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Making Courts Work For Kids

By DOUGLAS S. MALAN

Martha Stone's crusade began humbly: one computer, one room above the University of Connecticut School of Law's boiler and \$2,000. Nine years later, the once-fledgling Center for Children's Advocacy operates today under an \$800,000 budget supported by nearly a dozen foundations and more than 200 individual donors.

Seven staff attorneys now work at the Center's Park Street office in Hartford, providing multi-pronged legal services to impoverished children who fall through the cracks in Hartford's educational, health and justice systems.

Stone, who serves as executive director of the nonprofit organization, is focused on making the state's legal and social services systems responsive to the children they are designed to serve. She left the Connecticut Civil Liberties Union in 1997 after 18 years as its legal director to found the center, bringing to children's advocacy the passion and vision that drove her career in public interest law.

"Part of our theory is to encourage kids to speak up for themselves," Stone said. "Kids will be more stable and permanent with the ability to advocate for themselves."

The center specializes in individual representation, interdisciplinary projects, training programs for professionals, legislative advocacy and systemic advocacy designed to improve the structure of child welfare services. The breadth of advocacy allows for sweeping changes and case-by-case attention.



Stone's history as a child advocate is long. She serves as a plaintiff's attorney in the *Sheff v. O'Neill* school desegregation case and spent two years as the associate director of Children's Rights Inc., a national organization based in New York dedicated to reforming child welfare services.

An adjunct professor at the UConn Law School, Stone teaches "Law and Medicine in Child Protection" and an internship course in child advocacy. She started her legal career as a criminal defense attorney but felt she could make a bigger impact advocating for children.

"We ask ourselves, 'If this was my child, would this be okay?'" she explained. "If the answer is no, then it fuels the passion that we bring to these cases. The systems that are set up to protect the kids fail the kids."

The Medical-Legal Partnership Project (MLPP), a unique venture when it began six years ago, is typical of the multi-pronged advocacy that is the center's pride. Legal and community issues such as housing conditions and problems with benefits can easily impact children's health, project attorneys recognize. The project links law offices within children's hospitals and pediatric clinics, making legal advice readily accessible. When the center introduced the program in 1999, there was only one other like it — in Boston.

Originally, the partnership in Hartford included only the Connecticut Children's Medical Center, but now the project covers 90 percent of children in Hartford through Community Health Services and Charter Oak Clinic. Partnerships with UConn Schools of Law, Medicine and Social Work also are aimed at providing children improved health care.

One case it handled in 2005 involved a pre-teen boy suffering from a disfigurement that caused undue psychological stress and deflated self-esteem. The center's attorneys argued that a surgical procedure was necessary. The managed care company had denied the procedure, deeming it cosmetic, and an administrative hearing officer with the Department of Social Services upheld that decision.

Once challenged in Superior Court, however, the case was remanded to a different hearing officer, the decision overturned and HUSKY Medicaid program covered the cost of the procedure.

"It's important to be as close to the kids as possible," said attorney Jay E. Sicklick, director of the MLPP, which includes attorney Gladys Nieves. "Being in their sight gives us a different entrée, and we have the unique ability to interact with kids and provide consultation on the spot."

Similar results emerge from the Teen Legal Advocacy Clinic, which connects attorneys with children at truancy court, Hartford Public High School and Yo Hartford, an alternative learning program within Hartford's public school system.

Abusive relationships, restraining orders and homelessness are some of the problems children encounter. Other children need assistance with immigration issues, emancipation and other factors that could increase Hartford schools' already elevated drop-out rate.

"Because they're minors, they believe they don't have any rights," said the clinic's director, attorney Stacey Violante Cote, who began her legal career with the Center for Children's Advocacy in 2001. "Advocating for them keeps you going. It makes a difference in the outcome for the kid."

Other agencies around the country have replicated the Center for Children's Advocacy's collaborative structure, specifically the medical-legal partnership initiative. More than 20 similar partnerships now exist.

The Teen Legal Advocacy Clinic remains one of six school-based programs in the country, Stone said, adding that the center remains unique nationally for its "holistic legal services" approach. •