

The Immigrants and Refugees New Arrivals Advocacy Project

Expanding legal advocacy to increase the access of immigrant and refugee children to education and health services

SUMMARY

More than 30 million immigrants and refugees live in the United States, and they often have difficulty getting appropriate social and health services. For children, the situation is aggravated by their parents' lack of understanding about medical options in the United States and by medical professionals' lack of cultural competence.

In Hartford, Conn., 19 percent of the population is foreign-born and 8 percent of students have been in the United States less than three years. The Center for Children's Advocacy in Hartford, operated a medical-legal advocacy project (the Immigrants and Refugees New Arrivals Advocacy Project) from February 2008 to February 2011 that aimed to improve the health of new immigrant and refugee children, ages birth to 18, by:

- Improving medical professionals' knowledge of the children's legal rights, cultural context and barriers involving health care
- Improving parents' knowledge of their children's legal rights to health care
- Increasing access to education and health care for the children
- Reducing non-medical stressors that affect the children's health
- Promoting systemic reforms to improve the children's access to education

The Advocacy Project was one of nine projects funded as part of Fresh Ideas: Improving the Health of Immigrant and Refugee Communities, a December 2006 targeted solicitation for proposals from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). Fresh Ideas aimed to give immigrants and refugees the tools and support they need to improve and maintain their health by supporting organizations outside the formal network of health care providers, such as grassroots and advocacy organizations. See the Program

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¹ The Center for Children's Advocacy promotes and protects the legal rights of poor children in Connecticut through legal representation, advocacy and consultation.

Results for more information on the solicitation and to access reports on other funded projects.

Jay Sicklick, JD, deputy director of the Center for Children's Advocacy, directed the Advocacy Project, which encompassed three main activities:

- Community outreach to identify new immigrant and refugee families in need of health care and to link them with available services
- Training these families on their rights and the services available to them
- Training for support staff and medical professionals affiliated with Jubilee House, a nonprofit organization that partnered with the center.

Jubilee House provides resettlement, case management and outreach services to refugees and immigrants. For this project, the center provided the project's attorneys and Jubilee House, under a subcontract, trained the project's community liaison and facilitated communication with the refugee community.

Results

Project staff reported the following results to RWJF:

- The Advocacy Project served 436 children through legal consultation (187), legal representation (109) and nonlegal advocacy (140) during its three years of operation.
- The Advocacy Project trained 303 people (parents, immigrant support professionals, educators, attorneys and medical professionals).
- The Advocacy Project exceeded the targets for all of its performance measures:
 - Some 91 percent of medical and other professionals who attended a training program became more knowledgeable about education and health issues that have a legal component. The target was 90 percent.
 - Some 94 percent of the children who received legal representation and whose cases were closed increased their access to appropriate education and health care. The target was 85 percent.
 - Some 89 percent of the children represented for non-medical reasons and whose cases were closed experienced a reduction in the stressor that affected their health. The target was 75 percent.
- The Advocacy Project achieved system changes to improve immigrant and refugee children's access to educational services, such as:
 - Access to the H1N1 vaccine for refugee children who do not speak English or Spanish

- Culturally and linguistically appropriate tutoring for Somali-Bantu children
- Communication between school nurses and parents from Myanmar about health and hygiene for their children
- Translation of notices about school choice and assessment for non-Englishspeaking parents
- Services for homeless immigrant youth.
- Project staff produced a publication on the legal issues of new immigrant and refugee children, a brochure on the rights of immigrant and refugee adolescents, and another booklet on access to health care and other benefits for health care providers.

Lessons Learned

- 1. **Ensure that interpreters and language-based services are available.** "The access these families and communities have [to interpreters] is still very patchwork and piecemeal on a daily basis," Project Director Sicklick said.
- 2. **Encourage legal organizations to collaborate with immigrant support organizations.** This is an effective way to fill knowledge gaps on both sides. (Project Director)
- 3. **Engage a community outreach worker.** "Having someone on the ground and in the community to work with these families is the only way you can get to the heart of the problems ... [and] win trust and understand the cultural issues," said Sicklick.
- 4. Anticipate that the day-to-day case management needs of immigrant and refugee families are very intensive and that this will reduce the amount of time a community liaison can spend helping with trainings. (Project Director)

Funding

RWJF provided \$255,015 for this project. The center also obtained co-funding from the following sources: The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving (\$235,000); Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust (\$35,000); and Connecticut Bar Foundation (\$51,500).

Afterward

As of July 2011, the Center for Children's Advocacy continues to complete the legal representation cases it began under the project.

In March 2011, the center obtained funding from the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving to continue the project for six months. When that funding ends, Sicklick intends to reduce the scope of the project and move the work into the center's advocacy clinic for adolescents.

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Books & Chapters

Books

Immigration Law in the Medical Setting: Access to Healthcare & Other Benefits. Booklet on access to health care and other benefits for health care providers. Hartford, CT: Center for Children's Advocacy, 2011. Available for \$10 online.

Reports

Fact Sheets

Living in Connecticut: What are my rights as an immigrant or refugee teen? Brochure. Hartford, CT: Center for Children's Advocacy, 2009. Available online.

Reports

Our Kids. Booklet on the center's legal advocacy programs, including the Immigrants and Refugees New Arrivals Advocacy Project. Hartford, CT: Center for Children's Advocacy, 2009. Available online.