



KIDS COUNSEL®

Summer 2014

Center for Children's Advocacy . Fighting for the legal rights of Connecticut's most vulnerable children

Getting Ready to Roll!

Center's New Mobile Legal Office for Homeless Teens is Second in U.S.

We're putting the final touches on the Center's new mobile legal office. Rolling out in the fall, the project will provide legal services to the most at-risk youth in the state: kids who are homeless, teens without family and at risk of getting deported, kids who've been kicked out because they're lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT), youth who live on others' couches and need to know how to be safe.

Kids who are homeless don't usually consider themselves homeless. They are couch surfing, house hopping or living in some other temporary situation. "There are so many legal issues affecting their lives, but they don't often think to call a lawyer for help," says Stacey Violante Cote, Director of the Center's Teen Legal Advocacy Project.



The van has been purchased and we're working on teen-friendly graphics right now. Bold design and prominent social media links will give kids the chance to check out how the Center can help them - before they step into the van to talk with an attorney.

This project is made possible with the generous support of the The Herbert & Nell Singer Foundation. If you would like the Center to consider your organization as a mobile legal site, please email sviolante@kidscounsel.org.

SpeakUpTeens.org

SpeakUpTeens.org is the new website created by the Center to help teens learn how to resolve legal issues that impact their lives. Kids' stories help teens identify with the issues and the critical need for legal support.

The Center's new mobile office will visit schools, community organizations and other locations where youth gather. An attorney from the Center will travel with an assistant, bringing teens legal information and support to help resolve some of the most challenging issues they live with: staying in school while they move around, improper denials of state and federal benefits (food, medical, financial), immigration status for abused and neglected youth, guardianship matters and more.

The site offers information about staying in school, living options, antidiscrimination law for LGBT youth, access to healthcare or mental health care. There is practical information about finding a shelter bed and where to get food. There is contact information to reach an attorney for support. On facebook, Twitter and Instagram, SpeakUpTeens posts articles and information to help kids connect to services and have their legal rights enforced.

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Center Scores Big - Two Years in a Row Five New Legislative Victories to Protect Children

**We wrote new legislation.
We advocated for passage.
New laws provide stability and critical protection.**

Family Violence Mediation

Public Act 14-217, Budget Implementer, Section 85

What does this legislation do?

Keeps kids out of the juvenile justice system.

Why is it important?

Many juvenile court cases are a result of fights between parent and child, and these cases disproportionately represent youth of color. The new law creates a pilot mediation program in two judicial districts, allowing the court or juvenile probation officer to refer a family violence case to mediation.

A child with a juvenile record faces countless future difficulties with school and employment. If the mediation is successful, charges against the child will be dismissed and records erased. The pilot will be evaluated by the Judicial Department's Court Support Services Division (CSSD).



Raise the Grade - Closing the Achievement Gap for Children in Foster Care and the Juvenile Justice System

Public Act 14-99

What does this legislation do?

Requires that schools share children's educational records with DCF, foster parents, and children's attorneys, and requires DCF and CSSD to immediately assess youth in their custody for special education services.

Why is it important?

Many children struggle to get the educational support they need, partly because information is not shared with those responsible for the child's education. This new law directs schools to share information regarding grade level, test results, report cards, individual education plans, discipline reports and records of absenteeism. It also requires state agencies to ensure that youth who need special education assistance do not fall through the cracks.

(continued inside)

New Legislation *(continued from front page)*

Access to Preschool for Children in DCF Care

Public Act 14-217, Budget Implementer, Sections 132-133

What does this legislation do?

Increases access to preschool for children in DCF care.

Why is it important?

Access to preschool for children who have been abused or neglected is a critical step in closing the achievement gap. This legislation requires the Department of Children and Families to adopt policies that maximize enrollment of preschool-aged children in its custody.

Extensive research shows that high quality preschool is the single most cost-effective and important educational investment for children. It is particularly critical for abused and neglected children because of the effects of trauma on their social, emotional, and intellectual development.

As early as third grade, children in DCF care fall behind their peers in educational achievement. Eighty percent of all Connecticut children enter kindergarten with preschool experience. Children in DCF care must have the same opportunity.



