

# Our Kids

*Center for Children's Advocacy*

Together we can change the lives of Connecticut's most vulnerable children.

Somewhere,  
right now,  
a child needs a

HOME  
LAWYER  
FRIEND

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# Our Kids

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Dear friend,

As the Executive Director of the Center for Children's Advocacy (CCA), I have made it my life's work to make sure that every child's voice is heard. Through this organization and the work that it does, we are able to bring stability, safety, health and hope to the lives of so many children who would otherwise not have this chance.

For more than 12 years, CCA has been driven by its mission to promote and protect the legal rights and interests of poor children who are dependent upon the state's judicial, child welfare, health and mental health, education, and juvenile justice systems for their care.

We provide a much needed voice for Connecticut's children at risk. From vulnerable immigrant and refugee children who suffer barriers to health care and education, to children born in the U.S. and suffering from abuse, neglect, lack of medical access or homelessness, CCA helps kids of all ages and backgrounds overcome barriers to a safe, productive future.



Connecticut's kids are our kids. We all know there are children in need. Let's work together to ensure that all kids have the chance to look forward to a secure future and to be a part of our future. This storybook is one way for us to share with you the many ways that CCA is making a difference in the lives of our kids. We hope you are as inspired as we are.

### What we do.

Through outreach and collaborative programs, CCA serves hundreds of children each year and provides the legal advocacy needed to give these children the chance to lead healthy, safe and productive lives.

The Center remains committed to protecting the legal rights of children who fall through the cracks of the child welfare, health, education and juvenile justice systems. Individual legal representation of children who need our help, legal training for professionals, self-advocacy training for youth, and systemic advocacy and class action litigation allow us to impact the lives of children throughout the state.

## Our work focuses on the following areas:

- **Immigrants & Refugees**

- **New Arrivals Advocacy Project**

- A partnership to improve the health and educational access of immigrant and refugee children.

- **Child Abuse Project**

- Legal representation for Connecticut's most vulnerable abused and neglected children.

- **Medical Legal Partnership Project**

- A multidisciplinary approach to improving child health, with office locations at hospitals and community health centers throughout Greater Hartford.

- **Teen Legal Advocacy Clinic**

- On-site school legal clinics address the legal aspects of problems that result in poor school attendance.

- **Truancy Court Prevention Project**

- Legal advocacy and coordination of support services for youth who are at risk of truancy and juvenile justice involvement.

- **TeamChild Juvenile Justice Project**

- Legal representation to improve educational outcomes for youth involved in the juvenile justice system.

- **KidsCounsel Training Program**

- Seminar programs and resources for Connecticut child protection attorneys to improve the quality of legal representation for all children.

- **Systemic Advocacy and Class Action Litigation**

- To improve policy and services and broaden our reach to help thousands of children throughout the state.

Hartford is home to more refugees than any other city in Connecticut. We make it possible for vulnerable refugee and immigrant families to access education and health care services for their children.

We work with physicians, social workers, educators and advocates, and through these unique partnerships, we make a difference for children. We provide children with the opportunity and support that they would not otherwise have.

We help children enroll in school and help teens stay in school. We ensure that homeless youth who live in shelters get the educational, health care, and legal support they need. We work with the community to establish services to keep youth who have not committed any crime out of juvenile detention facilities.



## Why our work is important.

Our approach is unique . . . it is innovative . . . and it works. Thank you for reading the stories we share. I know you will find them compelling, inspiring and worthwhile. We need your help. Your support is needed by countless children and families in Connecticut. Without your help, our kids will not receive the assistance they need.

Sincerely,

*Martha Stone*

Martha Stone, J.D.  
Executive Director  
Center for Children's Advocacy

## You can help change a child's life.

Support the Center for Children's Advocacy by visiting [www.kidscounsel.org](http://www.kidscounsel.org) to donate, or call 860-570-5327 for more information about the critical work we do each day.



