American Bar Association Awards First-Ever Child Custody Pro Bono Grants

The Child Custody Pro Bono Project of the American Bar Association is pleased to announce the six recipients of the first-ever Child Custody Pro Bono Mini-grants. A total of $40,000 is being awarded to programs around the country to increase the number of children receiving pro bono representation in private custody cases. These recipients were selected by the Child Custody Project Advisory Committee’s awards subcommittee, from a pool of almost 30 applicants. All of the project funds will be used for volunteer attorney direct representation of children in divorce, parentage, guardianship, or adoption proceedings.

The largest award, $11,000, was made to the Children’s Law Center in Covington, Kentucky. The Children’s Law Center has provided staff representation directly to children since 1989, and in 1992 began representing children in custody and visitation cases. The Children’s Law Center will use the grant to hire a part-time pro bono coordinator to start and manage a new pro bono component to its custody and visitation case work. The coordinator will recruit, train, and provide case support to at least 20 new volunteers during the pilot year of the project.

Pine Tree Legal Assistance and Maine Volunteer Lawyer’s Project is receiving a $10,000 award. Staff at the two projects will use their combined experiences with pro bono guardian ad litems for children in custody cases and with evaluating Maine’s family law guardian ad litem system to develop the following resources under the grant: (1) a Resource Listing for GALs working with Low-Income Families; (2) a GAL Best Practices Manual; and (3) a new GAL mentoring program that will allow more attorneys to serve as GALs.

Also receiving a $10,000 award is the Legal Aid Society of Northwest North Carolina. The Society is partnering with the Winston-Salem law office of Kilpatrick, Stockton to start a new pro bono Guardian Ad Litem program for children in divorce and unmarried parent custody disputes. The grant money will be used to hire a part-time social worker coordinator, who will work with the court and the volunteer attorneys on placements, training, and case support.

Three awards in the amount of $3,000 were made. The first is to Chicago Volunteer Legal Services Foundation, which will add a volunteer component to its current staff representation project for children in contested or complex private guardianship proceedings in Cook County, Illinois Probate Court. The second is to West Tennessee Legal Services Pro Bono Project, to recruit and support volunteer attorneys in a new family law GAL program. The final $3,000 grant goes to the Franklin County Bar Association’s Bar Advocates for Children, in Massachusetts, to establish a mentoring program to increase the number of attorneys capable of representing children in custody cases.
In addition to making grants, the Child Custody Pro Bono Project has many other resources to support efforts to represent children in private custody cases. The Project has an extensive Resource Library with over 200 custody-related documents; runs a List Service for persons working or volunteering to represent children in custody cases; helps programs recognize exceptional volunteers through an annual Ann Liechty Child Custody Pro Bono Award; provides technical assistance to state and local programs, committees, and judicial system reform efforts; and sponsors numerous trainings annually on child custody representation. The Project is co-sponsored by the ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service and the ABA Family Law Section.

The Child Custody Project plans to award another $40,000 in early 2003. Interested persons can contact the project’s director, Linda Rio, at lrio@staff.abanet.org, for more information about the grants or the Project.