

SYLAW:

Law Students Dedicated to Justice for Street Youth

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In the 1990s, the number of homeless and at-risk youth ("street youth") in the greater Seattle area increased significantly. Today, on any given night, there are as many as 2,000 street youth, ranging from about 12 to 24 years of age, in the greater Seattle area. Keeping pace with this increase, service providers fought to expand and strengthen the services available to these youth. While they made phenomenal gains in providing youth with a wide variety of necessities, one aspect of the youth's needs remained unmet in Seattle.

The missing component was that of legal assistance. While most street youth have other basic needs met, there is often a legal issue which, if remedied, can expedite the transition to a positive and healthy adulthood. Legal needs for these youth vary, but generally fall into the following categories: abuse, neglect, and other family law issues; health, housing, and employment issues; educational barriers; and difficulty accessing state and federal entitlements. If these particular needs are not met, youth are often prevented from achieving other goals necessary for making progress toward stable housing, employment, and educational opportunities. These youth are then left with less constructive options for resolving their issues.

A group of law students, staff, and professors at the University of Washington took it upon themselves to fill this gap in services. Their efforts led to the creation of the Street Youth Legal Advocates of

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Washington (SYLAW). SYLAW has helped hundreds of youth overcome the legal obstacles they face.

History

SYLAW fills the gap. In the spring of 1995, law students at the University of Washington School of Law began work on a street youth advocacy project. The project was intended to mirror an adult homeless advocacy project in which attorneys volunteered at a homeless shelter and provided information, referrals, and representation.

The program began with law students volunteering at a local youth drop-in center to supply legal information and referrals. Unfortunately, the program had difficulty getting off the ground and faded away. In the fall of 1996, several faculty, staff and students from the UW School of Law began to revive the dormant program. They hoped to include as one of the program's components a way to actually resolve the legal problems of the youth. The new program intended to use law students working under the guidance of a supervising attorney from the law school. In addition, each student was to have a community pro bono attorney at his or her disposal for advice on specific issues. This way, clients would not only receive education about their problems, but a resolution of them as well. Representation was to be limited to civil law, as youth are entitled to a free criminal defense by public defender agencies.

In the summer of 1997, the program successfully sought 501(c)(3) status and was incorporated as SYLAW, Street Youth Legal Advocates of Washington. Several students began intensive work on preparing SYLAW for its official launch, including researching issues on which the program was to educate and/or provide representation. To help better grasp what issues SYLAW might encounter, the program conducted a citywide survey of service providers and visited programs in the District of Columbia and New York. The students solicited community leaders for an Advisory Board, contacted care providers, applied for preliminary grants to get the project off the ground, and worked with care providers to better define how its

do, if not help these kids with their criminal cases." His frustration was understandable given that the creators of this program weren't exactly sure either. The early SYLAW volunteers knew only that there was a need, and the partnership further opened their eyes to the lack of legal information and the overabundance of legal barriers that existed for street youth.

To address this frustration and confusion, SYLAW began to offer community-based presentations on legal issues relevant to youth. SYLAW sent checklists with dozens of legal issues to service providers who could check the issues they wished to have covered in the presentations. Generally, two students, under the supervision of an attorney, would prepare the presentation using the outreach materials located in the growing SYLAW library. The students would attend the presentation, speak briefly about SYLAW and the referral process, and after presenting, would ask each participant to fill out an evaluation of the presentation. After a while, it became apparent that presenting to the providers was equally as important as presenting to the youth. While the low pay for service providers kept turnover high, it rarely approached the turnover in the youth population. Thus, training providers was critical to ensure that information was actually reaching new populations of street youth.

SYLAW's public education was not solely limited to teaching about specific legal tools. For a long period of time, SYLAW students taught a weekly class at an alternative school in a local drop-in center and modeled the curriculum on Street Law courses. Classes on topics as broad as the first amendment and legislative process were included, and the students were generally very engaged. SYLAW conducted classes for several different groups, including offender youth, Campfire Girls, and public school students.

Another method of reaching out was closer to traditional legal services. SYLAW began to offer weekly "hang out the shingle" information centers at local service provider sites, including alternative schools for street youth. Youth asked SYLAW volunteers questions and were provided with information and referral services.

SYLAW provides a voice for youth. Connecting with the youth and providing information soon became routine. But students

expressed a recurring frustration with providing referrals: few legal providers were actually equipped to handle the issues of street youth. One problem was logistical: being able to meet youth where they were and when they were available. Another was being able to provide services in a holistic manner. While one attorney might be able to help a youth get federal benefits, he or she might not be equipped to handle the issues related to helping that youth escape an abusive parent. For most youth, having two attorneys is often overwhelming, and SYLAW quickly realized it was going to need to establish better services to represent these youth. At the same time, a statewide legal services provider, Columbia Legal Services, was again attempting to reach out to this population, but still was stymied by the fact that these youth didn't connect with the traditional style of providing legal services.

In 1999, Columbia Legal Services and SYLAW joined together and began to provide the full range of civil legal services and education for at-risk and homeless youth. Two to four students at a time interned at Columbia, each handling a number of cases. The student interns also helped with the outreach portion of the program, which was still largely performed by volunteer students.

Referrals to SYLAW were often made by caseworkers who had received written consent from their clients to contact a legal agency and to disclose any relevant information. In choosing whom to represent, SYLAW gave preference to youth who had been referred by a service agency. Walk-in clients were accepted on an availability basis.

SYLAW and Columbia invested significant resources in the law student interns. One goal of SYLAW was to create young attorneys who, wherever they practiced, would understand the legal needs of street youth. In order to make sure that law students got as much out of the program as possible, law student interns were required to commit at least 20 weeks to the program, but most stayed on for a year or longer. Interns were given substantial responsibilities: representing clients in court, working on briefs in state and federal court, and counseling clients on critical matters. It was not unusual for students to come in on weekends or work nights to accommo-

date clients—they did this not out of a sense of duty to SYLAW, but out of passion for the clients' cases. Former interns have gone on to work for State Supreme Court Justices, big and small law firms, the prosecution and the defense bar, and the state Attorney General's office, among other positions. They have often commented that their experience with SYLAW has helped positively shape how they approach issues involving youth. Former interns have taken on pro bono cases and worked with their firms to secure donations to keep SYLAW afloat.

In order to make legal information more accessible to youth and service providers, SYLAW launched a website (www.sylaw.org) and produced materials that informed at-risk youth and their service providers about relevant legal issues. Throughout the course of providing services, SYLAW interns discovered their clients often have better access to the Internet than to the mail or phone. Therefore, communication and information dissemination through the web became a useful tool.

SYLAW worked to involve private law firms as well, coordinating the law firm representation of 30 youth service agencies that were seeking to clarify the laws regarding services to at-risk and homeless youth. The results of the process were legal memoranda

SYLAW assisted David, a teen who had made it to his sophomore year of high school without earning any credits. David had severe learning disabilities, had begun to fail to show up for classes, and was facing possible time in youth detention as a result of a truancy contempt motion filed by the school district. SYLAW worked to get the truancy contempt motion dismissed, obtain special education services for the student, and work with the school and school psychologist to obtain full educational testing. David received additional help as a result and was on a path towards graduation.

