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## Children's Law Center

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*Spotlight on:*  
**Children's Law Center**

*Symone Bullock\**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

Washington, DC's Children's Law Center (CLC) is a legal organization that prides itself on tackling tough issues within the district. Child poverty is major issue for the city; 24% of area children faced poverty in 2019. CLC, a nationally recognized organization, combines a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to ease many of the burdens of the district's children and families, including issues stemming from poverty. CLC advocates for DC's youth in the areas of foster care, housing, custody, education, health, and more through direct legal representation, policy advocacy, and collaboration with professionals from other disciplines.

This article will examine the mission of CLC and the various ways in which it supports the district's youth, both in and out of the courtroom, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. It will also discuss how the organization is changing the lives of DC's children through policy advocacy. This article highlights the strategies and successes of CLC in hopes that it will inspire other legal aid organizations across the country to adopt their holistic, interdisciplinary model.

**II. HISTORY AND MISSION OF THE CHILDREN'S LAW CENTER**

The nation's capital is home to some of the most vulnerable children when it comes to poverty and other pressing social issues. Twenty-five years ago, CLC began operating in Washington, DC, with one mission: to protect the city's children. The year CLC opened its doors, thousands of children were navigating the child welfare system. Founding CLC attorneys James Marsh, Diane Weinroth, and Ken Noyes took on the challenge of trying to keep children out of foster care and in a safe and loving home. For those children who must remain in foster care, CLC works to ensure that they receive the health care, education, and other services needed for healthy development while in care, and some sort of permanency when they exit care. In their first operational year, CLC helped nearly 200 children and families by providing legal representation in child abuse and neglect cases. Today they are on target to provide legal, health, and education assistance to more than 5,000 families per year.

CLC's team has grown to comprise social workers, investigators, policy attorneys, volunteer attorneys, and paid attorneys. Their legal and non-legal services include support with foster care, advocating to reunite families, medical support, education reform, and community involvement. The non-legal staff help CLC to understand children's physical

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and mental health problems and their root causes as well as other underlying issues that pertain to each case.

The organization is able to achieve its mission with plenty of outside support. Dozens of law firms partner with CLC on pro bono cases to help it meet the large need in the district. In addition to pro bono support, CLC receives a wide range of monetary donations. The combination of donations, grants, and payments from contractual services for children in foster care allows the organization to pursue their mission and support their staff.

As a trusted advisor to the DC Council, CLC helps ensure that policies, programming, and funding are meeting the needs of all the city's children. CLC's goal is to innovate and advocate on behalf of youth, so that every child and family in the district is given the opportunity to thrive.

### **III. DC'S PROBLEM SOLVERS: IN THE COURTROOM AND BEYOND**

#### ***A. Legal and Non-Legal Advocacy***

CLC's original purpose was to provide legal representation to children in foster care. Each year, the Superior Court of the District of Columbia appoints CLC attorneys to represent hundreds of vulnerable children who are abused, neglected, or caught in a custody battle. As part of its representation of foster youth, CLC advocates in court for children to reunify with their families or to find another permanent family where returning home is not an option. The organization also advocates for safe housing, health care, mental health services, and educational interventions and support for its clients. However, CLC has expanded to serve all at-risk children in the district. Outside of child welfare cases, CLC provides legal advocacy for education, health, and disability issues for at-risk or impoverished youth.

CLC's legal advocacy has helped children through a wide range of matters. In one instance, a fifteen-year-old client was placed in foster care because the man she lived with started to abuse her. It was later discovered that the man was not related to the young girl, and she had in fact been trafficked to the United States from Jamaica. The CLC team located a California-based organization with expertise in trafficking and the two worked jointly to place the young client in a safe foster care environment.

CLC's holistic approach often incorporates interdisciplinary representation, depending on the client's specific need. Specifically, CLC can bring together attorneys, pediatricians, investigators, social workers, and other professionals to support children outside of the courtroom. CLC has a medical-legal partnership that helps it better address the various health needs of clients.

In other instances, CLC attorneys help their clients become better advocates for themselves. For example, when a young student was not receiving the special education assistance that he needed, one of CLC's pro bono attorneys worked directly with the student to ghostwrite a letter to the school so his educational needs would be adequately met. Overall, CLC provides access to both legal and non-legal resources that many underserved children would not otherwise be able to utilize.

### ***B. Policy Advocacy***

While the legal representation CLC provides is important, its work goes far beyond direct advocacy. CLC helps develop youth programming and advocates for policies on a broad range of important children's issues. For example, in May of 2019, CLC's policy team worked with DC Council members and Mayor Bowser to include reforms in the city's 2020 fiscal year budget related to children's health, education, and safety. CLC successfully campaigned for the Student Fair Access to School Act, which encourages and provides schools with substitutes to suspensions and expulsions. CLC's policy team also fought for Birth to Three for All DC, which funded measures to ensure healthier birth outcomes and financial support for all of DC's youngest residents. Because of this program, children are more likely to be screened for developmental delays at a younger age and fewer children are being placed in foster care. CLC also successfully encouraged the passage of the School Safety Omnibus Act, which improved policies for handling reports of sexual abuse and bullying. This policy work is one important prong of CLC's holistic approach to addressing the needs of vulnerable children across the district.

### ***C. Tackling Pandemic-Related Challenges with a Multidisciplinary Approach***

While CLC continues to provide strong advocacy for DC's youth, the COVID-19 pandemic has added a new set of challenges. At the time of this article's publication, it has been more than one year since many U.S. states ordered residents to stay home. During this time, CLC has used their years of experience helping children navigate personal struggles to help clients navigate the pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, the organization has maintained contact with families in need and has continued to connect families to organizations that provide basic necessities such as food, medicine, and diapers. For example, in May of 2020, CLC aided a teenage client with a one-year-old baby, who was furloughed from her job. CLC provided her with grocery gift cards and other resources to assist with her unexpected job loss, which was made possible through generous donations. CLC has also utilized professional partnerships to help address client health concerns, such as their medical-legal partnership and another partnership with mental health experts who are available by video or phone.

Additionally, CLC has shared information about COVID-19 with the families and children they serve. Many of their clients lack access to the internet, so in supplying information on COVID-19 prevention, CLC helps keep their clients' families safe. For example, when a young client in foster care was frequently coming and going from his home when transmission rates were high, a CLC attorney reminded him of the importance of staying closer to home. CLC's guidance during this time has been critical to many clients trying to survive the pandemic.

## **IV. CONCLUSION**

In an interview between CLC staff and former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, Holder stated that, "[k]ids are our future and how we treat them will determine what kind

of Washington, DC we're going to have 15 or 20 years from now." Holder's point is an important reminder that our future success depends on how we care for and protect children. For legal organizations seeking to make a meaningful difference in the lives of impoverished children and families in their communities, CLC's work can serve as a strong example of how to holistically advocate for children, particularly its interdisciplinary representation model and policy advocacy with the local government.

This past year has demonstrated the importance of CLC's approach to working across disciplines with medical professionals, therapists, social workers, and more. Even outside of a pandemic, the needs of children and families cannot be adequately met without cross-collaboration. During some of the hardest times in DC, CLC has been committed to addressing problems facing children with legal tools, policy advocacy, and interdisciplinary collaboration. While there are still children who are homeless, abused, or otherwise vulnerable in the district, knowing that CLC is working diligently to serve them should bring a glimmer of hope.

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