

## LEGAL AID &amp; PRO BONO

# Firm celebrates success of child advocacy project

The first anniversary has almost arrived for Alberta's Child Advocacy Pro Bono Project — Pro Bono Law Alberta's first brokered project between the Children's Legal and Educational Resource Centre and the Calgary office of Borden Ladner Gervais LLP.

On Oct. 30, 2007, the lawyers at BLG agreed to provide pro bono legal services in accordance with a memorandum of understanding developed between Pro Bono Law Alberta (PBLA), the Children's Legal and Educational Resource Center (CLERC) and BLG. The project was also designed and implemented in accordance with BLG's national pro bono policy.

The project allows BLG lawyers to provide a broad array of legal services to children and youth in the civil law realm, including education and school-related issues, estate, employment, immigration issues and property matters.

The project's goal is to provide this assistance without cost to vulnerable children and youth who are unable to access or pay for legal services in Calgary and the surrounding area. For exam-



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ple, one of the first young persons helped through the project was an 18-year-old who was fighting for her inheritance after her father died without a will.

The announcement of the project led to an overwhelming response from interested lawyers. Within minutes, six lawyers sent e-mails offering to become part of the project.

In addition to providing legal advice and representation, the project also allows BLG lawyers to assist CLERC in developing its own policies and procedures, such as its privacy policy, to ensure that they are compliant with applicable laws and regulations. The project also has a third aspect, which is to conduct legal research on pertinent issues facing children and youth. Most recently, one of BLG's summer students spearheaded a research project on parental alienation, which will serve as a valuable resource tool for CLERC.

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The project also contemplates the provision of seminars and workshops to be facilitated by BLG lawyers and offered in the community. They will focus on particular legal issues affecting children and youth. This facet emphasizes the educational and outreach aspects of the project, and this aims to strengthen the role CLERC plays in the community.

As the first anniversary of the project nears, there are over 15 BLG lawyers actively working on files.

While taking on files and assigning them to the appropriate lawyer who has the requisite legal knowledge and expertise, work continues on streamlining the administrative aspects of the project, such as the approval process and clearing conflicts, in order to better serve the needs of children and youth.

One key to running the project successfully has been the support of management for pro bono work, both at the regional and national level. BLG has a long tradition of pro bono work in each of its regional offices, and the introduction of the Child Advocacy Pro Bono Project has met with tremendous support and enthusiasm from management.

One of the main goals of BLG is to have an even greater number of associates and partners participating in the project. Although there are a considerable number of files to work on, there are also opportunities to provide educational and outreach seminars, as well as perform internal policy review and legal research for CLERC. A key aspect of BLG's national pro bono policy is to emphasize that lawyers have a professional

responsibility to carry out pro bono work and provide access to legal advice, services and representation to those in the community who do not have the financial resources to pay for them.

BLG's national pro bono policy provides that time recorded on approved files should be included in the lawyer's billable hours and treated as if they were billable hours for compensation purposes.

Over the past year, BLG lawyers have enjoyed working with CLERC and Pro Bono Law Alberta in promoting and encouraging the culture of pro bono legal service within Alberta's legal profession. While there are surely more challenges ahead in the course of developing projects between law firms and community organizations, we hope that the Child Advocacy Pro Bono Project will serve as a role model for other law firms. ■

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