Policy Research Associates Awards Center for Children's Advocacy New Grant to Reduce Re-Arrests of Children of Color

A new grant from Policy Research Associates, with funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, will advance the Center for Children's Advocacy's work to reduce the overrepresentation of youth of color in Connecticut's juvenile justice system. With this support, the Center will develop an innovative training program to address traumatic stress and its impact on youth behavior. Training will include youth and police officers, with a pilot program to be conducted at Connecticut Juvenile Training School.

Research shows that the majority of youth involved with the juvenile justice system have trauma histories, and there are racial disparities in the diagnosis and treatment of youth of color who have traumatic stress symptoms. **Black males are significantly more likely than White males to receive a diagnosis that disregards the trauma.**



Funding to Support Youth who are Homeless

Bill No. 5596, Adjustments to State Expenditures for Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2015

What does this legislation do?

Provides support services for youth who are homeless by reinstating funding appropriated in 2010 and subsequently rescinded in 2011.

Why is it important?

There are so many reasons a youth may be homeless: domestic violence, family in poverty, LGBT acceptance, mental health issues. Outreach efforts, drop-in centers and transitional housing are key supports for youth who do not have a permanent place to live.

Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS)

Public Act 14-104, Sections 8-9
An Act Concerning Probate Courts

What does this legislation do?

Protects abandoned, abused or neglected immigrant children from deportation.

Why is it important?

SIJS is a special form of immigration protection for children who have been abandoned, abused or neglected.

Many immigrant children have been in the U.S. from a very young age, with no family at all in their country of origin. New legislation codifies federal language pertaining to Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) into Connecticut General Statutes, helping children find safety and security.

Christina was at risk of getting deported - to a country where she had no family and no friends. She knew no one.

Christina was in the United States without legal status. She lives in Bridgeport and was in high school when Center for Children's Advocacy attorney Edwin Colon first met her. Christina was at risk of being deported to a country she had really never lived in. The terror of starting over, alone, in the country of her birth, was overwhelming. She had no family there at all and had been abandoned by her parents.

"I felt hopeless," said Christina, "But one day someone at school told me I should go and speak with Attorney Colon at the legal clinic. That's how I met my lawyer."

Edwin runs one of the only high school legal clinics in the country, on site at Bridgeport's Harding High School, one of the poorest schools in Connecticut.

Using a law that allows immigrant children who have been abandoned, abused or neglected to file for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), Edwin helped Christina apply to stay in the United States. She is here now, having graduated from high school and enrolled in college and knows she will be able to stay where her family and friends are.

Christina supported Edwin's efforts to get new legislation passed that protects many more children. Recently signed into law, Public Act 14-104, Sections 8 - 9, codifies federal SIJS language into the Connecticut General Statutes. Immigrant children who have been abandoned, abused or neglected can now apply for protection. When Edwin testified before the Judiciary Committee this year, Christina testified too. They have made it possible to protect many immigrant children.



The Center gives youth a voice: At the Legislative Office Building in February to testify before the Judiciary Committee in support of new SIJS legislation!

From left: Christina, Center for Children's Advocacy client; law student intern Carolina Guiral Cuervo; Dolman Higueros, Center for Children's Advocacy client. Christina and Dolman each recently received notification that their application for lawful permanent residence was approved.

Youth with trauma histories usually have a lower threshold of stress tolerance. This impairs their ability to self regulate and makes them more reactive to perceived threats to their safety. When police officers do not understand the behaviors of youth with traumatic stress, they are much more likely to interpret the behavior as aggressive and defiant, and respond in a way that escalates the encounter.

The Center and its partners, the Connecticut Mental Health Juvenile Justice Action Network team and the Pennsylvania DMC Youth-Law Enforcement Corporation, will provide training for police officers and youth, including information about traumatic stress and the cultural implications for youth of color during law enforcement interactions. Training will include direct instruction and facilitated interaction between officers and youth.

Understanding adolescents' coping behaviors and how police response to those behaviors can escalate interactions into arrest, may help defuse potentially escalating interactions and reduce the arrest rate among youth with traumatic stress.

Policy Research Associates is a recognized leader in behavioral health research.

“I was a great kid under all the hurt and abuse and anxiety. My attorney motivated me to believe in myself.”

