By Beth Malik

The Crucial Role of Access

Helping Homeless Youth Find Stability

Around 8:30 every night, more than 20 unaccompanied youths congregate outside The Crib. Each hopes to win the lottery–the shelter lottery, one that will let them sleep on a mat on a basement floor for the night. Operated by The Night Ministry, The Crib is a city-supported emergency shelter in the Lakeview neighborhood for homeless youth, ages 18 through 24.

The youth shelter only operates at night. Youth must be out by 9 a.m. the next morning. Most homeless youth have no choice but to carry their belongings with them wherever they go. Once they leave in the morning, they are not guaranteed a bed the following night.

There are 374 shelter beds for an estimated 11,447 unaccompanied youth in Chicago, so these young people run a good risk of being turned away. If unable to find another shelter bed for the night, they face limited options: sleeping outside, riding CTA trains, walking the city all night, or trying to find a friend or relative who will give them a place to stay. Youth who are unaccompanied–homeless, without a parent or guardian–also struggle with food instability, not knowing when they will have their next meal. Their day-to-day focus on survival presents barriers to full inclusion in society. Addressing immediate housing, hunger, and legal needs frequently prevents full participation in important activities, including school or employment.

The volatile and unstable lives that homeless youth endure can make access to resources and services extremely difficult. Signing up for public benefits such as food stamps or Medicaid, or applying for a college or a job, can seem impossible without a phone or a stable address. Homeless youth often struggle to obtain basic necessities, such as Social Security or state identification cards, because they were forced to leave home with nothing more than the clothes on their back, with no way to prove who they are. With too few shelter beds, many are forced to "couch-surf" or "double-up" with relatives or friends, usually in overcrowded conditions. This option presents a safe solution for some, but can be stressful and traumatic for others. The new book, *$2.00 a Day, Living on Almost Nothing in America* highlights this problem: "While living with relatives sometimes offers strength and uplift, it can also prove toxic for the most vulnerable in our society, ending in sexual, physical or verbal abuse."

Approximately 550,000 youth in the U.S. experience homelessness annually, 380,000 of whom are under age 18. Of a half million young people who experience homelessness, only 50,000, or 9%, receive services from homeless youth programs. In a 2013 survey of homeless youth in Chicago, 37% of youth reported going an entire day without food. They are more likely to suffer from infectious diseases, at higher risk of depression and suicide, and more likely to be victimized or experience sexual exploitation while on the streets. For more information on these, and other statistics, please visit the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless' website at www.chicagohomeless.org.

Accessing legal aid services can be equally difficult. A CTA trip to meet with an attorney is often not possible. Most homeless youth live in extreme poverty, unable to afford a $5 round trip fare. Leaving a message on an intake line is also difficult for youth who don't have a telephone number or a regular place to receive voicemail. Additionally, most homeless youth have different help-seeking mechanisms than adults. They are more likely to seek a referral from friends or by word-of-mouth among peers. Given that many of the youth were let down or abandoned by the adults in their life, they are not quick to trust or open up.

Meeting the Legal Needs of Homeless Youth Through a Mobile Legal Clinic

To meet the urgent and complex legal needs of homeless youth in the Chicago area, the Law Project at the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) launched Youth Futures, a mobile legal aid clinic in 2004. The first of its kind in the country, the clinic provides civil legal services by meeting youth out in the community, at schools, shelters, and drop-in centers. The mobile legal clinic is a van outfitted with mobile office equipment, enabling attorneys to bring their office into the community to deliver legal services directly to homeless young people. This model has proven extremely effective, with the program serving 354 youths in the year that ended June 30, 2015. The Law Project assists homeless young people with a myriad of civil legal issues, ranging from access to public benefits and health care to education and family law.

"Daryl" was one of the homeless youth living in Chicago. As a child, he suffered a traumatic brain injury that continues to impact his life. He first became homeless in his teens and lost his only source of income, Social Security, in 2011. He sought services at an emergency shelter and drop-in center in the Back of the Yards neighborhood. There he met an attorney from CCH. Working together at the drop-in center, the attorney helped Daryl, now 24, get his benefits reinstated, advocated for $13,800 in back payments, and arranged for an appropriate payee. With financial stability, Daryl is able to secure long-term housing and continue the supportive services he needs. Daryl's story is just one example of how legal services can dramatically change outcomes and circumstances for unaccompanied youth.

And because a quality education helps break the cycle of homelessness and poverty, the CCH Law Project has also focused its work on the educational rights of homeless students. The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and the Illinois Education for Homeless Children and Youth Act allow homeless students to stay stable in school with additional support services, including transportation to their school of origin and school fee waivers. These legal protections are critical for the

I have been homeless for over a year after I was forced to leave home. I came to La Casa Norte after the police found me sleeping at a bus stop. I didn't have any money and so I needed public benefits for support. It is difficult to get public benefits because the process is complicated and takes a long time. It was great to have a lawyer because they made the applications go faster and make sure you don't get denied. I also like that the lawyers will come to where I am staying, because I have a hard time getting transportation downtown.

