

# Children's Law Center

## Fast Fact Sheet

### History and Mission

- In November 1992, a six-year-old girl was shot and killed by her father during a supervised visitation session. Out of that tragedy sprang a coalition of concerned professionals and parents united to examine the weaknesses in the system that had failed that child. The lack of adequate representation for children in family court disputes was the concern that led to the founding of the Children's Law Center.
- The mission of the Children's Law Center is to protect poor children involved in family court by providing high quality legal services and advocating for policies that advance the well being and best interests of children. Through its work representing children the organization seeks to achieve the most stable, safe, and beneficial arrangement for children who are caught in the middle of a family crisis such as a custody battle, divorce or other chronic family conflict.

### Impact of Funding:

The Children's Law Center is a unique organization whose core service, providing legal advocates to children in highly contentious family court cases, is unduplicated by any other agency or private organization in the state.

Over the last 15 years the organization has grown tremendously: by adding new programs we've expanded the reach of our services and dramatically increased the volume of children served. **Our services save the state money. We help the family court system work more efficiently.**

- 92% of our cases end in a settlement or agreement. Only 8% go to trial or hearing.
- 98% of the time orders entered in a case reflect our recommendations.
- 87% of cases handled by CLC remain closed and do not return to court for further litigation.
- The Law Line helps people navigate the legal system in a more efficient manner. Over 60% of our callers are referred by 2-1-1, DCF or the Court.
- The mediation program helps parents reach agreements and avoid litigation.

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### **Scope of Services:**

The detrimental effect that parental conflict has on children runs very deep. The greater the conflict or the longer it continues, the worse off children are. Parents who fear losing their children will fight hard, unaware of the harm their actions have on their kids. Often at least one parent is *pro se*.

More than 14,000 divorces occur every year in Connecticut. Children whose parents are divorcing suffer from depression, low self-esteem, and poor academic performance. Children who live apart from one parent are more likely to drop out of school and have a child before age 20.

The Children's Law Center offers three ongoing programs in the service of children. They are as follows:

**Legal Representation:** The program provides court-appointed legal advocates to indigent children in high conflict custody and visitation family court cases. Attorneys advocate for the child's interests and protect them from the emotional and developmental harm that continued litigation has on kids. Children served are involved in the worst cases that the court sees. They include allegations of **domestic violence, substance abuse, child abuse or neglect, mental illness or other chronic conflict**. The program is the only service of its kind in Connecticut, and is provided at no cost to the families.

- In 2008, 466 children were served, and in 2009 we project that 560 will be served.
- Services are offered to Spanish-speaking children.
- The program currently serves 78 towns in Central and Northeastern Connecticut
- The program added 26 additional towns/cities to the service area in 2008.

**Children's Law Line:** The Children's Law Line is a statewide, legal help-line that answers legal questions, gives advice, information and referrals to those with concerns about children or to children themselves. The Children's Law Line is an ongoing program that originated out of the need to advise families, caretakers, and others about children's legal rights.

- Over the past fifteen years the Children's Law Line has become a major resource, particularly for those who call 2-1-1 the Court, DCF or Legal Aid and then are referred to us.
- In 2008, the Children's Law Line responded to approximately 1,569 calls regarding 1,838 children.

**Families in Transition (F.I.T.):** The program offers mediation and parenting education services to no-income, and low-income families. Being able to mediate conflicts between parents allows families to avoid litigation, and thus shields children from the harmful effects of parental conflict.

While there are other established mediation services in the area, they are inaccessible to low income families and often charge \$100/session per person. The Children's Law Center has worked with these established programs to create the area's only mediation service designed to serve low-income families.

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### **Organizational Structure**

The Children's Law Center is governed by a 15-member Board of Directors, which includes attorneys, mental health professionals, financial professionals and parents.

The office is located at 30 Arbor Street, Hartford.

All Staff are supervised by the Executive Director. A list of employees and titles appear below. Unless noted employees are 1 FTE.

<b><u>Staff Position</u></b>	<b><u>Name</u></b>	<b><u>Status/Comments</u></b>
Executive Director	Justine Rakich-Kelly, Esq.	Carries legal caseload
Staff Attorney	Randa Hojaiban, M.S.W.	
Staff Attorney	Nancy Strini	
Staff Attorney	Aisha McCluer-Fakhari	
Staff Attorney	Jodie K. Comer	
Staff Attorney	Monique Ryan	.5 FTE
Staff Social Worker	Tom Buczynski, L.C.S.W.	
Paralegal	Hollis DeAbreu	
Development Director	Ruth Van Winkle	
Administrative Assistant	Cecily Vanderspurt	
Bookkeeper	Karen Renfro	.25 FTE

### **Organizational Budget:**

The organization's goal is to continue to offer its services and programs at current levels in the communities we already serve. The organization operates on a January to December fiscal year.

- The 2009 organizational budget is \$779,909.
- 60% of the organization's annual budget comes from philanthropic sources, including private foundations, corporations, community groups and individuals.
- The organization has received IOLTA/CT Bar Foundation funding since 1998. In 2008 that source of funding provided \$211,714. In 2009, due to the weak economy IOLTA funding will provide \$95,812. The 2009 budget reflects this decline in IOLTA funds.