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Emily Schools

Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas Abilene, TX

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Texas Access to Justice Foundation

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ONE-YEAR FELLOWSHIP UPDATE

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Emily is developing a juvenile division in Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas's Abilene office that provides education and advocacy for youth struggling with homelessness and opportunity barriers created by their prior involvement with the justice system.

NEED ADDRESSED BY PROJECT

There are more than 100,000 runaway and homeless youth in Texas each year, hundreds from Abilene. Abilene is a relatively small town of 117,000, but its youth population struggles with many of the same issues as youth in much larger metropolitan areas: homelessness, unstable home life, and involvement in the juvenile justice system. Even minor offenses can impede securing future meaningful employment, higher education, and freedom from the transgressions of youth. Most of these youth are unaware of the possibility of sealing or expunging their juvenile records. Northwest Texas, however, has lacked free legal services specifically dedicated to serving its youth, and helping them get on the right track as they approach adulthood.

HIGHLIGHTS TO DATE

In the first year, Emily has:

- Met with 74 clients, 46 of whom received advice or brief services and 28 of whom received full representation
- Held 15 intake clinics at two regular community locations
- Helped create a Truancy Prevention and Intervention Team with Abilene Independent School District to address the underlying causes of truancy and intervene with creative solutions rather than punishment
- Successfully filed the first application to seal a juvenile record in Taylor County in several years
- Published a Youth Rights Handbook designed specifically to explain legal rights to unaccompanied minors in Texas

WHAT'S NEXT

In the next year, Emily plans to:

- Publish a second Youth Rights Handbook with information about juvenile records in Texas
- Educate additional community members and organizations about the rights of unaccompanied and homeless minors in the hopes of securing their support
- Collaborate with other organizations in the area to reach more clients and boost interagency referrals
- Continue to host intake clinics in the community
- Revise the new Truancy Prevention and Intervention Plan as needed and solicit community involvement