

Volunteer Advocates in Juvenile Matters Advisory Board

Minutes

March 2, 2011

The Advisory Board meeting was called to order on Tuesday March 2, 2011 at 2:00 pm at 225 Spring Street, Wethersfield.

Members in attendance: Honorable Christine Keller, Honorable Mary Sommer, Cynthia Cunningham, Esq., Carolyn Signorelli, Esq., Michael Miller, Esq., Jill Bicks, Esq., Joan Jenkins, J.D., Martha Stone, Esq., Tom DeMatteo, Esq. for Barbara Claire, Esq., Chris Rapillo, Esq., Elysa Gordon, Benjamin Zivyon, Esq. for Susan Pearlman, Esq.

Staff: Michele Massores, Marilou Giovannucci

Materials distributed:

- Minutes of the January 10, 2011 meeting
- Children In Placement Training Schedule
- Model Education Projects for Foster Youth
- Program Builds School Supports for Foster Pupils
- New York City CASA Program – Babies Can't Wait Initiative

Minutes of November 23, 2010 meeting:

Minutes of the January 10, 2010 meeting were approved unanimously.

CIP Training Presentation

Attorney Jenkins provided copies of CIP's most recent training. She discussed the various parts of the training that the volunteers received over the five days. The topics included information on the role and responsibility of a GAL, court process, recognizing abuse and neglect, educational issues, cultural awareness, permanency, and writing skills.

A call for questions was made. Judge Quinn asked about the frequency of the training. Atty. Jenkins explained it was held every 6-8 weeks. Atty. Zivyon suggested adding a section regarding the foster parent/child relationship. Attorney Jenkins explained that the handout was an agenda for a pre-service training.

Judge Keller asked if there were any issues with GALs visiting the foster family home. Attorney Jenkins responded that she had not heard of any and if the child is at home, there is communication with the parent's attorney prior to a visit.

Attorney Signorelli asked how many active volunteers CIP currently has and if there are case limits. Attorney Jenkins responded approximately 200. She explained that a volunteer received one case. If they have experience and depending on the status of their other case, a volunteer may be assigned another case. Attorney Signorelli asked about proposed legislation that would constrict when a GAL could be appointed and whether Attorney Jenkins had thought about how it would affect CIP. Attorney Jenkins explained that it would not affect their training curriculum but it would likely change the population of the children for which they were appointed.

Judge Keller asked if the volunteers were given a choice about working in probate court versus juvenile court. Attorney Jenkins said they are available for either court.

CAC Training Presentation

Attorney Bicks explained that the topics covered were similar to CIP. They also follow the National CASA standard but are not involved in probate court. Topics covered include role and responsibility of a GAL, confidentiality, foster parents, information provided by AAG, area providers. It is a five day training with an additional day scheduled for observation of the court process. Attorney Bicks mentioned the difficulties for the GAL joining at a later stage of the court process.

Attorney Signorelli asked if Attorney Bicks was suggesting that the volunteers have a different role. Attorney Bicks said it is possible to use the volunteers in a monitoring role and that Judge Sommer is very supportive.

Attorney Bicks explained that 40 volunteers have been trained since CAC began. She explained that if used in the monitoring role, there is not the conflict that may accompany a GAL role. The monitoring role volunteers could also be used for younger children.

Attorney Signorelli asked Attorney Bicks to explain the envisioned role of the monitor. Attorney Bicks answered that it is child focused. **It is envisioned that the pilot program will follow the national CASA model.** Judge Sommer spoke of the meetings that have been held to explain the program to AAGs, DCF, Attorneys and court staff. The benefit is that the court would get the quality of the information needed.

Attorney Zivyon raised concerns of possible ex parte communications. Judge Sommer explained that it is more important to get the information from the report rather than waiting for a court date.

Attorney Signorelli asked if the report would be provided to the attorneys first. Attorney Bicks explained that the reports would be given to every party just like a GAL report would. Attorney Zivyon thinks it is a good idea but also has concerns about due process and fairness. Judge Sommer explained it is more important to get the information shared with everyone as early as possible.

Judge Keller thinks the monitor role may be useful especially in following up on orders issued by the court especially in light of the fact that judges are not assigned to a specific case.

Attorney Signorelli and Attorney Miller concurred that it may be useful to have another set of eyes tracking what has been accomplished. Attorney Miller asked about the situation where the monitor sees that there is noncompliance with an order and what outcomes are available. He explained that if DCF doesn't comply with an order, a judge could find them in contempt. After discussion, Judge Sommer explained the purpose is earlier communication and collaboration.

Judge Keller cautioned about possible ex parte communications. Communication should only be through writing and should be shared with all. She also suggested using a standard form as the reporting tool.

Attorney Miller raised the issue of whether the volunteer as monitor would be a mandated reporter. Judge Keller answered that the attorneys would want the volunteers subject to cross examination.

