



**Stephanie Truong**

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

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## ONE-YEAR FELLOWSHIP UPDATE

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Stephanie provides legal advocacy and support to youth aging out of foster care in Harris County, Texas, to improve their social, educational, 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 established to ensure proper representation and case oversight. 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 many youth suffering from unidentified problems and insufficient support, which ultimately hinders their ability to live independently.

### HIGHLIGHTS TO DATE

In the first year, Stephanie has:

- Partnered with a district court to implement best practices for reviewing cases of youth in long-term foster care
- Provided advice, information, and resources to caseworkers and attorneys participating in the court research project
- Represented 14 foster youth through medical advocacy efforts, protections under special education law, and increased access to transitional services
- Helped four clients transition out of foster care with access to safe and stable housing, as well as education and employment opportunities
- Coordinated and hosted a Continuing Legal Education training for 35 child welfare attorneys and volunteer advocates in her local community

### WHAT'S NEXT

In the next year, Stephanie plans to:

- Publish findings and recommendations upon completion of her court research project
- Host a second Continuing Legal Education seminar and incorporate an increased focus on trauma-informed care training
- Obtain additional court appointments to represent transition-aged youth placed in institutional settings
- Seek additional funding to develop a pro bono project for law students to assist in direct representation of foster youth