

The Need for Representation and Law-Related Education

From its modest roots, the New Hampshire Bar Foundation has grown significantly over the last 30 years. Since its first grant of \$350 in 1977, the Bar Foundation has awarded more than \$20 million in grants to numerous legal service and law-related education programs to pursue its vision: “Justice understood by and available to all New Hampshire residents,” and fulfill its mission: “...dedicated to ensuring that all people in New Hampshire, especially those with limited means, are able to understand and obtain meaningful access to the justice system.”

Through the Bar Foundation’s IOLTA and Justice Grants, which are supported by generous contributions from members of the Bench and Bar, significant financial support is provided annually to NH Legal Assistance, the NH Pro Bono Referral Program, and the Legal Advice and Referral Center, as well as another 20 or so nonprofit programs providing legal assistance or law-related education throughout the state.

Bar Foundation’s Multiple Roles

The multiple roles of the Bar Foundation were apparent in the early stages of the Medical/Legal Collaborative formed by Child Health Services and NH Legal Assistance two years ago. The Collaborative was formed to address social and economic problems that have a negative impact on children’s health and often require legal intervention, including sub-standard housing, denial of benefits, domestic violence, lack of special education services, and other issues. Despite laws designed to ensure that the poor have access to the services they need, they are often denied access by government bureaucracies, school officials, and landlords.

Pediatricians recognize the impact these issues have on a child’s health, but are not equipped to negotiate with these institutions. The Collaborative created a direct link between pediatricians and attorneys, with the necessary exchange of information, to resolve legal matters on a case-by-case basis. The Bar Foundation provided partial funding for this program, but more importantly, the Bar Foundation’s letter of support was instrumental in helping NH Legal Assistance attract other foundations, ones that aren’t mandated to fund civil legal services, to provide funding also. This exemplifies how the Bar Foundation is in a position to attract other sources of funding, and therefore increase the pool of funds available to all our legal aid programs.

Help for the North Country

The Bar Foundation provided more than \$1 million to New Hampshire Legal Assistance last year, but on the other end of the spectrum, \$5,000 had a significant impact for another grantee: the Support Center at Burch House in Littleton. The majority of domestic and sexual abuse victims who come to the Support Center qualify for low-income or poverty level services. However, it is often impossible to secure legal representation in a timely manner through the *pro bono* and legal assistance programs for many North Country victims. The Bar Foundation has supported an emergency legal fund for the past several years to enable the Support Center to cultivate relationships with area attorneys who will offer greatly reduced rates.

Since domestic and sexual violence cases may escalate into more complex legal issues than initially anticipated, including re-victimization of the victim, it is imperative to be able to negotiate competent legal representation right at the start. However, this fund is only sufficient to represent 10-12 individuals a year. More than 1,300 children, teens, adults, and elders who have suffered from domestic or sexual abuse contact the Center annually.

Education Reduces Violence

Many good programs are funded each year; in fact, the Bar Foundation made more than \$1.5 million in grants to 20 programs in our last fiscal year. Yet many effective and necessary programs remain unfunded, or partially funded, due to insufficient resources. For example, nine years ago the Support Center at Burch House received a request from area schools to consider instituting a violence-prevention program aimed at reducing the number of teen-to-teen protective orders, incidences of sexual assaults and sexual harassment, and to inform teens about support services. In the beginning, the number of youths seeking support for violence-related incidents among the schools served by the program was 27 percent annually; by 2005, that number had dropped to 3 percent.

Child abuse and child sexual abuse victim-identification and prevention education are also part of the Support Center's educational program. Each year, students disclose that they have been assaulted by adults in their lives, resulting in the successful prosecution of child molesters, usually involving multiple victims. Although not the program's main intent, the information and support extended to students has helped to save many children from further victimization. This program was not funded in the most recent grant cycle. A grant of \$30,000 would have enabled them to run 350 programs on a consistent basis in elementary schools and high schools in the North Country.

The Support Center program is only one of a dozen worthwhile programs that were under-funded or not funded at all last year. We encourage all of you to contribute to the Bar Foundation's Annual Appeal and participate in the IOLTA Program so more of these important and worthwhile projects can be supported. Please contact David Snyder, executive director, for more information at 603-715-3255 or visit us online at www.nhbarfoundation.org.

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