



GREATER BOSTON LEGAL SERVICES

... and justice for all

NEWS

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The Impact of GBLS Advocacy for Children in Need

A significant portion of GBLS' advocacy has a positive impact for children living in poverty. Examples include:



Children's Disability Project (CDP):

Created in 2007 and funded through the generosity of an anonymous donor, the Project represents children wrongfully denied Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits which are critical for the children's well-being. The Project also provides parents with information on applying for Special Education. The Project is staffed by its director Senior Attorney Taramattie Doucette, long-time volunteer attorney Jane G. Smith, Paralegal Nancy Salamoun, and volunteer attorney Zainab Manasawala. They assisted 46 children in 2008.



Homeless families:

The foreclosure crisis has greatly increased the number of homeless families who come to GBLS for help. The Housing Unit helps them access or remain in shelter. In 2008, staff assisted 97 homeless children and their families with shelter issues. Staff also engage in systemic advocacy that has a positive impact for thousands

of children. Examples include improving homelessness prevention programs, the administration of the emergency shelter system, access to permanent housing to shorten shelter stays, and addressing the disruption to children's education created by homelessness.



Protecting families from economic destitution:

Welfare Law Unit advocates address a host of issues that impact children, securing critical income and nutritional benefits. GBLS' impact advocacy helped to eliminate the harsh "sponsor-deeming" requirements that long denied immigrant children's access to benefits. In 2008 GBLS Welfare advocates represented families with 1,874 children on issues such as obtaining Food Stamps and welfare benefits.



Unaccompanied minors:

GBLS' Immigration Unit provides representation to children under the age of eighteen who have entered the U.S. without their parents



"Rosa" was a trafficking victim when, at the age of 15, she was detected by U.S. immigration authorities, who subsequently sought to remove her to her home country. The private law firm which represented her later requested that GBLS partner with them to help save her from removal. As a result of that partnership, she finally received her "green card" in 2009. Photo by Laura Westerling

or a guardian. They are often fleeing violence, neglect, and destitution. GBLS is able to file Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) petitions for many of these children. In 2008 Immigration Unit staff assisted 109 children under 18.

Greater Boston Legal Services is the primary provider of free civil legal assistance to poor people living in the City of Boston and 31 surrounding cities and towns.

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GBLS rescues a family from the Social Security Administration labyrinth

Like many families with autistic children, the Newcombs were struggling because their health insurance does not cover the cost of their child's specialized therapy. The father is the sole income provider for the family of five, and he earns just \$500 a week working at a Boston hotel.

His income is stretched to cover basic necessities like food, rent, utilities, transportation, and medical expenses. There is rarely anything left to pay for the therapy needed to treat his ten-year-old son, Jake, who lives with autism and seizures. In order to pay for the treatment along with their basic necessities, the family had been receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits for several years. The therapy had proven successful, as there had been notable progress in the development of Jake's communication skills.

Unfortunately, in fall 2007, the Newcombs received the first in a series of letters from the Social Security Administration (SSA) notifying them that they had received an overpayment of more than \$13,000, leaving them shocked and

properly processed the waiver. They then engaged in a persistent series of phone calls. Finally, these GBLS advocates were able to schedule a meeting with the SSA claims representative.

"...that winter was very difficult for them. They fell behind on their rent and bills, and they could no longer afford the therapy that had proved so instrumental to Jake's progress."

confused. They stopped receiving their critical SSI check, and that winter was very difficult for them. They fell behind on their rent and bills, and they could no longer afford the therapy that had proved so instrumental to Jake's progress.

The Newcombs were referred to GBLS. The GBLS Children's Disability Project staff helped them file a waiver of overpayment. The staff discovered that SSA never

complied with every regulation and that the overpayment was caused by a clerical error at SSA. GBLS discovered that the mistake dated back to 2003, and in fact the family was owed \$1,500 because they had been **underpaid!**

The Newcomb family is now back on its feet. Once they started receiving SSI benefits again in May 2008, Jake resumed his crucial therapy. He is doing well and is involved in his school community.

