

Center for *Children's* Advocacy

University of Connecticut School of Law
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TESTIMONY OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY TO THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE REGARDING FUNDING FOR LEGAL SERVICES

February 23, 2009

This testimony is submitted on behalf of the Center for Children's Advocacy, a non-profit law firm based at the University of Connecticut School of Law. The Center improves the quality of legal representation for poor children in Connecticut through training, systemic advocacy, and direct representation. We represent children in the Hartford area and in Fairfield County through a variety of projects, including collaborations with medical providers, juvenile public defenders, and public schools. The Center is part of a network of organizations in Connecticut that provide free representation to poor children in civil matters, including Connecticut Legal Services, Greater Hartford Legal Aid, and New Haven Legal Assistance.

This testimony is to urge the Legislature to provide additional funding to Connecticut's legal service agencies, including the Center for Children's Advocacy. As you know, the Center for Children's Advocacy and all of the legal service agencies in Connecticut have been hard hit by the current economic downturn. Until recently, one third of the Center's budget came from Interest On Lawyers' Trust Accounts (IOLTA), the money derived from funds held in trust by Connecticut lawyers for their clients. Because lawyers most often hold money in trust during real estate transactions, the massive downturn in real estate sales and values has cut IOLTA funding in half. In addition, the Center received funds from a grant from the JEHT Foundation, which was forced to close after losing its endowment in the ongoing Bernard Madoff fraud case. With the economy suffering, individual donations cannot make up for these losses. As a result, the Center, which has been at the forefront of advocating for Connecticut's poor children for the last eleven years, faces an uncertain future.

My work for the Center for Children's Advocacy involves running a walk-in legal clinic for teenagers at a high school in Bridgeport, and representing poor teenagers throughout Fairfield County. What I want to talk to you about today is not just the people that legal service organizations help, but how economical that help actually is.



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Poor children face numerous barriers to high school graduation, from inadequate access to special education services to unstable housing and domestic abuse. When these obstacles cause kids to drop out, the costs to society are staggering. A recent study by scholars at Columbia Teachers College of nationwide data showed that high school graduation reduces demands on public health systems by an average of \$40,500 per student.¹ Every black woman who graduates high school saves the public health system \$62,700 over her lifetime.² High school dropouts are also more likely to commit crimes, which cost the state money: The same study

¹ Levin et al., *The Costs and Benefits of an Excellent Education for All of America's Children*, Columbia Teachers College, Jan. 2007.

² *Id.*

showed that every student who graduates saves an average of \$26,200 in criminal justice expenditures over the student's lifetime.³

The attorneys of the Center for Children's Advocacy and Connecticut's other legal service organizations are instrumental in creating better opportunities for vast numbers of children. Even when we don't represent a child, our advocacy on other cases forces schools and state agencies to provide better services, and those services lead more children toward self-sufficiency. In light of the statistics mentioned above, it is plain that the effect we have on Connecticut's economy is far greater than what we do for individual clients and more valuable than what our services cost. When we are unable to provide services, the impact is severe. When you consider whether to provide additional funding for legal services, don't worry about the attorneys and their jobs. Worry about the state's economy as a whole and about the cost of providing for the undereducated, the homeless, and those who have not received adequate mental health care.

Often, a relatively simple intervention by a legal services lawyer can make a huge difference in children's educational and life outcomes. A pair of examples from my own practice make this point well.

I have a client named Jonathan who was in juvenile detention when he was fifteen. When he got out, the Department of Children and Families placed him in New Haven and he was attending a large high school there. Because of his psychological and educational needs, however, he never actually attended class, choosing to roam the halls or find refuge in a counselor's office to avoid getting in trouble in classrooms where he couldn't concentrate. At seventeen, he was still a freshman and earning no credits.

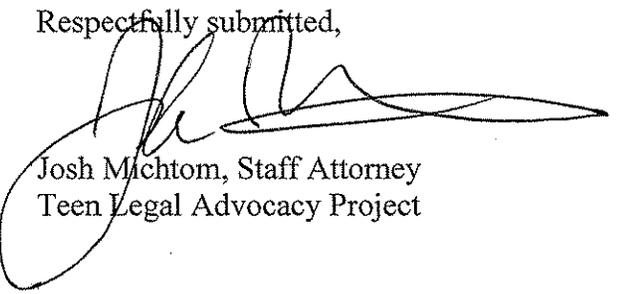
By meeting with school district administrators and stressing Jonathan's right to a special education plan tailored to his needs, I was able to get him into a small, therapeutic school. Now 18, Jonathan loves school, gets As and Bs, and has recovered almost an entire year of credit. He used to talk only of leaving DCF care and leaving the state, without any plan for work or his future. Now he is comfortable in his group home, thriving in school, and excited about college. My limited intervention drastically reduced Jonathan's chances of ending up incarcerated or on public assistance, bettering his life and saving the state money in the long term.

Another client of mine, Miguel, suffers from severe intellectual limitations because of lead poisoning when he was an infant. His mother contacted me because she was concerned that Miguel was less able to speak at 16 years old than he had been at 12, and I quickly discovered something: Not only was Miguel not receiving the speech and language therapy that his special education plan required, but neither were any of the other kids at his high school. With a just a few hours of meetings and phone calls, I was able to solve the problem: The school district conducted a case-by-case review of every case where a student was meant to receive speech and language therapy. Within a month, over forty teenagers of all different academic abilities were receiving the services they were entitled to and improving their educational performance. Even if my intervention only helps four of those forty kids go on to graduate and become productive, taxpaying members of society, it will have paid for itself many times over.

³ Id.

I am asking you to recognize funding for legal services for what it is: Not an expensive and dispensable budget item, but an essential, low-cost investment that helps those in need and provides enormous financial returns.

Respectfully submitted,



Josh Michtom, Staff Attorney
Teen Legal Advocacy Project