



# Homeless Advocacy Project

A legal aid project of the Philadelphia Bar Association

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### SOAR Project

Federal disability benefit (SSI/SSDI) applications submitted by homeless men and women are disproportionately denied time and again despite evidence of severe psychiatric and physical ailments. Each denial a disabled homeless individual receives means a longer stay on the streets or in shelter. He or she cannot otherwise afford private housing and is unable to access housing programs without these financial benefits. And while the chance of success may increase at the hearing level, hearings are typically scheduled more than one year after an appeal is filed.

Aware of HAP's SSI/SSDI expertise, representatives from the City of Philadelphia's Office of Supportive Housing (OSH) approached HAP last spring to develop and implement a local SOAR Project. SOAR (SSI/SSDI Outreach Access and Recovery) is a technical assistance initiative developed by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The goal of SOAR is twofold: to reduce SSI/SSDI disability application delays and, more importantly, to increase the percentage of favorable application decisions for disabled men and women experiencing homelessness.

During the initial phase of the SOAR Project, HAP attorneys negotiated with SSA and its state counterpart to develop, unique to Philadelphia, the critical components of disability claim processing here utilizing the SOAR model. Consistent with the capacity building focus of this project, HAP attorneys trained social workers from the largest homeless services providers on the Philadelphia SOAR application model. As a result, the number of favorable decisions on initial application has increased dramatically.

The first SSI application in the Philadelphia SOAR Project was filed on December 29, 2007 and a favorable decision was issued only 24 days later. As of today, HAP's SOAR Project has already resulted in 26 favorable decisions on initial application, with an average claim processing time of only 31 days. Previously these individuals had lost hope of ever accessing disability benefits. Once approved for benefits under HAP's SOAR Project, these same men and women moved into personal care boarding homes and other stable housing sites after living years on our streets.

*If you are interested in additional information about HAP's Philadelphia SOAR Project, feel free to contact Senior Staff Attorney Pat Malley, [pmalley@philalegal.org](mailto:pmalley@philalegal.org) or Managing Attorney Michele Levy, [mlevy@philalegal.org](mailto:mlevy@philalegal.org).*

### Letter from the Executive Director

As summer approaches and Philadelphia residents settle into longer days and sweltering nights, the reality of life for so many of our homeless clients is that they still don't have a place to call home. Chronic street homelessness affects all city residents and visitors, not the least of whom are making our parks and sidewalks their home.

The early promise of new leadership in City Hall to address the issues of street and family homelessness, lack of affordable housing and often deplorable shelter conditions has given way to initial solutions to ending homelessness in Philadelphia. As he promised, on May 28, 2008, Mayor Nutter unveiled a concrete list of initial recommendations that his administration will implement to address the urgent needs of our homeless population. In conjunction with the Philadelphia Housing Authority, the City will immediately create an additional 700 new units of housing for homeless persons: 300 units for homeless families, 200 units for singles and an additional 200 beds. These units have already begun to come on line. Additionally, the City will leave open the "winter" cafes as a place to shelter chronically homeless persons year round. Ultimately, the cafes will give way to a permanent engagement center, where men and women experiencing homelessness can go at any time of day or night to receive food, lay their heads and access social services.

In short, Mayor Nutter's team has not only read The City United, a comprehensive list of recommendations HAP helped to draft to address the problem of homelessness, but has moved to adopt and implement many of the proposals. In his words, "this is just a start." We have far to go to ending homelessness for those living on our streets and languishing in our shelters, but we are optimistic that Philadelphia has turned a corner in the battle to end homelessness.

Marsha I. Cohen  
Executive Director



Pictured Left to Right: Mayor Michael Nutter, HAP's Executive Director, Marsha Cohen and HAP Board President Ethan Fogel.

## Our Mission

In the fall of 1990, a group of concerned members of the Philadelphia bar and the homeless services community created HAP to address the unmet legal needs of the city's homeless population. HAP was founded in the belief that homeless people have unique and complex legal problems that often are not adequately addressed by traditional providers of legal services to indigent and low-income individuals. Homeless individuals often lead transient, unstable lives, and are often debilitated by mental illness, substance abuse, and inadequate education. They frequently lack an understanding of their legal rights and the ability to make effective use of the network of advocacy and service organizations that is available to assist them. Living in crisis, often without income or resources, homeless persons are less likely, and less able, than other indigent clients to make use of Center City-based legal services programs.

To ensure that homeless people had access to legal services, HAP's founders created an organization designed to deliver legal services directly to them in the places where they live and eat. Since its inception, HAP has conducted legal clinics in shelters and soup kitchens throughout Philadelphia. By recruiting and training volunteer attorneys, legal assistants and law students to staff these clinics, HAP is able to leverage its resources to provide free legal counseling and representation to a population not adequately served by other legal services programs. HAP is the only legal services organization in Philadelphia that conducts such direct outreach to the homeless population.

