

The Wholistic

The Powerful Potential of Multidisciplinary Team Advocacy for At-Risk Youth

By Jonathan Budd, Mildred Doody, Priscilla Hammond and Michael F. Miller

There is growing recognition that effective legal services representation requires a broad range of knowledge which extends beyond a client's

immediate legal needs and into the realm of available services for mental health, medical, housing and substance abuse. Perhaps in no other legal services area is this more apparent than in dependency proceedings, where most legal decisions relate to children's placement, services and well-being. Often, social service professionals have more experience and expertise than attorneys in these critical areas. Making informed recommendations to clients and the court requires at a minimum: visiting a child in his/her placement; gathering and evaluating information from the child welfare agency, foster parents, schools, doctors, mental health professionals and other service providers; and participating in important child welfare administrative meetings and school meetings. This article will discuss how three legal services organizations, one in Pittsburgh and two in Connecticut, have developed multidisciplinary advocacy teams.

In 2001, KidsVoice, a Pittsburgh children's law office representing nearly 5,000 abused, neglect and at-risk children each year, developed a new model of advocacy that teams attorneys with social service professionals (called Child Advocacy Specialists (CASs)) to represent children.¹ For each hearing, the attorney and CAS jointly determine what information is needed, who will gather it, what recommendations to present to the client and court and what follow-up is needed after the hearing to ensure timely implementation of court orders.

The multidisciplinary model allows people with different backgrounds and training to bring varied perspectives to bear on a child's case. KidsVoice learned that two critical components must be present for this model to work — effective case team



broader political issues. Only in rare instances will a community even consider its local public defender as a resource when tackling problems of community justice."

But, by engaging in community outreach, such as offering "know your rights" trainings, participating in community resource fairs, or creating a forum for the airing of community concerns, defenders can become more visible and more valued. For example, the Youth Advocacy Project, a juvenile defender unit of the statewide defender program in Massachusetts, has been particularly successful in raising its profile by forming alliances with youth worker networks, teen councils, neighborhood initiatives and state agencies. The Youth Advocacy Project has created four editions of "community notebooks," which compile lists of organizations and resources available to at risk and court-involved youth.

Through activities such as these, defenders can develop

relationships of trust in the communities they serve, and in turn can rely on these relationships to identify issues that are most pressing, and to build support for reform.



For more information on how your office can pursue racial justice policy reform initiatives, and to learn more about the Community Oriented Defender Network, visit: http://www.brennancenter.org/content/section/category/community_oriented_defender_network. ★

Melanca D. Clark is counsel with the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law's Access to Justice Project.

YOUTH - Continued from page 14

communication and timely information sharing. CASs need to feel that they are valued members of the team and not the attorney's paralegal/CASs should understand that attorneys need legally relevant information for court. KidsVoice addressed this by setting clear expectations during hiring and initial training and by implementing a supervisory structure that could timely identify and resolve issues. To address information sharing, KidsVoice developed its own Web-based client information system where staff is required to enter all notes and other information and which can be accessed anywhere there is an Internet connection.

The benefits of this multidisciplinary approach include: better recommendations tailored to each child's specific needs and continuity of representation as when one case team member leaves the agency, the other member is still there for the child and can bring the new staff up to speed. Beyond broadening the agency's expertise, the team approach is also cost-effective since social service professionals are typically paid less than attorneys to do work attorneys otherwise would perform less efficiently.

The State of Connecticut's Commission on Child Protection (COCP), recognizing the cost-effectiveness of multidisciplinary advocacy and with consulting assistance from KidsVoice, established two pilot multidisciplinary offices.

New Haven Legal Assistance Association (NHLAA), a civil legal assistance program founded in 1964, set up the Child & Youth Advocacy Project, which will be assigned 300 child/youth clients each year. Advocacy staff include: three attorneys, an experienced master's level social worker, a second social worker and a paralegal for educational and administrative advocacy. The project provides traditional client-directed advocacy and shares NHLAA's commitment to serving the "whole client."

Paralegal and social work staff are able to participate in provider meetings and to maintain communication and personal contact with clients, who often are moved several times during the life of a case. Social workers in the legal team are in-house experts who analyze client needs, marshal

resources to promote clients' desired outcomes and assess the agency's plans for the client. Child welfare agencies have institutional interests that are not identical to their stated mission. The multi-disciplinary model ensures independent, well-informed advocacy for clients' interests.

Southeastern Connecticut Center for Juvenile Justice (SECCJJ) was newly formed by three contract dependency attorneys. SECCJJ has contracted with the COCP to represent up to 450 child clients in each of the two years of the pilot program. The law firm is staffed with three attorneys, two child welfare advocates (CWAs), an office manager and two legal assistants. Some staff is part time. Each client has one attorney and one CWA assigned to him or her.

SECCJJ clients have already experienced benefits from our multidisciplinary model. For example, teen clients have made real connections with their CWAs and feel free to call and text them. Additionally, the CWAs are able to attend critical DCF treatment planning meetings, which otherwise would go unattended because they conflict with mandatory court appearances for the attorneys. Finally, our youngest clients are better served due to increased contact and consistent dialogue with service providers, foster parents and family members.

Our experience has shown us the value of employing a multidisciplinary model for child advocacy and we strongly encourage others to consider this approach. ★

Jonathan Budd is with KidsVoice. Mildred Doody is with New Haven Legal Assistance Association. Priscilla Hammond is with Southeastern Connecticut Center for Juvenile Justice. Michael F. Miller is with Southeastern Connecticut Center for Juvenile Justice.

1 See Scott Hollander & Jonathan Budd, KidsVoice: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Child Advocacy, 41 University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform 189-198 (Fall 2007) for a detailed description of KidsVoice. Also visit www.kidsvoice.org.