

EQUAL JUSTICE WORKS®

Helping Lawyers Help Community



Stephanie Truong

**Randall O. Sorrels
Legal Clinic at
South Texas
College of Law
Houston, TX**

Sponsored by

**Texas Access to
Justice Foundation**

Equal Justice Works is the national leader in creating public interest opportunities for law students and lawyers. Collaborating with the nation's leading law schools, law firms, corporate legal departments, and nonprofit organizations, Equal Justice Works offers a continuum of opportunities that provide the training and skills that enable attorneys to provide effective representation to underserved communities and causes. Equal Justice Works is a 501(c) (3) nonprofit organization. For additional information about Equal Justice Works, please visit: <http://www.equaljusticeworks.org>.

SIX-MONTH FELLOWSHIP UPDATE

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Stephanie is providing legal advocacy and support to youth aging out of foster care in Harris County, Texas to improve their social, education, and occupational opportunities in adulthood.

NEED ADDRESSED BY PROJECT

In 2011, Harris County had 2,630 youth in long-term foster care. Judges rarely appoint attorneys to these cases due to budgetary constraints and limited resources and, when they do, there are no uniform court practices in place to ensure proper representation and oversight of cases. Many of these youth age out of the system without the resources or support necessary to obtain employment, higher education, or housing, leading to high risk for homelessness, drug abuse, mental health issues, and contact with the criminal justice system. Most youth have no advocate to help them transition out of the foster care system, resulting in these children leaving care with unidentified problems and insufficient support that ultimately hinders their success in living independently.

HIGHLIGHTS TO DATE

In the first six months, Stephanie has:

- Worked with the 313th District Court of Harris County to implement best court practices for 52 foster youth in long-term care
- Managed 24 hearings as part of the court project to collect data, facilitate more thorough review of cases, and provide parties with information and resources
- Developed and distributed hearings guides to the Court and parties on court project cases that include legislative mandates from the federal Fostering Connections Act and state H.B. 2619 and H.B. 915
- Began receiving court appointments in the 314th District Court of Harris County
- Provided full representation for 13 foster youth between the ages of 8-18, consisting of court representation, regular home visits, working with school districts, and advocating for and participating in transitional planning meetings
- Supervised 9 law students in child welfare clinic
- Participated in over 20 meetings with district judges, child welfare stakeholders, county committees, and direct service providers
- Built partnerships with the Earl Carl Institute Juvenile Justice Project at Texas Southern University Thurgood Marshall School of Law and the Center for Children, Law & Policy at the University of Houston Law Center to establish a referral network and share ideas and resources

WHAT'S NEXT

In the next six months, Stephanie plans to:

- Continue oversight of court project and track cases
- Host CLE training for attorneys and law students on specific issues that affect foster youth in long-term care
- Expand outreach to courts to receive more case appointments
- Continue to participate in community meetings to educate direct service providers on the legal rights of foster youth