

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

