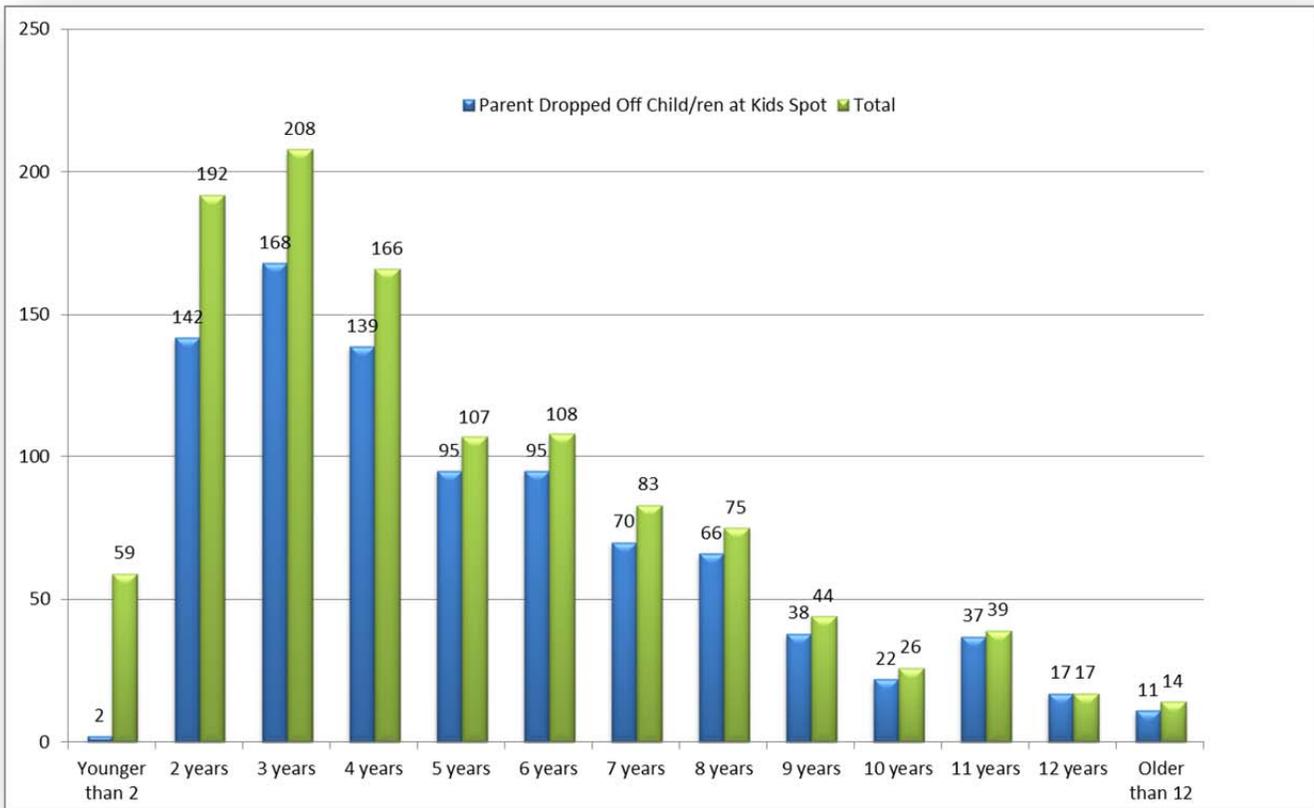
Figure 3 presents the number of visits by month. Visits to the Center increased noticeably between June and August when schools are closed

CHILDREN SERVED

Since its opening in April 2015, the Kids Spot Center has served over 1,000 children (N = 1,139), with 83%⁶ between the ages 2 and 8 and an average age of 5 years (Figure 4). Almost 80% stayed at the Center without their parent or guardian. The only exception is the children younger than 2 years; all but two of them were with their parents or guardians while at the Center.

⁶ The age analysis was based on 1,138 children as one child did not have age information provided.

Figure 4 - Children Served by Kids Spot Center: Number of Children by Age and Drop-Off Status



On a given day, the Center registers four children on average, one of whom is two years old. The average daily number increases by one if the children are accompanied by a parent or a guardian. Of the 233 business days that the Center registered at least one child (including days when the parent or guardian remained at the Center with the child/ren), less than 10% of the days ($n = 21$) had 10 children or more. The Center has never exceeded the state-defined age-dependent capacity level. Thus, the Center’s current capacity is large enough to accept and welcome children of court patrons.

