



Public Children Services
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National Study: Foster Children Lose Attorneys to High Debt

Advocates, policymakers say loan forgiveness and tuition waivers for child welfare professionals would increase child safety and stability

Columbus - Too many of the nearly 20,000 children in Ohio's foster care system (and the more than 500,000 children nationwide) are voiceless in court proceedings that profoundly affect their lives. Now a national study reveals why: Many lawyers cannot afford to practice in this low-paying field due to high student loan debt.

"The court makes life-altering decisions for these children, such as whether they will lose ties to their parents, enter foster care, be adopted, or be returned to their family," says Kent Markus, Associate Professor of Law at Capital University Law School and Director of the National Center for Adoption Law & Policy. "In light of the effect of these decisions on these children's safety and permanency, the lawyers representing them must be well trained and able to make good decisions. Too often the high cost of student loan debt keeps lawyers from entering or staying in the child welfare field."

According to the survey, conducted by the Children's Center of Los Angeles and issued by Home At Last, more than two-thirds (68%) of lawyers surveyed owe at least \$50,000 in student loan debt and nearly a quarter (24%) owe \$75,000 or more.

A March 2003 federal General Accounting Report, GAO-03-357, also shows that the safety and stability of abused and neglected children increases in relation to their social worker's education and training.

Policy Solutions

- **Two federal bills would establish loan forgiveness programs for attorneys and social workers working with foster children.** Ohio Republican **US Senator Mike DeWine** has long been a leader for foster children, as a primary author of the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act. Along with Sen. Jay Rockefeller, (D-W.Va.) he recently **introduced the "We Care Act," SI679**. A similar bill, "Fostering Our Future," HR3758 (Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Pasadena) has been introduced in the US House. Both bills include loan forgiveness programs for attorneys and social workers working with foster children.
- The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, the Ohio Board of Regents, PCSAO and the Ohio InterUniversity Council are discussing ways to **assist with tuition for our current child protection professionals working to earn their Masters of Social Work Degree**. Ohio is fortunate to have a small loan forgiveness program for social work students that commit to work in the child protection field called the University Partnership Program. This has proved cost effective to attract new social workers.

"Keeping children safe and stable is the mission of child welfare," says Crystal Ward Allen, Executive Director of the Public Children Services Association of Ohio. "If there are ways to attract and keep experienced attorneys in the field, and support child protection workers for educational advancement we must do it."

The Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, a national blue-ribbon panel, recommended loan forgiveness programs, enhanced training, reasonable caseload sizes and compensation for child advocates as incentives to keep committed, competent professionals in the field. Similar reforms were also recently urged by the American Bar Association and the National Association of Counsel for Children.

More than 300 children's attorneys in 43 states were interviewed in the survey conducted by the Children's Center of Los Angeles (CLC) with the assistance of the American Bar Association and the National Association of Counsel for Children. The survey was issued by Home at Last, a national project supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts aimed at raising awareness about the need to improve the nation's foster care system. For more information, contact PCSAO at 614-224-5802 or go to our website at www.pcsao.org.

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