HAP collaborates with shelter providers, homeless advocates, community service providers and the legal community to provide homeless clients with legal representation and to connect them with other social services. HAP currently holds legal clinics at twenty homeless shelters and soup kitchens. Since HAP's first legal clinic in December 1990, HAP's 300 volunteers have helped more than 17,000 homeless people. To date, HAP's volunteers have provided more than \$20 million worth of free legal services to homeless clients.

## Adopt-a-Shelter List

Through HAP's Adopt-a-Shelter project, a firm or corporate legal department agrees to staff a HAP legal clinic. HAP collaborates with the following law firms, corporate departments, and law schools through this program.

Caton Village – Schnader Harrison Segal & Lewis LLP  
Covenant House – Duane Morris LLP  
HELP Philadelphia – Villanova University Law School  
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St. John's Hospice – Pepper Hamilton LLP and Dechert LLP  
**Stenton Family Manor – DLA Piper LLP and The Pep Boys - NEW**  
Sunday Breakfast Association – Ballard Spahr Andrews & Ingersoll LLP  
Trevor's Place Next Door – Obermayer Rebmann Maxwell & Hippel, LLP  
University City Hospitality Coalition (UCHC) – University of Pennsylvania Law School  
Woodstock Family Center – Morgan Lewis and Exelon Corporation

## Volunteer Success Story

When HAP volunteer Stephanie Peet met Martha, Martha was living at Trevor's Place (a homeless shelter) and seeking assistance with her social security disability appeal. Martha appeared to have limited intellectual functioning, was undergoing treatment for severe psychiatric impairments, and was struggling with a long term drug and alcohol addiction. Ms. Peet agreed to represent Martha at an Administrative Law Judge hearing and began to accumulate evidence to support her claim.

After Ms. Peet obtained Martha's school records, she learned that Martha had a performance IQ of 70, with cognitive abilities in the borderline range. (She had been in special education for her entire school career. Her reading and writing skills are very limited.) When Martha's case was initially reviewed by the Social Security Administration, there was no evidence in the record of her significant intellectual impairments. The low IQ in combination with Martha's diagnosis of bipolar disorder with psychotic features, now presented a much stronger case for benefits.

As the hearing date approached, Ms. Peet discovered that Martha had moved from the homeless shelter and had left no information as to her whereabouts. Despite this hurdle, Ms. Peet continued to prepare the case and search for Martha, even after her request for a postponement was denied by the Judge. Less than a week before the hearing, Martha was located at a recovery house, where she was residing after a relapse of her addiction. Ms. Peet quickly met with Martha to discuss the case, obtained updated medical records, and submitted all evidence along with a supporting brief to the Judge.

Ms. Peet appeared with her client at the hearing, and obtained a favorable decision on the record! The Judge said that she did not need to hear any testimony from Martha or from the vocational expert that was present, because Ms. Peet's brief was "compelling," and it, along with the records submitted, clearly established disability under the applicable social security listing. The Judge complimented Ms. Peet for her great work, Martha cried, and hugs were exchanged.

Martha received over \$15,000 in back benefits and now receives a monthly disability check of about \$700. She resides in a long term recovery house, maintains her sobriety and is fully engaged in psychiatric treatment. Martha's current financial security, obtained through the diligent representation of volunteer Stephanie Peet, will continue to have significant impact on her ongoing journey towards greater stability and self sufficiency.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP HAP...

HAP needs your help to serve the thousands of homeless men, women and children who make Philadelphia their home.

There are many opportunities for lawyers, paralegals, law students and others with a variety of backgrounds to assist HAP. You can:

- Become a legal clinic volunteer. Spend a few hours meeting with a client and assist that client with his or her legal problem.
- Volunteer for the Children and Families Project and assist homeless parents with education, family law and disability matters.
- Volunteer for the Veteran's Project and assist homeless veterans with obtaining veteran's benefits and compensation.
- Make a monetary contribution and/or assist with fundraising efforts.

To help make a difference, please call us at 215-523-9595, or complete and return the form on the next page.



**HAP Raises More than \$175,000 at April Benefit!**

The Homeless Advocacy Project held its annual April Benefit on April 24, 2008, sponsored by **Morgan Lewis along with Dechert LLP, PECO and Saul Ewing LLP. This year's benefit raised more than \$175,000 for the Homeless Advocacy Project (HAP).** Thank you to the HAP 2008 Benefit Planning Committee Co-Chairs **Lenard Cohen, Madeline Sherry and Blaine Stanley** and committee members **Andrea Bloch, Marsha Cohen, Leonora Cravotta, Jack Foltz, Susan Meier, Jeff Palazzese, Randi Rubin and Marnie Simon** for helping HAP surpass its goal. HAP would also like to thank the following sponsors of the event.

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Pictured from left to right, bottom row: Blaine Stanley and Madeline Sherry, (front row, from left) HAP April Benefit Co-chairs are joined by Gordon Cooney of Morgan Lewis; Andrea Bloch of HAP and (top row, from left) Ken Kulak of Morgan Lewis; Marsha Cohen of HAP; and Geanne Zerkowitz of Dechert LLP.

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