With all the necessary documentation in hand, GBLS was able to demonstrate that the Newcombs had

GBLS Victories



Rights for tenants with disabilities: In January 2009 Housing Unit attorneys Ann Jochnick, Dick Bauer, and Mac McCreight won an important case in the Supreme Judicial Court (SJC), *BHA v. Bridgewater*, that establishes important rights for tenants with disabilities and will probably have national impact, because it is based on federal law. The SJC determined that a federally-assisted public housing authority's obligation to consider reasonable accommodations of a disabled tenant "is not optional", even when the tenant is perceived to pose a threat to others. A housing authority must consider whether a requested accommodation will sufficiently mitigate any alleged risk, before proceeding with an eviction.



Unemployment Insurance notices translated: In September 2008 Employment Unit attorneys Brian Flynn and Sherley Cruz secured a preliminary injunction motion that the Division of Unemployment Assistance (DUA) must translate into 9 languages all notices they send out to alert people about federal extended unemployment insurance benefits.



Guardianship reform: In January 2009 Governor Deval Patrick signed the Uniform Probate Code bill, including a section on guardianship reform, which will give strong due process protections to the elderly and disabled including a right to counsel. GBLS Elder Law Unit advocates and other elder advocates have worked on guardianship reform and lobbied for this bill for several years.

Thank You, Legal Community

Boston's legal community again proved its generosity and support to ensure the poor have access to legal services by contributing over \$2.8 million in operating support to GBLS in 2008. This support allows GBLS to provide thousands of clients—victims of domestic violence, homeless families, low-income tenants and homeowners impacted by the foreclosure crisis, people denied health care or unemployment benefits, elders living in poverty, people with disabilities, and so many others—with the legal assistance they desperately need.

The GBLS Legacy Society

Members of the GBLS Legacy Society make a lasting commitment to legal services by including GBLS in their wills or other planned giving vehicles.

For more information on how to become a member of the GBLS Legacy Society, please contact your attorney, financial advisor, or Anna Marie Ventura at GBLS (617-603-1565).

Fish Family Foundation Grant Helping Asylum Applicants

GBLS received a generous Fish Family Foundation grant to fund the **Immigrant Documentation Legal Assistance Initiative** to represent clients with affirmative asylum claims that if granted will provide work authorization. Attorney Heather Yountz was hired in October 2008 as the Fish Family Fellow.

2008 Associates' Drive and the People Who Made it a Success

The Associates' Drive began in 1993, when 331 associates donated \$17,000. 15 years later, 1,100 associates from 36 firms reached deep into their pockets and 16 of their firms matched their donations. The result? \$300,000 was raised to support the GBLS Family Law Unit. Thanks to Boston's generous associates, nearly 3,000 people (mostly women) as well as their children made the transition from victims to survivors of domestic violence.

This a grassroots effort. The original idea came from an associate, and firm captains are the key to its ongoing success. One of the most successful teams last year was from Goodwin Procter LLP. Brook Ames and Jennifer Berylson spearheaded a team that raised \$20,484 from nearly 40% of the associates at their firm, representing the largest donation from any single firm. GBLS asked them how they did it.

Brook Ames is a fourth-year associate at Goodwin, currently on loan to the Middlesex DA's office. While a student at Rice University, he participated in the university's fundraising effort, and turned out to be pretty good at it. What made Brook want to take on the job of drive captain? "GBLS is a phenomenal service! An underoffered service. Restraining orders and the criminal system can only go so far. [Victims] really need civil relief—for custody, for example."

This was the second year that Brook headed up Goodwin's Associates' Drive, after being a successful floor captain. (The secret to his success as a floor captain? "It's important to make [GBLS] personal for the potential donor. Put a human face on the money you are asking them to donate.") Even so, in his first year as firm captain, Brook says he didn't realize how much organization it would take to effectively reach out to every associate at the firm. This past year, he was looking for someone else equally passionate about human dignity, with fundraising experience as well. He found a worthy partner in Jennifer Berylson, also a fourth-year associate.

Jennifer's roots in community service and fundraising efforts reach deep, starting in her early years, led by the example of her

immediate extended family. Currently, Jennifer represents several nonprofit clients and serves on advisory committees for Facing History & Ourselves and the Steppingstone Foundation, in addition to chairing an annual fundraising event for the latter.

