

## CAMDEN COUNTY BAR ASSOCIATION HAS A HEART FOR CHILDREN WITH NEW PRO BONO CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY PROJECT



The Camden County Bar Association recently has partnered with South Jersey Legal Services, Inc. to establish a *pro bono* Children's Advocacy Project. The mission of the Project is to meet the most pressing legal needs of impoverished children in Camden County. The Children's Advocacy Project matches volunteer attorneys with children needing advocacy in one of three areas: Children's SSI, Education and Access to Health Care.

Volunteer attorneys from the Camden County Bar will be offered specialized training, support and mentorship to represent Camden County children in areas where traditionally they would go without advocacy. Trainings will take place in October with dates and location to be announced.

The Project will encompass three topical areas:

- 1. Children's SSI:** Attorneys will assist child clients in appeal from denial of Supplemental Security Income ("SSI"), which will include client contact, document gathering and review, appeal forms submission (in some cases), administrative law hearing preparation and representation, and if appropriate, written closing briefs. Attorneys who sign up for this area will be assigned a trained law student from Rutgers Law School in Camden to assist in all areas of the case. Medical students from Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, supervised by Cooper Hospital Physicians, will be available to assist the pro bono attorney with translating the medical terminology in the medical documents.
- 2. Education:** Attorneys who accept education cases will assist children with special education needs. Specifically, the attorney will evaluate whether the child is receiving the special education supports and services consistent with the child's Individualized Education Plan ("IEP") and whether the child is properly classified. These cases often require a settlement meeting (known as a "Child Study Team Meeting") with school special education professionals. If no agreement is reached at these meetings, it may be necessary to represent the client at a mediation session and/or an administrative hearing before the Office of Administrative Law. After a settlement is reached or a favorable decision is rendered, the attorney will monitor the case briefly to ensure the implementation of the agreed-upon plan or court order.
- 3. Access to Health Care:** Attorneys will become skilled in advocacy on behalf of children who for a variety of reasons are not receiving appropriate health care. These cases may involve disputes with the child's HMO concerning treatment coverage and medical necessity, locating a specialist who accepts the child's insurance, assistance with changing the child to a more appropriate HMO or to fee for service Medicaid, and/or connecting the child with resources for health insurance coverage if for some reason the child does not already have coverage. Among the most common problems in this area involve children with apparent mental illness, developmental delays or neurological impairments (such as ADHD or autism) who are not seeing any specialists for their conditions. Although there are rarely any court appearances required or deadlines to meet, these cases require more immediate advocacy because of the child's pressing need for appropriate evaluation and timely medical treatment before the condition becomes worse.

Once an attorney has chosen a volunteer area, s/he will register for the training by filling out the registration form. Shortly after the training, the attorney will be matched with a client. Screening and case placement will be performed by SJLS staff. The case will be screened for eligibility and merit, and the file along with a cover letter describing the procedural posture of the case will be sent to the volunteer attorney

After reviewing the file, the attorney may wish to schedule an in-person appointment with the client. Office space is available upon request at the Camden office of SJLS, which is located at 745 Market Street, Camden, New Jersey. Ongoing administrative support will be provided by the Private Attorney Involvement Unit (PAI) of SJLS, and an SJLS staff social worker and translator are available to assist you where appropriate. During the duration of the case, SJLS remains involved with each case placed with a volunteer attorney. Periodically, SJLS will contact the attorney for a case update and to offer assistance. **Note that all case-related costs will be covered by SJLS or exempt by Court Rule, and malpractice will be covered by SJLS for the duration of the case.** Participation in the Project also satisfies your annual *Madden* requirement.

South Jersey Legal Services has attorneys who specialize in Health Care Access, Education and SSI who are available to review the case and to mentor the volunteer attorney through each step of the case process. This may be accomplished either by email or by

teleconference. Additionally, these SJLS attorneys are available to conduct periodic case review on a quarterly basis for larger law firms with a number of volunteers. This hands-on mentoring is key to learning child advocacy law and lends to the comfort of striking into a new substantive area. If your firm has new associates interested in gaining valuable case handling and administrative law experience, or if you have a solo practice and want to expand into a new area, this is a great way to do so.

In addition to accepting cases *pro bono*, the success of this Project depends on comprehensive support from the Camden County Bar Association. To this end, there are alternate ways an attorney or law firm may wish to support the efforts of this Project, such as:

- ✓ Donating financial contributions to cover Project expenses
- ✓ Sponsoring the production of training materials
- ✓ Sponsoring the production of outreach materials
- ✓ Recruiting fellow members of the bar (including retired members) to join the Project
- ✓ Performing intake for potential clients at a central Camden County public location
- ✓ Creating a public interest/pro bono fellowship in your firm's name with placement of the fellow at SJLS to work on the Children's Advocacy Project
- ✓ Coordinating a Fundraising event for the Project
- ✓ Lending your expertise by mentoring newer attorneys in these three areas of child advocacy law, and/or participating in a training session
- ✓ Participating in media efforts and interviews about the Project

The Camden County Bar Association's Children's Advocacy Project is designed to meet the legal needs of Camden County's most vulnerable population: disabled, infirm and special needs children living in poverty. It is destined to bring about hope and change through legal advocacy which would otherwise not exist for these children. It has the potential not only to impact on the life of a child, but to impact positively the communities of Camden County by equaling the scales of justice.

To join the effort to make a difference in the life of a Camden County child, please register for the Children's Advocacy Project here <http://www.camdencountybar.org/pdfs/ssiregform.pdf> and please indicate your area of interest. If you have questions or for more information, please contact the Project Coordinator, Michelle T. Williams, Esq., at 964-9400 ext. 6229 or [mtwilliams@lsnj.org](mailto:mtwilliams@lsnj.org).