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Summer 2013

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

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Center Celebrates Its Huge Legislative Successes! Four New Laws Protect Most Vulnerable Children and Youth

We initiated them.

We wrote them.

And they all got passed!

The Center's enormous legislative successes this year saw passage of four significant initiatives that benefit children and youth critically in need of support.

Raise the Grade - Closing the Educational Achievement Gap for Children in State Care

Public Act 13-234, Sections 123-124

What this legislation does: Requires state agencies to share, track and report academic progress of children in state care. The law directs a *Raise the Grade* pilot program in three school districts to identify children who perform substantially below grade level, and ensure targeted assistance to improve their academic performance.

Why it is important: The thousands of children in state foster care or under juvenile justice supervision are some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children in our communities. Many have experienced abuse, neglect and abandonment. They have high rates of absenteeism, academic failure, special education needs, and disciplinary infractions. School records may not have followed them when they've moved from one placement to another. (see sidebar)

Why it makes sense: Connecticut has not tracked or published data on the academic performance of children in foster care or the juvenile justice system. The new law requires that every child's case file include updated information on academic progress, absenteeism and disciplinary actions; and requires DCF and CSSD to report to the Achievement Gap Taskforce regarding plans to ensure that all children receive an appropriate education.

Alternative School Reform - Quality Education for High-Risk Students

Public Act 13-122, Section 12

What this legislation does: Secures state evaluation of all alternative education programs by February 2014, to ensure uniform quality statewide.

Why it is important: Students who attend alternative programs are a high-need, high-risk group, yet the state has no set standards for education or support. The simplest information - how many programs exist, how many students are served - is unknown.

Why it makes sense: Lack of oversight has created a vast disparity in the quality of alternative school programs. Some have dedicated teachers and staff who engage and educate struggling students; others offer a dismal educational experience. The study will evaluate each program based on the needs of its student population and compliance with the standards public schools are held to. The evaluation will establish a minimum standard and framework for alternative programs to assure that high-risk students have the opportunity to be properly educated.

Developmental Screening for Abused and Neglected Infants and Toddlers

Public Act 13-234, Section 156

What this legislation does: Ensures that every abused and neglected infant or toddler will be regularly screened for developmental and social-emotional delays, and referred to the state's early intervention program as indicated.

Why it is important: Abused and neglected infants and toddlers are at significant risk of developmental delay and impairment. Of children removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect, 50% may have significant communication and cognitive delays. Yet only 5 to 8 percent actually receive early intervention services.

Why it makes sense: The addition of the universal screening and referral system required by the new law is a low-cost, high-impact reform. Federal law already requires states to screen all abused and neglected children for eligibility for *Birth-to-Three*, a family-strengthening model that can provide in-home services and improve outcomes for children at no additional cost to DCF. Universal screening and referral ensures that abused and neglected children are also screened for delays and referred to early intervention services which can dramatically decrease their need for services later in life. Legislative leadership's embrace was an invaluable asset in implementation of this critical reform.

Homeless Youth - Access to Birth Certificates for Schooling and Employment

Public Act 13-142

What this legislation does: Allows homeless youth over age fifteen to get a copy of their own birth certificate with help from a school "homeless liaison" or a shelter provider (without a parent's or guardian's consent).

Why it is important: There are hundreds of homeless teens in Connecticut who want to enroll in school, get a job, or sign up for a job training program. Until now, they have been unable to secure the documents they need to enroll or submit an application.

Why it makes sense: Teens who are on their own must be able to act to secure their own future. To protect these youth from identity theft, requirements for providing proper identification remain in place.

Go to www.kidscounsel.org/legislative and click on "significant recent state legislation" for more information.

Raise the Grade Legislation Angela has a profound history of victimization and abuse.



Angela had no adult who could care for her and entered "the system" at age 15. She was placed in detention, then hospitalized for two months, sent back to detention and then to a residential facility.