# Kristie

Kristie needs support to keep up in school so she can achieve her academic goals.

Kristie's family recently arrived in the U.S. from Eastern Europe. She has limited English language skills and is psychologically frail, having engaged in past suicide attempts. Despite these overwhelming challenges, Kristie is motivated to learn and do well in school. She is looking toward the future, and wants to graduate from high school and go to college to become a social worker.



A school-based psychologist recommended specific supports that might help Kristie keep up in school and feel more comfortable in the school environment. The school district claimed that it was not obligated to provide support services for Kristie since she did not require special education services. In fact, the school held a meeting with Kristie and suggested that she withdraw from school and enter an adult education program.

Kristie did not want to drop out of high school. CCA's **Immigrants and Refugees: New Arrivals Advocacy Project (IRNAAP)** represented Kristie on this issue and advocated for an educational program that would help Kristie with English and provide access to the general curriculum. CCA informed the school district that Kristie's right to these supports was guaranteed by federal civil rights law. After much correspondence and a few conferences with the school district, the district agreed to change its position.

With Kristie's input, CCA worked with the school district to create a program that gives Kristie the support she needs and the opportunity to work hard and achieve her academic goals. Kristie has thrived with her individualized program. By the end of the past school year, she dramatically improved her English skills and passed all of her classes.

# Baya

Baya was born in Nigeria and her mother died when she was an infant.

After her mother died, Baya was cared for by her maternal grandmother. When Baya was eight, her grandmother died, and her father, whom she had never met, took over her care.

Baya's father took her to the U.S., where he lived with his new wife. Within a short time, both her father and step-mother were physically abusing her.

Following custom, other members of the Nigerian community assumed Baya's care. Her father turned over her documents to an undocumented couple and ceased all support and contact.

Baya always assumed that there was no way she could get legal status and never sought any assistance to address the matter. She became an exceptional student, earning money during high school by winning writing competitions, becoming valedictorian of her class, and receiving a full, private scholarship to a prestigious university. Just before her 18th birthday, Baya mentioned her situation to someone in the university's international student office and was referred to the United States Commission on Refugees and Immigrants. They thought Baya might qualify for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status and referred her to the Center for Children's Advocacy.

After reviewing her history, it was clear that Baya qualified for commitment to the Department of Children and Families (DCF), which is an important prerequisite to get Special Immigrant Juvenile status – and the next step in getting a green card. Although Baya had been living with another family, she was never legally adopted; she was inarguably abused and abandoned by her only living legal guardian (her father).

Baya had no money for clothes, no housing outside of the school year or during holidays, and faced the constant risk of deportation to a country where she knows no one. Because of the short time before her 18th birthday, CCA immediately filed a neglect petition in juvenile court and secured a hearing date five days before her 18th birthday.

The Department of Children and Families opposed the petition because Baya was so close to her 18th birthday. They said she had not really been neglected, and she was doing too well on her own to need DCF's help. However, none of these arguments had any basis in law. The judge ruled to approve Baya's commitment to DCF, bringing her one step closer to U.S. citizenship.



Gio

## Gio says he couldn't have made it without his CCA attorney.

Gio, whose CCA attorney has been the only stable adult in his life, was displaced from his home, leaving him with no place to sleep at night, struggling to get to high school each day. He was placed in foster care, and his foster mother died. After a very difficult adolescence, Gio is now in college and holds down a full time job. He is very emotional when he says that he could not have done this without the constant support of the Center for Children's Advocacy and his attorney from the Center's **Teen Legal Clinic**.



I have been quite moved by the impact CCA has had on the lives of abused, neglected and otherwise disadvantaged young people, both individually and collectively. CCA has been responsible for important institutional changes in the juvenile justice system, in services for kids in DCF, in hospital-based services, as well as many other initiatives that directly or indirectly impact the lives of thousands of young people.

