

KIDS' LEGAL AID CURRENT ACTIVITIES AT PINE TREE Summer 2003

For more than 30 years, Pine Tree has prioritized legal representation that will improve outcomes for children. Representation has included efforts to:

- maximize children's access to necessary health care;
- give children access to appropriate education;
- maximize and protect income specifically intended for children, including public benefits programs and child support; and
- improve coordination of government services for children with disabilities.

In addition, two specialized units within Pine Tree, the Native American Unit and the Migrant Farmworker Unit, also provide legal services relevant to children within these discrete client populations.

Staff resources in this area, as in all others, have fluctuated relative to developments within the program's major funders, and this limits our ability to provide consistent and comprehensive advocacy for children. In order to stabilize and expand services in this important area, Pine Tree began actively seeking new projects that would address children's legal needs in 1999, as discussed below.

Guardian *ad Litem* advocacy for low-income children in family law proceedings (1999 to present): Originally supported by foundations and individual donors, a three- year fellowship attorney provided guardian *ad litem* services on behalf of children in high-conflict family law cases. Pine Tree has continued to make available staff attorneys around the state to handle GAL cases at the request of the Court when no other resources exist. Funding support provided through three-year \$160,000 Muskie Fellowship for Legal Services (including The Edmund S. Muskie Foundation, Betterment Fund, Libra Foundation, Joyce Mertz Gilmore Foundation, UNUM Foundation.

***Pro Bono* Training and Support** (ongoing): Pine Tree received a \$10,000 ABA grant in 2002 to develop a mentoring program and web-based "best practices" model for *pro bono* Guardians *ad litem* that covers essential elements of quality GAL representation of low-income children and the critical social services available to children in Maine, at <http://www.vlp.org/gal.htm> Pine Tree staff have now provided two free trainings for *pro bono* GALs and are involved in planning a special program for the 2004 winter bar meeting of the Maine State Bar Association.

Homeless Teen Outreach (2002 and ongoing): at the request of staff at the Preble Street Teen Center in Portland, Pine Tree began regular outreach to staff and children served by the center in the spring of 2002, using general program funds. Pine Tree has also provided trainings for center staff on such issues as education advocacy and Medicaid services. Many of these outreach activities and case consultations are now supported with Team Child funds referenced

below. Similar programs exist in Lewiston, Augusta and Bangor/North, although Pine Tree does not currently have the resources to provide outreach to these projects.

Medical/legal Collaboration (2003 and ongoing): Pine Tree has begun discussions with the Pediatric Clinic at Maine Medical Center about a joint collaboration between the two programs designed to benefit low-income children, and modeled on a Family Advocacy Program developed at Boston Medical Center in 1993. Pine Tree is seeking funding for this project, which would include trainings, advocacy tutorials for pediatric residents, case consultations and patient referrals to Pine Tree when the medical outcome is impacted by unresolved legal issues (e.g., substandard housing conditions that contribute to asthma or educational advocacy related to a behavioral disorder).

Juvenile Justice Collaborations: The "Team Child" project provides holistic legal advocacy to low-income children living in Portland who are at risk of detention in order to reduce the risk of further involvement in the juvenile justice system. Pine Tree attorneys partner with local juvenile defenders and district attorneys to represent at-risk youth in educational and healthcare matters—matters that may cause many of the problems underlying their juvenile court involvement. PTLA was awarded two consecutive grants of \$35,000/year from the Juvenile Justice Advisory Group and a \$45,000 grant in 2003 from the Maine Bar Foundation to expand the Team Child project to Aroostook County and Washington County.

Immigrant/LEP Outreach (2001 and ongoing): At the request of the staff at the Multilingual Office of the Portland School system, Pine Tree began offering presentations to immigrant and LEP parents on various legal topics, and to accept case referrals involving immigrant and LEP children denied services or facing school discipline. This work has expanded to the Lewiston/Auburn area in 2003 with general funding support.

Tribal Projects (pending): Pine Tree is in discussions with the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy Tribal Courts about collaborative projects modeled on the juvenile justice collaborations described above and hopes to secure seed money to launch this effort in late 2003. A \$40,000 proposal is pending before the U.S. Department of Justice.

Research and Writing Projects: The Muskie Fellowship attorney developed *A Voice for Low-Income Children*, a detailed report on the role of GALs in family law proceedings that was released by the Muskie School for Public Policy in February of 2002. The New England Juvenile Defender Center, in association with the American Bar Association, subsequently contracted with Pine Tree to author its assessment of juvenile defense practice in the state of Maine. This assessment was completed in the winter of 2003 and should be available for circulation by the end of 2003.