Angela lived in state facilities for five months - and after five months attending school while in state care, no one had any meaningful information about Angela's educational status:

- No one knew what grade she was in
- No one knew how many credits she had
- No one knew why she'd never been evaluated for special education
- No one had a copy of her records
- No one knew where to get this information

"Raise the Grade" reforms the educational system to close the achievement gap for thousands of children like Angela.

Center Opens Fifth Medical-Legal Office Now On Site at Yale-New Haven Hospital

The Center's Medical-Legal Partnership has opened a new office on site at Yale-New Haven Hospital.

Alice Rosenthal, a native of New Haven who attended New Haven public schools, has joined the Center for Children's Advocacy as the on-site MLPP staff attorney at Yale-New Haven Hospital. She brings her extensive public service legal expertise on behalf of vulnerable children and families to this new partnership.

"There are so many New Haven families whose children suffer from medical issues that can be alleviated with our help," said Rosenthal. "Poverty should not be a roadblock to appropriate medical care. Our new office gives patients and practitioners easy access to legal services that provide real relief to families, and Yale has been incredibly welcoming."

The Center's first medical-legal office opened in 2000 at Connecticut Children's Medical Center. Other locations include St. Francis Hospital & Medical Center, Charter Oak Health Center, Community Health Center, and The Hospital of Central Connecticut.

The partnership has helped thousands of children and families, and provides support and training for hundreds of pediatric and family medicine clinicians throughout the state each year. The new office at Yale-New Haven enables the Center to improve health outcomes for the most at-risk children in the New Haven area.

Yale-New Haven pediatrician Ada Fenick, acting director of the hospital's Pediatric Primary Care Center, is the project's on-site medical director. "This is an important service for patients, many of whom face challenges we are not equipped to deal with as physicians," said Dr. Fenick.

Rosenthal, Fenick and other MLPP staff will conduct trainings for Yale-New Haven health-care providers and social service staff on legal issues that affect children's health.

Culture Change Promotes Health Equity

The MLPP follows a model that creates culture change in pediatric practice: lawyers and doctors work together to address health inequities. Common issues include housing, mental health screening, disability and basic needs benefits, utility shutoff, employment law, Medicaid and HUSKY, and education rights.

In addition to the cases of individual children, the MLPP continues to focus on systemic issues that affect children's health.

For information, contact arosenthal@kidscounsel.org or jsicklick@kidscounsel.org



Alice Rosenthal has joined the Center as staff attorney for the Medical-Legal Partnership Project at Yale-New Haven Hospital.

Attorney Rosenthal has an extensive background in child welfare and education law. Admitted to practice in Connecticut and New York, she was previously director of the Robin Hood Project at Advocates for Children of New York, providing education advocacy for eighteen Robin Hood Foundation organizations. She was lead staff attorney of the Project Achieve venture, creating collaborations with the City of New York's welfare and child protection programs.

Alice is a graduate of Rutgers University School of Law (Newark) and the University of Wisconsin. Her new office, on-site at Yale-New Haven Hospital, takes her back to her roots. Alice was born and raised in New Haven and attended New Haven public schools.

Contact Alice Rosenthal at 203-688-0113 arosenthal@kidscounsel.org

Victor's Triumph

(continued from back cover)

Victor's pediatrician called the Center's Medical-Legal Partnership for help. The public school had never evaluated Victor and attorney Bonnie Roswig could make this happen.



Despite strong resistance from the public school, attorney Roswig got Victor placed at High Road, a therapeutic school for students with educational and emotional needs.

The placement transformed Victor's family. His mother went back to school and returned to work as a medical assistant. Victor thrived at High Road. He did well in his classes, began to understand his own emotional needs, and returned to playing basketball.

Happiness was short lived. In the fall of 2011, Victor sustained a traumatic spinal cord injury as the result of a terrible car accident. Months of hospitalization led to his return home and an uncertain future. Victor was quadriplegic.

