

CLC acts as legal advocates for children in foster care

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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So what is it like to be a child in foster care?

The following is an excerpt taken from the website of the Children's Law Center of Minnesota (CLC). It states, "Imagine that you are 12-years-old. You and your 14-year-old brother have been neglected by your mother and sexually abused by her boyfriends. You are taken from your mother and her rights are terminated because she is chemically dependent and has been arrested for selling drugs."

Not a pretty picture.

And while not every child in the foster care system has the same horror story illustrated in the CLC anecdote, far too many do mirror those circumstances. The question then becomes who is going to be there to truly advocate on behalf of the child? According to Lilia Panteleeva, executive director of the Children's Law Center of Minnesota, she and the nearly 300 volunteer attorneys of the CLC are there to do just that – advocate as trusted advisors and mentors.

Founded in 1995, the CLC has represented more than 2,000 foster children, and "helped to promote systemic change and advocacy for vulnerable youth throughout Minnesota." The CLC mission is to promote the rights and interests of Minnesota's children – especially children of color and children with disabilities, in the judicial, child welfare, health care, and education systems.

While a foster child's life is being turned upside down with little stability, Panteleeva said CLC volunteer attorneys are there as a constant for the foster child.

"Judges change, social workers change, guardian ad litem change, but our attorneys stay with the children they represent," said Panteleeva. "They become life-long mentors for these children."

On average a CLC volunteer attorney stays with a child for at least five years.

That continuity can mean a lot to the children within the foster care system. According to the CLC, the numbers speak for themselves. In 2013, CLC represented 13 youth who were seniors

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in high school. All of them graduated. That is a lofty success rate compared to a national average of just 46 percent of children who age out of foster care without a high school diploma. In addition, last year the CLC served 44 young adults enrolled in the 18 - 21 extended foster care program who aged out of the foster care system. Of those 44, 41 finished high school (93 percent) and 27 have gone on to post-secondary education (61 percent). Nationally, only 10 percent of foster children go on to post-secondary education.

"It's not unheard of for our attorneys to make wake-up calls and we have attorneys that attend various school meetings and events," said Panteleeva.

In addition to being a child's advocate in court and mentoring outside of legal proceedings, the CLC staffs a social worker to assess a child's social and mental needs. Weida Allen has been with the CLC since 2002 and works closely with the volunteer attorneys and youth served by the CLC to assist in advocating for a child's well being.

"Some kids we represent are misdiagnosed or not diagnosed at all. Some of our kids are over-medicated and we go through the courts to get them reevaluated," said Allen, who agreed that CLC volunteer attorneys become more than just a court representative. "The attorneys that represent these children are in it for the long haul."

Panteleeva said her organization is seeking additional volunteer attorneys, in particular, African-American attorneys. To learn more about the Children's Law Center of Minnesota, visit its website at www.clcmn.org.

May is National Foster Care Month. Insight News will feature a story in each edition this month to highlight issues in foster care within the Twin Cities.