Figure 5 - Children Served by Kids Spot Center: Number of Children by Month

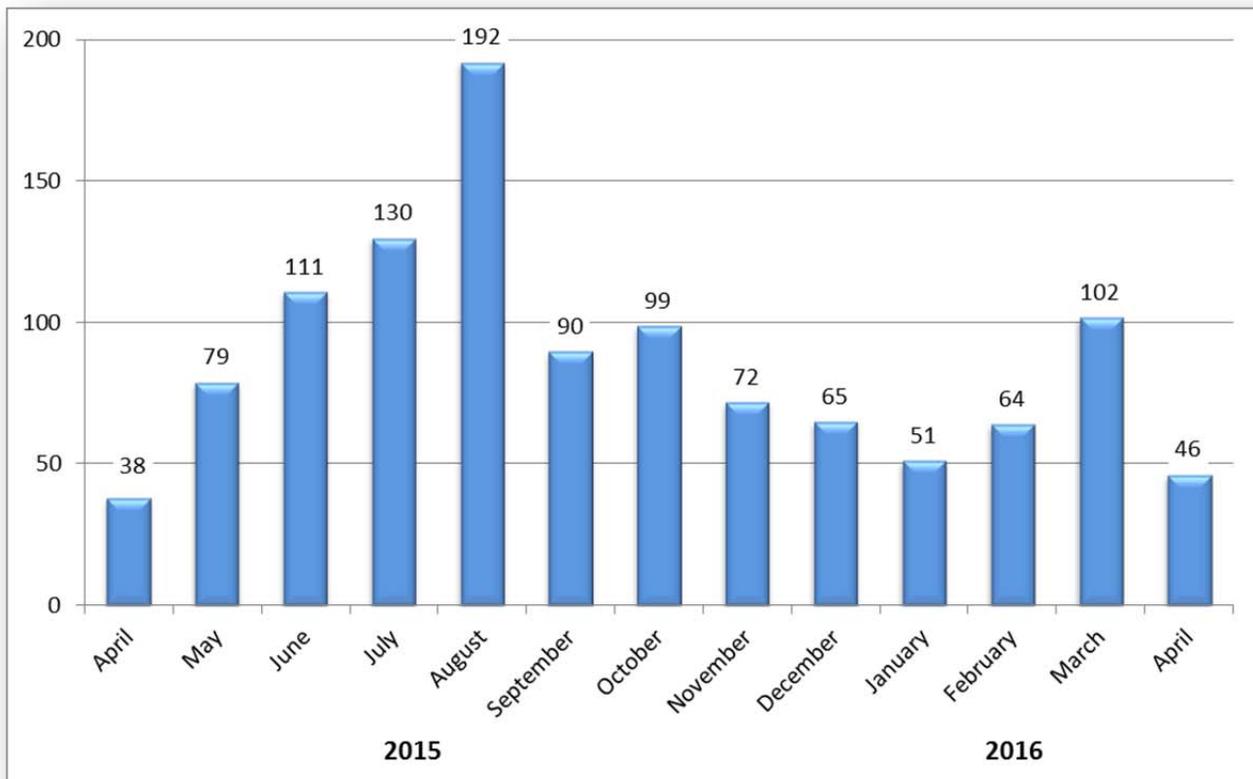


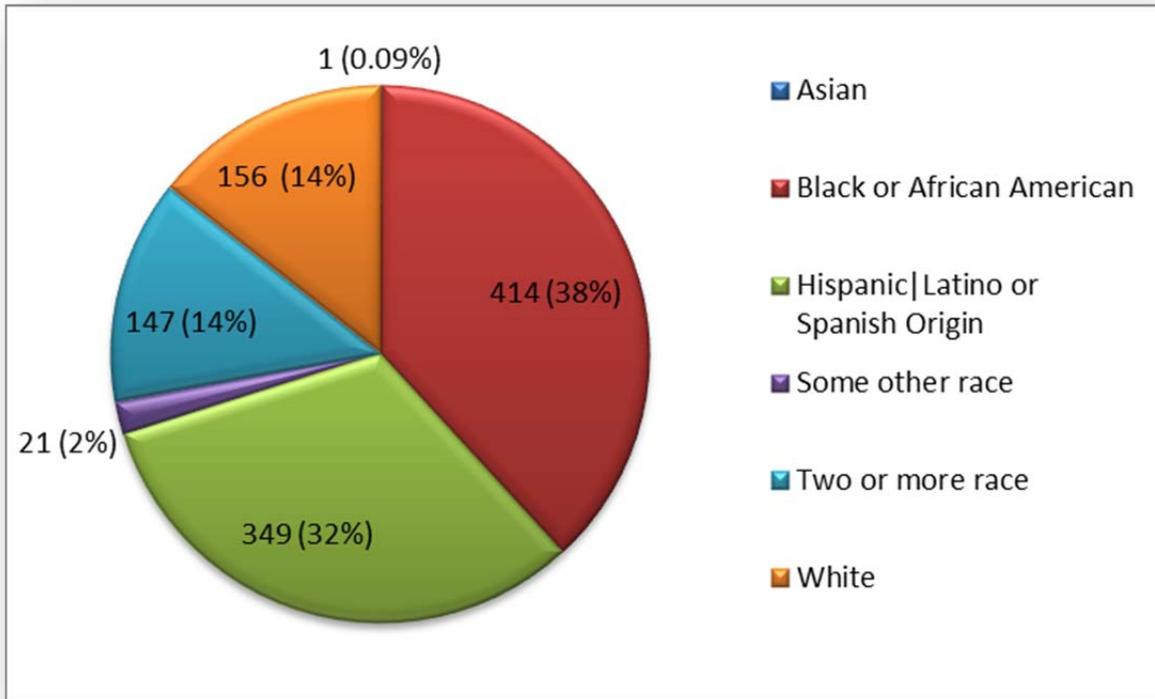
Figure 5 presents the number of children served by the Center (including those whose parent/guardian remained with them during their stay) by month. The pattern closely follows that displayed in Figure 3, which displays the number of families' visits by month, except for August 2015 when an exceptionally high number of children (192) were received by the Center. In fact, the average daily number of children in that month is nine 9, compared to the annual average of 5 children.

Fifty-six percent (N = 633) of the children served⁷ were male while 44% (N = 489) were female. The majority of children served were Black or African American (414, 38%) or of Hispanic/Latino or Spanish Origin (349, 32%).⁸ Fourteen percent of children (N=156) served were white and another 14% (N=147) associated with more than one race category.

⁷ Gender information was not available for 17 children.

⁸ Race/Hispanic origin information was not available for 51 children.

Figure 6 - Children Served by Kids Spot Center: Number of Children by Race and Hispanic Origin



Data Source: Kids Spot Center registration forms.

LENGTH OF VISIT⁹

The average length of stay per visit, which may include a child/children visiting the Center more than once during the day (e.g., in the morning and in the afternoon) is approximately 1 hour 15 minutes (N = 875). Slightly over half of those visits (56%) occurred in the morning compared to the afternoon (44%).

COURTHOUSE DESTINATION¹⁰

The courthouse destination of parents or guardians who dropped-off their child/ren at Kids Spot Center to play was analyzed (N = 557).¹¹ The most frequently cited court destinations of the parents or guardians utilizing Kids Spot are a court/hearing room (42%) or Family Division Services (including the Family Law Self-Help Center) (42%).

⁹ Data source for length of visit is the Kids Spot Center registration forms.