But in addition to the legal support, CCA lawyers provide support and form important, personal relationships with the hundreds of kids they represent. There is the story of José and his two brothers who have been represented by a CCA attorney for many years. For various reasons, the brothers were placed in separate living arrangements, but every year their CCA lawyer travels several hours to pick them all up and take them out for bowling and pizza on their birthdays and on holidays.

– Fran Ludwig, CCA Donor, Middlefield, CT

# Mateo

When thinking of the impact CCA can have, Mateo's story comes to mind.

Looking at Mateo, an active junior in high school who is nearly fluent in English, you would never know the hardship he has endured.

Mateo came to this country from an abusive home in Bolivia. His parents sent him to the United States when he was 15 years old, with instructions to work and send money home. He was caught and deported in Texas, then sent back to the U.S. by his family again.

At 16, after a stint in Houston and another in Maryland, Mateo was renting a room in Bridgeport, working at a barber shop. There he was raped by an older male acquaintance.

At first, Mateo thought there was nothing he could do since he was in the country illegally, but when his attacker began looking for him again, he began to fear for his safety. Assured by various sources that the police would not turn him over to immigration authorities, Mateo reported the crime. The police did not call Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Instead, faced with an unaccompanied 16-year-old, they turned Mateo over to the state's Department of Children and Families.

Initially, the state's plan was to put Mateo on a plane back to Bolivia, notwithstanding the fact that he would be returning to an abusive home and parents who had sent him on a two-thousand-mile unaccompanied journey. While awaiting his de facto deportation, Mateo was placed at a group home, and staff there got in touch with the Center for Children's Advocacy.

We spoke with Mateo and then with the Department of Children and Families, insisting that they not return Mateo to Bolivia without conducting as thorough an investigation as they would if he had been sent by a family in Bridgeport to work in New York City at the age of 15.

DCF's response was, "He's illegal." We pursued Mateo's legal options, and CCA was appointed as his counsel. A judge decided to commit Mateo to the care of the Department of Children and Families, and CCA helped provide the information needed to qualify Mateo for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status.

Mateo is living in a foster home in Bridgeport and doing well in his junior year of high school. His English improves every day, and he plans to attend college when he graduates. Following some persistent nudging by CCA and the judge, the Department of Children and Families has its contract immigration attorney working on Mateo's Special Immigrant Juvenile Status petition.



"What powerful work. CCA is unlike any other organization working for children. No other investment I've made has reaped such truly inspiring rewards. Keep up the good work."

– Rosalie Roth, CCA Board Member and Donor

LAYLA Gil Robert

Layla, Gil and Robert are all struggling in school, but will succeed with the help of CCA's intervention and support.

Hartford has a large immigrant and refugee population, many of whom arrive from Somalia, Liberia and Spanish-speaking countries. The children of these families often need specific skills to help them succeed in school, but Hartford's public schools do not always offer the classes these children require for educational success and future high school graduation.

How can immigrant and refugee children become successful, independent, contributing adults without an education?

Layla, a 12-year-old from Somalia, is enrolled in a middle school math class even though she does not understand addition or subtraction. Gil, a 16-year-old from the Dominican Republic, failed all of his classes because he could not read. Robert, a Liberian second grader, was suspended multiple times. It took two and a half years before school staff met to discuss the possible causes for Robert's behavioral issues.

In 2007, the Center for Children's Advocacy filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) on behalf of Hartford immigrants and refugees with limited English skills. CCA asked the OCR to intervene on issues including implementation of a system for communicating with non-English speaking parents, services to help limited-English students access the school curriculum, and identification of students who might need special services, may never have attended school before, or need language transition support services.

According to a recent Immigrant Children and Youth Survey, over 2400 Hartford students have lived in the U.S. less than three years. Some have received little, if any, formal schooling before coming to the U.S. Many come from refugee camps, where they are fortunate just to make it through each day.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 guarantee equal educational access for all students. CCA is working to assure that the Hartford school district meets its obligations to the refugee and immigrant community. All parents must be able to participate in their children's education; all children must receive an education in order to become responsible, independent adults.