Victor's mother and his physicians assumed state services would provide support, but Victor was released with no home-nursing help. "Those Medicaid cases can slip through the cracks," the responsible state agency said.

Mental health providers and private therapeutic schools did not return attorney Roswig's calls or would not accommodate a wheelchair. Agencies for the disabled were unresponsive.

The public school suggested that Victor "register and start classes and then we can have a meeting" – despite the fact that no plan was in place for support.

With attorney Roswig's help, some humanity began to emerge. A generous volunteer bought an iPad for Victor that became his window to the world. She convinced High Road School to take Victor back and they worked to make him an active member of the school community. An amazing woman from the State of Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitative Services, herself a quadriplegic confined to a wheelchair, met with attorney Roswig and Victor, and showed Victor the potential for a bright, productive life.

Poor children in Connecticut face incredible odds for educational success and future independence. A youth with multiple disabilities faces even greater odds, particularly when systems fail to provide the most basic support.

Victor's attorney, Bonnie Roswig, is a Senior Staff Attorney at the Center for Children's Advocacy Medical-Legal Partnership Project.



Great Success Reducing School-Based Arrests of Youth of Color Results in for Hartford and Bridgeport, New Haven and Waterbury Next



The Center is leading citywide "Disproportionate Minority Contact" committees to reduce school-based arrests of youth of color. Working with the national Center for Children's Law and Policy and Local Implementation Teams (LISTs), we met with schools and police in Hartford and Bridgeport.

The reduction in arrests, especially for low-level, non-serious offenses, has been significant.

Hartford's school-based arrests dropped by 52% and Bridgeport saw a 37% drop. Similar efforts are underway now in New Haven and will begin in Waterbury this fall.

For information, contact mstone@kidscounsel.org

“Every kid deserves to have a lawyer like the one I have.”

At the Center's annual Spring for Kids awards event on May 14, Laquandria shared thoughts about life in DCF care and the enormous impact her lawyer, Sarah Eagan, and the Center for Children's Advocacy have had on her life:



“Sarah has been my lawyer since I've been in DCF custody.

Being in DCF is difficult because you have to trust people who are not your family and you have to be very strong and learn how to adjust and make healthy relationships, be open-minded to new things and trust that people want what's best for your life. Since 9 years old I've been in 10 different homes and had some great experiences and some bad ones.

Having a lawyer in my opinion is like having a bodyguard, but in a special way. Sarah has been with me through thick and thin. She is

very caring and honest and I know she wants the best for me as I want for myself. Sarah is a person that always keeps her word, whenever I need her she's always there.

I believe DCF kids need lawyers. It makes us feel like we're important. The little things that lawyers do make every bit of a difference like showing up to PPTs, DMHAS meetings and even just taking them out. Kids in DCF need to feel like they matter and what goes on in their life is just as important as a kid that's not in DCF. I feel like the key to a kid or teenager's heart is to be able to listen, be honest and just be there to show that you care. I get all those great feelings from Sarah.

Every kid or teenager deserves to have a lawyer that cares just like the one I have.

Over time, I've learned that you can't change where you've come from but you can always change where you go from here.

Today, I have become a great advocate for myself, which my lawyer always tells me!! I'm in school, I'm on track to graduate, and I want to grow up to be a pediatric nurse or a child advocate.

Thank you!!”



Stopping Expulsion of Young Children

Ruben's mother, Ms. Garcia, called the Center for Children's Advocacy for help because she knew her son was in trouble at school.

Ms. Garcia had gone to a meeting at school to talk about Ruben's behavior. She didn't understand what the school was proposing.

She didn't know she had the right to a formal expulsion hearing before the school could expel him. She felt coerced to agree with the district's proposal. And, she felt ambushed because the district brought a police officer to the meeting as a “witness” to talk about Ruben's behavior.

Ms. Garcia didn't know she had the right to bring someone to stand up for Ruben, and she didn't know that the law didn't support the district's reason for expulsion.

