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Legal Clinic Gives 'Voice' to Homeless Teens

Stacey Violante Cote is the director of the Teen Legal Advocacy Project at the Center for Children's Advocacy, which advocates for a wide range of low-income teens, including those who are victims of abuse, neglect and other traumas. In her work, Violante Cote has come to realize that law related to teenagers can be a "gray area."

Stacey Violante Cote helps the homeless. Not by running a shelter or dishing up meals in a soup kitchen, but by serving up a healthy portion of legal advice and representation. Violante Cote, the director of the Teen Legal Advocacy Project at the Center for Children's Advocacy, calls homeless teens the "invisible population" of the state. And, she said, many of these young people defy stereotypes.

"One thing I have found," Violante Cote said, "is that most of my homeless clients share the desire to go to school, remain steady in school and see school through, despite the fact that the rest of their lives may be in chaos."

The staff does more than help the homeless. Violante Cote and her crew advocate for a wide range of low-income teens, including those who are victims of abuse, neglect and other traumas. The Teen Legal Advocacy Project tries to remove barriers that prevent youth from completing high school, addressing civil issues such as the educational rights of homeless students and improper denials of state and federal benefits, among others. It's a never-ending battle, as Hartford has one of the highest dropout rates in the state.

But the efforts to fight homelessness got a recent boost when the Center launched a new website, www.speakup-teens.org, which links homeless young people with resources ranging from lawyers to shelters.

"The young and homeless basically operate beneath the radar," said Robert Francis, executive director of the Regional Youth Adult Social Action Partnership (RYASAP), who has been working with Violante Cote for five or six years. "Through our state mechanisms, we are able to identify 2,000 kids who are considered homeless -- that's probably 15 to 20 percent of the actual [adolescent] population who are not sleeping in their own bed every night."

'GRAY AREA'

Violante Cote entered her own young adulthood ready to become a teacher; she liked working with kids and wanted to help them. "I quickly realized that the classroom was not the place for me," she said. She got her J.D. from UCONN Law School, with a joint degree in social justice. About that time, she met Martha Stone, the longtime child welfare advocate who is founder and executive director of the Center for Children's Advocacy.

The two women clicked right away, and Violante Cote has been working at the center for 11 years.

"I got a summer internship there after my first summer of law school, and this was a time when [the Center] was just a room above the boiler room at the school," Violante Cote said. "Now, we have 11 lawyers in the office, we have offices in three different parts of the state. So I grew as a lawyer, and so did the Center."

Violante Cote said as her work evolved, she came to realize the law related to teenagers is a distinct practice area. "A lot of folks understand law as it relates to young children, families or adults -- but there is a lot of gray area when it comes to teenagers," she said. "The more exposure I had, the more I liked the work. I always have said I love teenagers. They say it like it is."

To illustrate what she does, Violante Cote offered the example of Melissa, who is 16. The teen was in the care of the Department of Children and Families, until the courts said she could move back into her mother's house. But before long, the mother was arrested and sent to jail. Melissa then lived for a time with an older sister with whom she did not get along. The sister kicked Melissa out, and she bounced around to five other places in a short period.

"She stayed in a shelter for a short time, but left there because she didn't want the program to call DCF. She didn't want to be in DCF care," Violante Cote said.

Today, Melissa goes to school almost every day, with the exception being the days when she is moving from one house to another. Violante Cote said she is currently "couch-surfing" with relatives and friends.

"I represented her to enforce her rights under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, to stay in school even though she was moving around," she said. "I also advocated for her to get an appropriate educational placement."

The McKinney Act provides federal money for homeless shelter programs. Enacted in 1987, it was the first significant federal legislative response to homelessness. "This federal law is very helpful in that it gives students the right to continue their studies," said Violante Cote. "This is the one thing that can remain constant for these kids."

Not only does staying in school provide homeless students with stability and an education, but it helps keep them away from the violence of the streets and the world of sex trafficking. In fact, Violante Cote says an important part of her job is explaining to students what their options are, and advising them of the possible consequences of some of the choices that they may make.

"Really," she said, "there is no single voice sticking up for these teens. They are survivors without a voice."

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