My name is Lamar David Scott and my story started when I was 5. I was placed into DCF due to the illegal activities of my mother. I was moved all over Connecticut from foster home to foster home. I developed a severe anger problem and severe depression due to abuse from the foster parents and isolation from my family. I was becoming a problem child and began a downhill journey.



Center for Children's Advocacy client Lamar David Scott spoke to an audience of over 200 at the Center's 2014 Champion of Children awards event.

I was in and out of psychological institutions and group homes and I was incarcerated. Although I seemed like a nuisance, I was a great kid under all the hurt, abuse, sadness, confusion, and anxiety that life brought me.

When I was in a group home, I got into big trouble and was sent to Bridgeport juvenile detention and then Manson Youth Institution at age 15. I thought I was still the big bad tough guy doing some hard time but I cried myself to sleep every night. I witnessed riots, people

being stabbed and guards just sitting back.

After Manson, I was moved to Ohio because DCF said they could not find a suitable placement for me. While I was there, I learned that my new child advocacy lawyer was Martha Stone. My previous lawyers I hardly ever saw. I was very depressed and became extremely overweight.

Martha talked to me on the phone a lot and began to advocate for me. She was one of the first people to believe in me and it motivated me to believe in myself.

With her help, the judge listened and ordered me back to Connecticut. Martha came to visit me the first week I was back. She advocated for me to start public school and found a way so I could see a nutritionist. I am extremely proud that I have lost over 100 pounds.

I live in a group home where I have been for about 2 years. Martha has gone to bat for me to be in independent living, and advocated for me to go to college.

I have learned so many skills from her, such as self-advocacy and how to be heard in an appropriate way. I am grateful for learning these skills because I can't have her for the rest of my life. I am glad that another youth after me will get to experience her intelligence and wisdom.

I am working at Greater Hartford Communities that Care and have already earned 6 college credits from Tunxis Community College. I would like to graduate with a degree in psychology. I am moving into my own apartment soon and I am looking forward to being independent. In the future, I want to work for the department that raised me and my all-time goal is to someday be the commissioner of DCF!

Center's Complaint Against Bridgeport Public Schools Spurs Positive Change

The Center for Children's Advocacy filed a complaint with the State Department of Education (SDE) on behalf of Bridgeport children whose disabilities had gone unidentified and unevaluated by Bridgeport schools for years. These children lacked educational support services and suffered from prolonged and unaddressed academic failure.

In response to the Center's complaint and subsequent findings from SDE, Bridgeport is taking affirmative steps to remedy widespread deficiencies. Steps include the adoption of district-wide policies to facilitate the identification and referral of children suspected of having

a disability and who may qualify for services under the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA). An independent agency is auditing student records to identify children with unaddressed learning needs and uncover other widespread or systemic failures.

Fran Rabinowitz, Bridgeport's interim Superintendent, and Robert Arnold, Director of Specialized Learning, have been meeting with lawyers Kathryn Meyer and Edwin Colon from the Center to find solutions that encourage lasting systemic change and benefit all Bridgeport students.

Check our website for great photos from our 2014 Champion of Children Awards!

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2014 Recipients: Marueen Price-Boreland, JD;
Nina Livingston, MD; John Leventhal, MD

kidscounsel.org/photos-from-our-2014-awards-night/



Center's Attorney on Child Fatality Review Panel calls for Focus on Abuse and Neglect-Related Deaths

Center for Children's Advocacy Child Abuse Project attorney Alexandra Dufresne has served on Connecticut's Child Fatality Review Panel since 2013.

The Child Fatality Review Panel (CFRP) is a Connecticut interdisciplinary body charged with reviewing the unexplained or unexpected death of any child under 18 who has received services from a state child welfare, social services, human services or juvenile justice agency.

In April 2014, the CFRP and the Office of the Child Advocate released a public health alert regarding unsafe sleep practices. This report, based on data from 2001- 2013, concluded that "infants in Connecticut are more likely to die from unsafe sleeping conditions than from child abuse, car accidents, choking, drowning, falls, or any other source of accidental injury."

In 2013, 23 infants in Connecticut died due to accidental or sudden unexpected death. Of these, 18 had risk factors associated with sleep environment.



Based on this finding, attorney Dufresne and members of the CFRP provided guidance to DCF regarding a new policy and practice guide regarding safe sleep conditions.

