

TRUANCY INTERVENTION PILOT PROJECT New Britain, CT

The Truancy Intervention Pilot Project is jointly sponsored by the Connecticut Bar Foundation and the Connecticut Bar Association, in cooperation with the New Britain Public Schools. The Project's goal is to reduce truancy in New Britain's Middle Schools by involving volunteer attorneys appointed to represent truants in Family With Service Needs (FWSN) cases filed by the New Britain Public Schools. Attorney volunteers will not only represent children in their FWSN cases, but also will act as a Mentor/Role Model for these children, and problem solvers for their families in helping to address the underlying causes of truancy. This Project is modeled on the Fulton County, Georgia Truancy Intervention Project, which has been in operation since 1991 (see www.truancyproject.org).

Why A Truancy Project?

High school drop-outs have a higher incidence of incarceration and are more likely to be life-long victims of poverty than their graduating peers. Educators report that the best predictor of whether a student will become a drop-out is the child's history of school attendance. Truancy is frequently an early warning signal of stress affecting a child's family, and also a child's first encounter with the judicial system. The Fulton County Truancy Prevention Project reports that of the 2254 children served by their project since inception, 77% did not have any further involvement with juvenile court. The New Britain Pilot Project targets middle school children to provide early intervention before truancy-related problems become intractable.

Why New Britain, CT?

New Britain represents a diverse community, with a relatively high proportion of economically disadvantaged families. The New Britain public school system has recognized truancy as one of its major problems and has given truancy prevention a high priority. New Britain has in place an Attendance Review Board which combines the resources of the public schools, the juvenile probation department of the Juvenile Court, the Department of Children and Families, and several local social service agencies to address truancy problems. This Board helps in early identification of children who can benefit from the Truancy Project, and acts as a resource to attorney volunteers in their efforts to mobilize community services to address underlying family problems. The New Britain Superintendent of Schools has heartedly endorsed implementing an attorney-based truancy intervention project.

How Does The Project Work?

Identification of truancy problems begins with the public school system which files FWSN cases with the juvenile court and identifies cases which meet our program's

criteria. A juvenile probation officer meets with the child and family, and obtains the family's approval for involvement in the program. The child is placed on non-judicial supervision for 6 months, the case is referred to the Project and is assigned to one of our volunteers.

The volunteer's representation is limited to the FWSN matter only – the volunteer will not be required to represent the child in any other court cases that might be related to the FWSN matter. As part of this representation it is expected that the attorney will advocate for services and programs which will address the causes of truancy. The volunteer will also work to build a positive/supportive relationship with the child, and will try to identify social and economic factors that contribute to the child's truancy. The attorney also consults community resources to identify and mobilize appropriate social agencies that can help ameliorate underlying problems. Perhaps most importantly, the volunteers will serve as mentors and role models for the children, many of whom have not had close relationships with adults who place a high value on education. The attorney will monitor the child's school attendance, and provide encouragement to meet school attendance requirements.

How Much Of A Commitment Do Volunteers Make?

We ask all volunteers to commit to remaining involved in a case at least until the FWSN petition reaches disposition-- in most cases this will be six months to one year. Attorneys may elect to remain involved with the children they have represented as a mentor/role model beyond this point, but that would be at their own (and the child's) discretion. The Fulton County Truancy Project has learned that a volunteer can expect to spend about 2 hours or more per month on a case, much of which will be outside normal work hours.

What Kind of Support Are Volunteers Given?

The Truancy Intervention Pilot Project provides training to all volunteers. This program is designed to be comfortable for attorneys who are not litigators, and who have little or no courtroom experience. Training topics include procedure in FWSN cases, special education law, understanding issues of culture and poverty and learning about community and state services available to clients and their families. Six hours of training is required for all volunteers, and on-going training is also offered. We have identified specialists in special education law, juvenile law, and entitlements law who are available for consultation, and who will be able to step in to represent the child or family in these areas if necessary. We also have consultants available to provide assistance with identifying available social service programs. The Project also intends to provide funding for rewards, prizes and other incentives that volunteers can use to recognize a student's achievements in improving school attendance and academic performance.

Is There Malpractice Insurance Coverage for Volunteers?

The Connecticut Bar Association has obtained malpractice Insurance which covers volunteers on a primary basis for their activities associated with the Truancy Project.

How Do Volunteers Receive Recognition?

The Truancy Intervention Project is part of the Connecticut Pro Bono Network. Volunteers are eligible for pro bono award recognition, as well as reduced fees for CLE programs sponsored by the Connecticut Bar Association.

How is the Project Funded?

The project is currently funded with a small “seed money” grant from the Connecticut Bar Foundation, which covers costs associated with training. The Connecticut Bar Association has provided in kind services, such as office space, computer and telephone, as well as some administrative assistance. The Project is currently administered primarily through donated time. Expansion of the project will require identification of a funding source. We estimate that a \$20,000 grant (coupled with continued in-kind donations of office facilities) would permit the Project to service up to 45 cases per year.