

Report From New York Women Bar Association's Foundation Fellows at the Feerick Center for Social Justice

by *Chrissie Cahill and Jennifer Puchalski*

As New York Women Bar Association Foundation's Fellows at the Feerick Center for Social Justice, our work focused on the New York Unaccompanied Immigrant Children Project (NYUICP). As described below, through this project we have gained valuable experience in project planning and implementation, legal and policy research, development of surveys and fact-finding, and report writing.

NYUICP is organized into four working groups: Fact Finding and Research; Family Court; Pro Bono and Access to Justice; and Model State Statutes. As Fellows, we have worked closely with Olga Byrne, the Project Director, as well as with the chairs and other members of each of the working groups. We were involved in NYUICP's planning activities, beginning last fall, but especially this semester.

Engaging in the various planning activities helped us to understand the challenge of coordinating with many stakeholders and balancing different perspectives on a complex area of law and policy. Outlined below are some highlights of our work this semester.

- **Feerick Center Advisory Board Meeting.** On April 17th, we presented to the Center's Advisory Board on the NYUICP and had an opportunity to practice public speaking.

- **April 5th Stakeholder Gathering.** On April 5th, we helped convene stakeholders involved in NYUICP. We helped develop the agenda and written materials and coordinate with Working Group chairs. Most importantly, we presented on a major initiative of NYUICP, the Family Court Survey, described further below.

- **Legal Research.** One of our assignments on NYUICP was to help summarize the legal framework affecting unaccompanied immigrant children and their access to justice, public benefits, healthcare, education, employment rights, and immigration status. Specifically, we researched federal, New York State, and New York City statutes; administrative regulations; ordinances; and, policies that may affect or grant rights to these children. We invested a substantial amount of time and effort into this research, knowing that no one had compiled relevant research yet and that our end-product would be NYUICP's first comprehensive findings on the legal issues - particularly at the state and local level - relating to unaccompanied immigrant children. Conducting this research was a great opportunity to learn how so many different systems and areas of laws intersect and have the potential to affect the education and employment of young people.

- **Fact Finding – The Family Court Survey.** A major aspect of our work at NYUICP involved gathering information from experienced practitioners directly through surveys and interviews. Specifically, we needed to learn more about ways to improve the access of abused, neglected, and abandoned immigrant children to New York State Family Courts who are eligible to pursue Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS). After speaking with stakeholders and practitioners familiar with the complicated and often frustrating practices of Family Courts, we sought to identify the particular administrative challenges faced by unaccompanied immigrant children, their families, and their legal counsel when going to Family Court to seek a "special findings order"—a prerequisite to applying for SIJS.

- In consultation with the Family Court Working Group chairs, we developed a survey aimed at identifying and describing these administrative challenges. We conducted more than twenty phone surveys. In developing and conducting the surveys, we learned much more about special immigrant juvenile law and the challenges faced by these children than we could have

through research alone. We also helped synthesize the survey results, which contributed to a report completed in the fall 2013.

- **Fact Finding – Model Statutes.** Another aim of NYUICP is to develop a model state statute that addresses unaccompanied immigrant children's substantive, procedural, and systemic barriers to accessing state courts and that promotes uniformity in state proceedings concerning unaccompanied children. This is the one facet of NYUICP that does not focus on local and state practice and policy but is national in scope. To accomplish this goal, we participated in group discussions, helped develop a survey, and then carried out survey interviews.

- **Development of Grant Proposal – Work with the Fact Finding and Research Working Group.** The aim of this working group is to improve systematic fact finding and research on issues related to unaccompanied immigrant children, since much of the information currently available is either anecdotal, focused on federal policy, or found only in the social science literature. We participated in early meetings of the working group to develop a proposed needs assessment and systems mapping effort.

The Fellowship has been a meaningful experience for both of us. It provided an opportunity to work on a variety of public interest initiatives. Through NYUICP, we learned a great deal about unaccompanied, immigrant children, a small, but notable population. Not only has the Fellowship been a source of professional development for us, it has also taught us that the work of a few dedicated individuals can help improve policy and practice affecting a particularly vulnerable group of children.

Chrissie Cahill, who graduated Fordham University School of Law in 2013, is a new NYWBA member. She is currently a Dean's Fellow at the Stein Center for Law and Ethics at Fordham University School of Law. Jennifer Puchalski is a 3L at Fordham University School of Law, and she served as a summer associate at Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan LLP last summer.

HAPPY 80TH BIRTHDAY TO THE NEW YORK WOMEN'S BAR ASSOCIATION!

On March 16, 2014, NYWBA will celebrate its 80th birthday! In the mid-1930's, women attorneys were forbidden from joining New York bar associations. When women attorneys who had been admitted to the bar asked the leading bar association for a reason why they could not become members, they were given the odd answer that, "There are no women's rest-rooms." (Testimony of NYWBA Past President Hon. Hilda G. Schwartz.)

In response, six women attorneys, including Rose Lehman Stein, Hilda G. Schwartz and Florence Perlow Shientag (all of whom were eventual Presidents of the Association, and two of whom later became judges), formed the NYWBA on March 16, 1934. In 1935, NYWBA secured its official NYS documentation as a "full service bar association," with eleven women attorneys signing the NYWBA Certificate of Incorporation.

The Association's roots trace back to that small group of individuals in 1934 dedicated to making a place for women in the legal arena. We are forever grateful for these driven women, who paved the way for NYWBA to become all that it is today!

In 2014-2015, NYWBA will officially celebrate our 80th Anniversary Year. Won't you join us?