¹⁰ Data source for courthouse destination is the Kids Spot Center registration forms.

¹¹ There is a 69% response rate for this registration form item.

CONCLUSION

The Circuit Court held its first annual assessment meeting with the Kids Spot Center operations team to discuss the prior year's operations and lessons learned. The Court identified and implemented changes to the Operational Procedures and ensured Kids Spot staff is aware of these changes.

After a year of operation, key lessons learned from implementing a child waiting area at Montgomery County Circuit Court include:

- Well-trained staff are critical;
- Sufficient resources are needed for a space that is safe, secure, clean, and fun;
- Communication between parents and center staff are essential; and
- Commitment to providing quality service by the court and its funding partners is a must.

The Kids Spot Center has become a core function of the court as it directly supports the needs of families in our community who have courthouse business. Further, it underscores the court's vision to provide an accessible judiciary that is responsive and adaptive to community needs. Lastly, the Center's success during its first year of implementation has been due in large part by the effective collaboration and communication between Family Service Inc., the Montgomery County Sheriff's Office, and the Montgomery County Circuit Court.

Value of Kids Spot Center

The importance of having a child in a child waiting area is underscored by a visit from two siblings who recently entered the child welfare system pending a court-ordered resolution to their immediate need of assistance.

While the two children played in Kids Spot, a contentious hearing played out in a courtroom where their mother's aptitude in her parental role was called into question. The children whose lives were already harmed and disrupted were shielded from the graphic nature of this hearing. Kids Spot offered a safe haven to this family and many others in similar situations.