Center attorney Kathryn Meyer met with the district to explain the confusion faced by many of our clients. She asked the district to be more forthright about the “informal hearing process,” and pushed them to comply with state law and provide notice in the parent's native language.

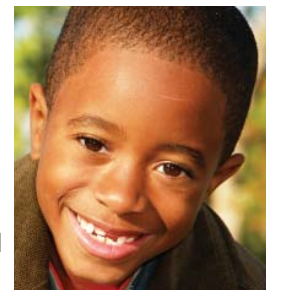
Attorney Meyer was able to help get Ruben evaluated by the school and is working to get him placed in a program that includes support for his emotional issues.

System-Wide Changes and Statewide Safeguards

Attorney Meyer worked with district personnel to draft materials that clarify the procedural safeguards of the expulsion process. The materials are being translated so all families can understand their rights.

The Center is formulating a strategy for the coming year to address the systemic injustices of the expulsion process. The goal is to create statewide safeguards that ensure parents and students have a fair opportunity to defend themselves.

“We aren't looking to keep kids in school who will create safety concerns; we just don't want districts to “push out” kids for unfair or untrue reasons,” says attorney Meyer.



Frustrated. Degraded. No One Listens . . . Center Initiates New “Speak Up!” Project

Girls at Stepping Stone, one of Connecticut's secure residential care facilities, talked about their lives in the system. They're working with the Center as part of *SpeakUp!*, a new program helping teens in state custody learn their legal rights and gain the confidence to speak up and change the policies that directly affect them.

SpeakUp! uses gender-responsive practices and a youth-led curriculum. Intensive skill-building activities help the teens identify their priorities.

Led by Kim Selvaggi of Taylor Lane Consulting and Center for Children's Advocacy attorney Kathryn Meyer, the girls' first priority was to establish the right to have a say in their own case planning and discharge planning.

The girls requested a meeting with the Department of Children and Families and developed an agenda that outlined their requests and relevant sections of laws, regulations, and policies they wanted changed.

At the meeting, held at Stepping Stone, one specific discussion point surprised DCF officials: the girls said they were almost never allowed to be physically present at their own ACRs (Administrative Case Review meetings). ACRs were usually held at a facility too far

away for the girls to be easily transported, and they felt like outsiders at the very meetings that were supposed to be all about them.

The meeting with DCF was a great success. The girls felt validated in their opinions and insights, and DCF officials were inspired and motivated by their suggestions. Shortly after the meeting, DCF contacted the young women and the project facilitators to say the issue had been resolved – DCF would hold ACRs at most of the state's congregate care facilities so the majority of girls would be able to attend in person.

The advocacy of the girls at Stepping Stone opened the eyes of Department officials and convinced them to make an important change. Skills learned during the 16 week program will help the girls be better advocates for themselves as future issues arise. The successful program will repeat this summer at a boys' group home.

SpeakUp! is a partnership between the Center for Children's Advocacy and the Department of Children and Families (DCF).

Center Presents 2013 Champion of Children Awards!



Photos online at www.kidscounsel.org/eventphotos



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Ultimate Triumph for Quadriplegic Boy

Victor, a very special young man who is confined to a wheel chair, received his high school diploma from High Road School in Wallingford last week.

When we first met Victor 5 years ago, he had academic and behavioral problems and was failing in middle school. His mother was frustrated and confused. She was constantly called to take Victor home from school because of his violent outbursts.

Her greatest fear was that her son's downward spiral would lead to involvement with the juvenile justice system.

(photo and story inside)



Above: At age 18, our client, Theresa, was homeless and struggling. We worked hard to get Theresa get back into DCF support services, find a foster home, and stay in school. Theresa is now a high school graduate and couldn't be happier!

Left: Daquan has been with DCF since he was very young, and with his attorney from the Center for Children's Advocacy just as long. We helped Daquan get an appropriate school placement and safe housing. Daquan is now a proud high school graduate!



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