Attorney Signorelli raised concerns of injecting another adult person with an opinion into the process. She understands that there may be a gap in communications but concerned about the additional person.

Judge Sommer explained that the purpose is to increase collaboration. She believes it is important to start using the volunteers and then see how the program is progressing.

The Advisory Board felt it would be helpful to have the NCJFCJ checklist for the next meeting.

Youth Empowerment Program

Attorney Jenkins gave an overview of the CT. Youth Alliance Program operating through CIP. She described the activities associated with the Youth Alliance. The program operates in Fairfield and New Haven Counties and is designed to more effectively work with teens to assist them with transition to adulthood including education, employment and housing needs. The program receives private funding.

CIP determined that 61% of the cases they receive from the various courts where they operate involve youth between the ages of 13 and 17 years of age. Youth who are assigned to GALs, as well as, other youth participate in the program. The program provides specialized training and support for youth. Volunteers who work with the youth also receive specialized training. A major initiative of the program has been digital story telling by youth about their lives. To that end, two media labs have been established in Bridgeport and New Haven to allow youth to produce video in a storytelling manner. Youth who participate in the program have also gone on to participate in the NYU Film Clinic.

Some successes include a youngster who graduated from Yale and is planning to go to graduate school; other youth have served as speakers at Quinnipiac University Law School and are featured in various publications. National CASA is currently working with Diane Sawyer to produce a feature on the CASA program and the youth involved.

New York Zero to Three CASA and Infant/Toddler Specialist Program Information

Marilou reported on the New York Zero to Three program. It predates the National Zero to Three program. They have 100 active volunteers in New York City who are appointed for 1500 – 1600 children. Volunteers commit to 20 hours/month with the average volunteer staying on for 19 months.

The role of the volunteer in the Babies Can't Wait program is to facilitate early assessment, follow up on compliance with the recommendation, coordinate services and provide court reports. Two areas focused on were that the volunteers were instrumental when transitioning children from one foster home to their parent's home or another foster home and the transition from one DCF department to another. In New York when the child turns three, they are transitioned to another department in DCF.

As to program outcomes, no formal study was completed but it was discussed that the volunteers help meet case goals. In addition, there is high volunteer satisfaction reported. The program offered to host visitors from the Advisory Board later this spring, if desired.

Elysa Gordon stated that the program began as a Court Improvement Project to expedite the permanency of children.

Marilou spoke about the New Haven Zero to Three pilot. Judge Keller suggested the possibility of using of CIP volunteers as monitors in the pilot cases.

Using Volunteers as Educational Advocates

Attorney Stone gave an overview of various models for educational advocacy for children. They fall into five major categories: Court Based, CASA, Interagency, Advocacy Program based and School Based. Attorney Stone handed out an article from "Education Week" that describes a program in Los Angeles County, CA where an interagency approach based on an Annie E. Casey Foundation model is being used. The model centers on older adolescent who are high school students and it focuses on "transition plans" for the youth. Attorney Stone indicated that she shared the information about the program with Commissioner Katz.

A discussion ensued about what type of expertise a volunteer needed to be able to effectively advocate of a child/youth. Attorney DeMatteo indicated that they often look to attorneys to assist youth in special education proceedings held at schools.

Attorney Stone expressed concern that the manner in which the education needs of children in the juvenile justice system and the child welfare system is uneven. Atty. Signorelli indicated that her office has contracted with CLS to assist attorneys who represent children and youth with special education issues and that the resource has been used on a minimal basis and given current budget constraints she is not looking to expand that resource.

There was a discussion of using an educational check list for younger children. The check list will be made available at the next meeting.

Rhode Island CASA Model Information

Attorney Rapillo will follow up with her colleagues from Rhode Island and provide an update at the next meeting.

Miscellaneous

Attorney Stone raised whether there is any data to assess compliance with court orders that is regularly collected. Judge Quinn indicated that there is not at this time and given the current resources it is not likely that such data would be easily attainable.

Marilou indicated that the federal Child and Family Services Review is a comprehensive system review of the child welfare system in each state. The report of the CFRS will be provided to members of the Advisory Committee.

Judge Keller reported on the progress of assigning volunteers in child protection cases. The report was favorable. More judges are assigning volunteers and it is going well. Meetings have not yet occurred between the CIP coordinator and the Presiding Judges in Hartford or Waterbury. There have been attempts to schedule in Hartford.

Atty. Signorelli reported that she sent a request to the CCPA attorneys to ask about their interaction with volunteers. She received one response from Atty. Mildred Doody who said she has seen an increase in the number of volunteer GALs assigned in New Haven.

Judge Quinn asked that members submit agenda items for the next meeting.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be on May 3, 2011 at 2:00PM at 225 Spring Street, Wethersfield.