"I am very thankful . . . tears are falling out of my eyes . . . for the work that you are doing on my behalf. I'll make sure to get a good education and to succeed. No one ever trusted and helped me as you are doing."

– Young high school client of the Center for Children's Advocacy

# Krystal

## Two-year-old Krystal was not growing or gaining weight as her older siblings had.

Her mother was getting more concerned and brought her to the emergency room at the local hospital, where she was admitted and diagnosed with Cystic Fibrosis. Krystal's mother, a single parent, had to be at work every day to pay her rent and feed her family. Now, she also had to maintain cell phone service so she could receive important calls from the hospital at any time. The need for phone service stretched an already tight budget, and Krystal's mother could not keep up with rent payments.



Krystal's family was evicted from their apartment and had no secure place to live. Because the family was now homeless, when Krystal was ready to be discharged, the hospital called the Department of Children and Families (DCF). DCF wanted to remove Krystal from her mother's custody and place her in a foster home or emergency group shelter. Medical professionals were frightened by this suggestion; Krystal was very bonded to her mother and removal from her mother's care could only worsen Krystal's condition. Krystal's mother could care for her daughter's complex medical needs. She just needed some help with housing issues to keep the family together.

Hospital staff contacted the Center's **Medical Legal Partnership Project** and we were able to negotiate a government housing subsidy for Krystal's family which included an emergency security deposit. The family quickly found a secure apartment. DCF agreed that Krystal could remain with her mother, and she was released from the hospital to her mother's loving care.

"We have been advocating for our patients for years in our clinic – but never had the ability to take the advocacy to the level that our attorney partners allow it to go. Having the ability to work with an attorney for these hard-to-serve kids is invaluable in our practice. It has enabled us to be better advocates, and ultimately provided more comprehensive care to our patients."

– Dr. Fred Bogin, Director, Pediatric Primary Care Center, Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center

*Sasha Mary*

Last winter, a Liberian refugee family resettled in Hartford.

Twin daughters Sasha and Mary began attending high school in Hartford and found themselves victims of bullying at school. Hoping to enroll the girls in a safer and more academically competitive environment, the family entered Hartford's magnet school lottery at the end of the school year and were fortunate to be accepted. When the girls arrived on the first day of school this September, they were told they had been dropped from the admission list. Their parents had failed to respond to written notices mailed home over the summer and the school assumed that the girls no longer wanted to attend. In fact, language and cultural barriers had prevented the parents from understanding the prerequisites for enrollment.



CCA's **Immigrants and Refugees: New Arrivals Advocacy Project** collaborated with Hartford-based resettlement agencies. When the Refugee Assistance Center learned about the girls' entrance denial, they contacted CCA to advocate for Sasha and Mary to be admitted to the magnet school. The school had not understood that they might have to communicate enrollment prerequisites in a way the family would understand. CCA worked with the district to help them understand the language and cultural challenges faced by new refugee families. Now successfully enrolled in the magnet school, the girls love their teachers and have made new friends. They are thriving in a more appropriate educational environment.

"Supporting CCA is very meaningful. The impact on vulnerable children in Connecticut is monumental. It's lasting. I know we are helping to make it possible, and that CCA is making the difference."

– Penny Robiner and Dr. David Miner, CCA donors

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Together we can change the lives of Connecticut's most vulnerable children.

With your support, we are the voice for the children who need us.

Let's work together to help kids who are abused, homeless, living with unaddressed mental health issues, suffering without access to health care, living in shelters or group homes, bullied and afraid to go to school, living without adequate food and shelter.

With generous support from people like you, we help thousands of children and families each year.

You can help change a child's life.



Support the Center for Children's Advocacy. Visit [www.kidscounsel.org](http://www.kidscounsel.org) to donate, or call 860-570-5327 for more information about the critical work we do each day.



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