Jennifer finds that most associates are philanthropically inclined *if you ask them*. "People want to give to something—often, they are just too busy to decide to what group." When approached by someone they know and respect, associates generally respond positively. She also found that many people asked her, "What are you giving?" Jennifer tells them, but gives them other benchmarks—what the average gift from associates has been, for example—to help them decide what's appropriate for them. Jennifer points out that giving to GBLS is a "pro bono equivalent—although you can and should do both!"

Final words of wisdom to other captains? Brook says the key to success is, "Good planning. The right people helping. And give the pitch [to everyone]." Jennifer adds, "The current economic climate poses serious challenges for the low-income clients served by GBLS. It is even more critical than ever that people extend support to the nonprofit missions they deeply believe in. Their support will have a tremendous impact."



Goodwin Procter LLP was recognized at the end-of-drive event for being the firm whose associates made the largest total donation. Pictured l-r: Jennifer L. Berylson, Firm Co-Captain; Marian A. Tse, Partner and GBLS Board member; and Brook L. Ames, Associates' Drive Co-Captain. Brook and Jennifer were among several firm captains recognized at the event for outstanding achievement in the drive. Photo by Anna Marie Ventura

GBLS Honors

Manisha Bhatt, Family Law Unit Senior Attorney, was selected as a New England Rising Star 2008 by *Law & Politics* and *Boston* magazine in November 2008.

Nadine Cohen, Nancy Kelly, Pauline Quirion, and **John Willshire Carrera** were selected as New England Super Lawyers 2008 by *Law & Politics* and *Boston* magazine in November 2008.

Nadine Cohen, Consumer Rights Unit Managing Attorney, was honored by the Boston Bar Association's Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights under Law in March 2008 for her commitment to civil rights and tenure at the Committee.

Zoe Cronin, Housing Law Unit Attorney, was selected as a Public Interest Leader by the Boston Bar Association in September 2008, one of 15 "rising stars" who were admitted to the BBA's leadership development program for lawyers with fewer than ten years of experience.

Mary Frasca, Elder Law Unit Paralegal, and **Wynn Gerhard**, Elder Law Unit Managing Attorney, both received a Commission on Affairs of the Elderly Edward L. Cooper Award for Outstanding Advocate from the Boston Area Agency on Aging in October 2008, for "dedication, caring and generosity in support of the elder community in Boston".

Wynn Gerhard was inducted into the National Association of Legal Services Developers (NALSD) Elder Rights Advocacy Hall of Fame in November 2008, the only person to be inducted in 2008.

Mac McCreight was selected in March 2009 to receive the Massachusetts Bar Association Access to Justice Legal Services Award, that recognizes a legal services attorney "who has made a particularly significant or meaningful contribution to the provision of low-income legal services, above and beyond the requirements or his or her position".

Maureen Serio, Housing Law Unit Administrative Secretary/Legal Assistant, was selected to receive one of the Unsung Heroes awards by Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly in September 2008. She was chosen as Secretary of the Year.

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GBLS Health and Disability Unit client Michael White advocated for legal aid funding in the state budget during a meeting with his state Senator Susan Fargo (middle), along with his attorney Nancy Lorenz (right) during GBLS' Client Lobby Event at the State House on February 23, 2009.

Photo by Senator Susan Fargo staff

GBLS Honors - continued

Ellen Shachter, GBLS Cambridge and Somerville Office Senior Attorney, was awarded the National Student Partnership (NSP) Community Partner of the Year award and was also honored by Reaching Out About Depression, a community-based program for low-income women in Cambridge, both in February 2008.

Ellen Wallace, Employment Law Unit Senior Attorney, received the Massachusetts AFL-CIO Gompers-Murray-Meany Merit Award in May 2008 "for her hard work and commitment to the Massachusetts labor movement, and the Joseph Meszar Award of Outstanding Union Leadership by United Auto Workers, Local 2320 in January 2009 for her "brilliant leadership and selfless dedication to our union".

Greater Boston Legal Services was honored by City Life/Vida Urbana in December 2008, for GBLS' work supporting tenant organizing during the foreclosure crisis and for supporting City Life/Vida Urbana's organizing for the past 35 years.

GREATER BOSTON
LEGAL SERVICES

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