

By Garrett Therolf for [The Los Angeles Times](#)

Los Angeles County Juvenile Court will be opened to media coverage regularly, with certain exceptions intended to protect the interests of children, under an order issued Tuesday by the court's presiding judge.

Judge Michael Nash said he wanted to open the proceedings because secrecy had allowed problems to fester outside of the public's view. Without access to the courts, news organizations have been forced to rely on incomplete case records released months or years after decisions were made.

Nash's ruling applies to the dependency side of Juvenile Court, which largely means child abuse, foster care and adoption proceedings. The order does not apply to the delinquency side, which handles crimes committed by children.

Under state law, Juvenile Court judges have always been able to open a proceeding if a news organization makes a persuasive argument for it. But the media virtually never prevail.

Nash's order shifts the burden of proof from news organizations to the parties involved in the proceedings. A Juvenile Court proceeding will now be open to reporters unless a compelling case is made to close it in the best interest of the child or children involved.

The burden of proof does not shift for members of the public, however. For them, proceedings will be closed if an objection is raised — unless they demonstrate a legitimate interest in attending or are present at the request of the child or the child's attorney.

The California Newspaper Publishers Assn. has campaigned for years to open Juvenile Court proceedings. Kelli Sager, an attorney for the Los Angeles Times, told Nash that his order would provide a road map for judges. "For 20 years there has been no process set up ... and the process has been inconsistent or ad hoc at best," Sager said.

Nash, the longest-serving Juvenile Court judge in the state, has long been an advocate for transparency in the courts. He released a draft of his order in November. The proposal sharply divided the child welfare community and brought denunciations from some county supervisors, social worker union leaders and others.

Leslie Starr Heimov, executive director of the Children's Law Center of California, which represents a majority of children in the Los Angeles dependency system, said her firm was considering an appeal to the order.

Before the order was made final, she said her concerns had been largely resolved by revisions made by Nash in recent weeks. But after further reflection, she issued a statement Tuesday that said "there has been no opportunity to address necessary protocols and procedures aimed at ensuring that the child's protection does not take a back seat to public and media access."

In recent years, a commission led by then-California Supreme Court Justice Carlos Moreno found that hearings on critical placement decisions for abused children commonly lasted 10 to 15 minutes, less than half the recommended duration.

"California's dependency courts are over-stressed and under-resourced, burdened by crowded dockets and inadequate information," the commission wrote. The child welfare system in Los Angeles has undergone wrenching examination in recent years as cases of government mishandling came to light.

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, however, has moved to block access to potentially embarrassing information sought by the news media and state auditors.

County lawyers did not officially oppose Nash's order, but Supervisors Don Knabe and Michael

D. Antonovich wrote letters of opposition, saying the order would invade the privacy of abused children. The union representing social workers also opposed the move, saying it was contrary to the law and that access should be granted only on a case-specific basis.