

Tales from the Front Lines of Pro Bono: HAP

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As we mark the Public Interest Section's 20th anniversary, this is another in a series of articles about the experiences of attorneys providing pro bono assistance. These articles are the words of the volunteer attorneys. We hope their experiences will encourage others to volunteer.

The Homeless Advocacy Project (HAP) is a 501(c) (3) nonprofit that provides direct legal services to adults, children and families who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness throughout Philadelphia. HAP conducts legal clinics at homeless shelters and transitional housing facilities throughout the city. HAP offers clients access to legal consultation and representation aimed at preventing homelessness, and resolving legal issues that may create obstacles to client self-sufficiency, independence and stability in housing. Since HAP's first legal clinic in December 1990, HAP's staff and dedicated volunteers have helped more than 25,600 homeless Philadelphians, providing more than \$33 million worth of free legal services to homeless clients. For information on volunteering visit our website at <http://www.HomelessAdvocacyProject.org> or call 215-523-9595.

Christopher H. Casey, partner, Dilworth Paxson, LLP

By the time I met Priscilla B. at the HAP clinic she had been out of work for two years and was struggling. Priscilla had a good job at a national mail-order company before suffering a nervous breakdown. The company terminated her. Priscilla needed someone to help her obtain the disability benefits to which she was entitled.

The insurance company mistakenly denied Priscilla benefits by incorrectly offsetting workers' compensation benefits she never received. Because of her condition Priscilla had failed to follow up and too much time had passed. The insurance company would not help her. That's when she turned to HAP.

Helping Priscilla get her benefits required a few phone calls and letters. Insurance companies pay attention when a lawyer writes on behalf of an insured. When the company saw proof that Priscilla had never received any workers' compensation benefits, it sent her a substantial check immediately. I then sought benefits for an additional four-week period (even though the time to appeal had long passed) and the company sent her another check for additional benefits. Priscilla was very grateful for my efforts.

It's hard to describe the feeling of satisfaction one gets from simply helping someone in need. Although many are drawn to a career in the law for this reason, in the practice of law we seldom feel like we made a difference in one person's life. Many HAP clients, like Priscilla, just need someone to go in there and fight for them. When you win (and you will), the psychological rewards are great.

Paul W. Luongo, associate, Reger Rizzo and Darnall, LLP

As a HAP volunteer at the Eliza Shirley House, I meet with families facing homelessness. Our

clients expend significant energy each day securing a bed and waiting at walk-in clinics for medical treatment. The constant struggle leaves little time to handle other problems affecting their ability to live. The intake is often one of the more difficult tasks during the attorney/client relationship. Clients are intimidated and often ashamed. The emotional toll of their issues often hinders their ability to communicate effectively. Keeping this in mind, I focus on listening. This experience provides an opportunity to refine my professional “bedside manner.” It is rewarding when we, as practitioners, provide clients with a sense of relief by stepping as advocates.

Several months ago, I represented a gentleman in a fiercely contested custody dispute involving his two young children. He faced additional adversities as he was physically disabled and unable to provide for his family. Obtaining custody of the children was a tremendous relief for him. Free of the worry of losing his children, he could then focus on getting the rest of his life on course. He now has a home for his children and income to support them. Custody was but one obstacle, but I know it empowered him to fight harder to rehabilitate other aspects of his life. I was proud to be a part of that transformation.

Jared A. Jacobson, Jared Jacobson Law, LLC

I receive many emails regarding opportunities to get the Homeless Advocacy Project’s legal clinic being offered to homeless individuals on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. As a volunteer and member of the Hoboken Shelter’s Board of Directors, homeless issues have always been a concern of mine so I was eager to get involved on a local and more personal level.

The client was attempting to gain Social Security disability benefits – although he qualified he was getting the run-around and making little progress. With no prior experience in this area and unaware that I would be asked to take on a client immediately, I easily related to the confusion and apprehension the client must have been feeling when he was faced with his challenge. It would have been easy to explain my inability to help and give a laundry list of plausible reasons, but the client had nowhere else to go.

Nervous about taking this new pro bono client, I was immediately mentored by a HAP staff attorney who walked me through the process from that day until several months later when the client was granted his benefits.

This experience provided me with two things I don’t normally get in my daily law practice – knowing I had amazing support from the HAP staff in uncharted waters; and hearing “thank you” from someone who really needed help and appreciated mine and HAP’s efforts. Gratitude is unnecessary but it adds that extra feeling that reminds us why we help others in need. Less than one week after the matter has concluded, I’m ready for my next pro bono case. Keep up the good work HAP!