DCF's new policy affirmatively requires social workers to take concrete steps to reduce risks, including:

- directly observing infants' sleep environments
- discussing safe sleeping practices with caregivers
- advising caregivers that unsafe sleep conditions are the leading cause of preventable infant deaths in Connecticut
- assisting families to secure necessary equipment
- immediately consulting with supervisory staff, the infant's pediatrician, and home-visit or parent support services regarding unresolved unsafe sleep issues

Information about the CFRP is on the Office of the Child Advocate website at cga.ct.gov/oca. Links to CFRP investigative reports and public health alerts are provided.

Read Attorney Dufresne's Hartford Courant OP-ED in response to recent data showing 9 deaths of infants under 6 months of age in the last few months. Go to: kidscounsel.org/information-key-saving-risk-infants/



Center for Children's Advocacy

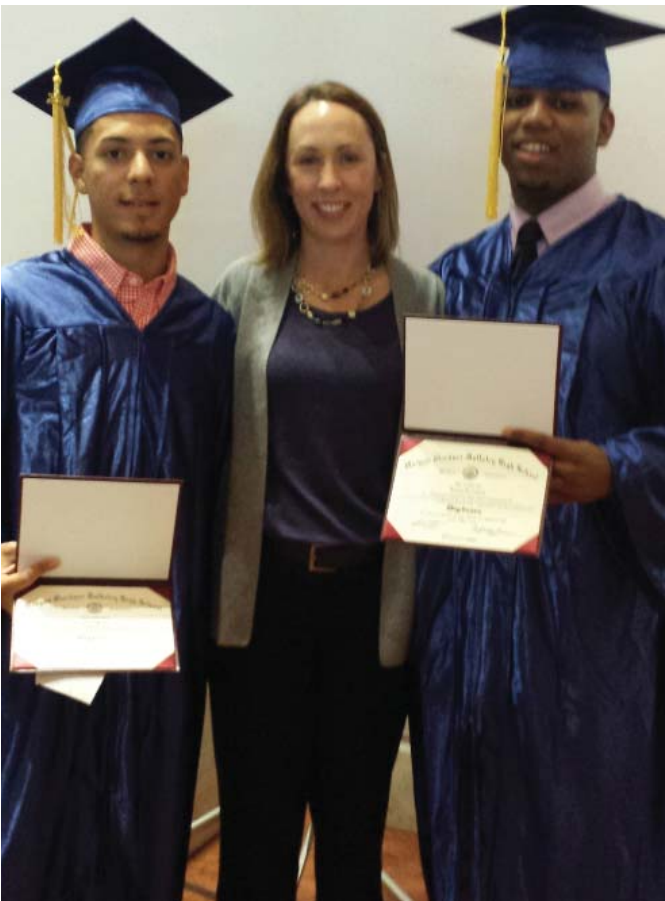
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The Center has represented Jaime Rivera since he was 8 years old. Four days before he turned 13, **Jaime got the best birthday present ever - a forever family.** Pictured: Judge Jorge Simon presents Jaime and his adoptive mother, Luraine Lawrence, with the official adoption petition.

"Jaime's story illustrates the best of the Center's individual legal representation," said his attorney, executive director Martha Stone. **"We stick by our kids, and May 28 was a joyous day."** Attorney Stone returned to court many times until Jaime was stable and achieved permanency in his life.



Center for Children's Advocacy attorney Stacey Violante Cote with new graduates Lenny V. (left) and Edwin P. Three years ago, Lenny and Edwin almost gave up. Stacey's legal advocacy helped with placement at a school that could support their special education needs. We're all very proud of their success.



LeAndreene Comrie, a 6th grade student at Hartford's Martin Luther King Jr. elementary school, spoke eloquently at the Truancy Court Prevention Project's end-year celebration at the Lyceum.

For information about the TCPP, go to kidscounsel.org and click on 'Truancy Prevention' under 'Our Work.'



Kids from the Center's Truancy Court Prevention Project visited UCONN this spring. It is very important to actually see what the future can hold. Hard work and a lot of support is keeping these youth in school. We are honored to be part of their wonderful success.

KidsCounsel® is published by the Center for Children's Advocacy. Past issues are available on the Center's website at kidscounsel.org.