– Catherine, age 20

59,211 homeless students identified by Illinois schools in the 2013-2014 school year.

Access to education is changing the life of Andrew. During his junior year at Lane Tech High School, Andrew's grandmother fell behind on rent and lost the family's one-room apartment. Andrew was forced to live on his own, occasionally sleeping in the park when he couldn't find a friend to stay with.

"There's stuff you can't control," Andrew said. "But education is something you can control, and going to school is something you can control, and doing something with your life."

Andrew was determined to go to college, the first in his family. As a senior, he sought legal assistance from the CCH Law Project when he was being unlawfully barred from graduation due to unpaid school fees. Later, youth attorneys helped Andrew get access to insulin for his diabetes and reinstate his Medicaid after it was wrongfully terminated.

Andrew graduated from Lane Tech in 2013 with a weighted 4.1 GPA. He won a partial scholarship from University of Illinois at Chicago and a $2,500-a-year scholarship from CCH. He is now a junior, majoring in economics.

Since its launch 11 years ago, Youth Futures has expanded to three staff attorneys, including a health law specialist. Their outreach connects with 2,000 youths and directly engages 650 youths. Each month 25 outreach sessions are offered at more than 20 venues, including weekly clinic stops at the Center on Halsted, La Casa Norte, and Teen Living Programs. In recent years, law firms and corporate legal departments have also shown increased interest and enthusiasm for working with homeless youth.

Pro Bono Partnerships Find Innovative Ways to Help Homeless Youth

Looking for new ways to reach young people in need, the CCH Law Project partnered with the legal department of JPMorgan Chase Bank to launch legal clinics in 10 Chicago Public High Schools, targeting homeless or at-risk youth. Through the clinics, volunteer attorneys and legal professionals are able to answer questions, provide resources and referrals, and represent young people in need of attorneys. Sharlita Davis, a CCH Board member and paralegal, helped organize the program. "Chase attorneys and legal support staff have a professional responsibility to assist our community and a sincere dedication to helping those in need," she said. "Homeless children and youth are some of the most vulnerable members of our society. We help remove as many barriers to education as we possibly can in order to ensure that these young people will grow into productive adults."

This summer, Chase held a Legal and Identification Clinic for homeless youth at the Center on Halsted, an LGBT facility in Lakeview that serves homeless youth. Volunteer attorneys secured ID documents for homeless youth, including birth certificates and homeless verification letters for free state IDs. Attorneys were on-hand to enroll youth in public benefits and assist with other legal needs. "It's very significant to provide these types of services for young people," said Avi Bowie, the Center's director of youth programs. "There are a lot of barriers that prevent unstably housed young people from accessing identification documents. We take IDs for granted. They mean so much to our young people–they can open doors to school and employment."

Another recent pro bono partnership resulted in a new way to deliver legal information and resources to homeless youth in a user-friendly format. The Baker & McKenzie law firm partnered with its corporate client, United Airlines, and the CCH Law Project to write the *Illinois Homeless Youth Handbook.* Forty-nine attorneys from Baker & McKenzie and United Airlines donated 1,100 hours to the project. Released last January, the comprehensive guide presents information in a youth-friendly question-and-answer layout across 17 legal topic areas, from education, health care, and housing to consumer and credit issues. The handbook also provides tools for dealing with social issues that can cause or accompany homelessness, such as domestic violence, sexual exploitation, mental health issues, and substance

abuse. The handbook is available online at www.homelessyouth.org and more than 2,000 print copies have been distributed to schools and service providers statewide.

"United's Legal Department Pro Bono and Community Service Committee is always looking for ways we can use our legal skills to help those in need in the communities in which we work and live." said Barbara Thomas, a paralegal in United's Environmental & Regulatory office. "When we learned that homeless youth, a population already vulnerable to many disadvantages and hardships, did not have a readily available resource to understand what legal rights and options they had, we jumped at the chance to help out."

Providing legal services to homeless youth is no easy task. These impoverished youth struggle to find shelter, safety, and stability in their lives, despite little or no personal resources. In Chicago, legal aid and pro bono attorneys work together to improve those odds. ■

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Looking for Affordable Meeting Space?

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Make a Difference

To learn more about pro bono opportunities in Chicago, and for assistance in getting involved, contact Angela Inzano at the CBF Pro Bono Support Program (ainzano@chicagobar.org, 312/554-4952) or visit www.IllinoisProBono.org.

The Chicago Bar Foundation Ensuring access to justice for all

Pro bono legal work has made me a better lawyer and a better person. Many pro bono clients are in a poor position to defend themselves against people and institutions not interested in vindicating individual or public rights. The pro bono lawyer at least offers these clients a fighting chance to assert their rights. All who want to fight for their rights deserve a fighting chance.

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