

Meeting the Legal Needs of Homeless Youth

By Mary K. Zajac

As a law student and now in her professional life, **Ingrid Lofgren '10** is a passionate advocate for at-risk individuals and communities.

Lofgren advocated for access to medical care for detainees at the Baltimore City Detention Center as an Albert Schweitzer Fellow at the Public Justice Center. And as a student attorney in the Community Justice Clinic, she crafted policy recommendations to support the development of green affordable housing in Baltimore. But it was her experience as the inaugural Linda Kennedy Advocacy Fellow at the Homeless Persons Representation Project (HPRP) that planted the seeds for broader advocacy, when Lofgren realized that there is no one place in Baltimore where homeless youth can access the range of legal services they need.

This September, in conjunction with HPRP, Lofgren will launch the Homeless Youth Law Project, a program that builds on HPRP's mission by offering homeless young people (ages 13 to 25) comprehensive legal counsel in areas including

housing, education, family law, and public benefits. Currently a judicial law clerk for the Honorable Andre M. Davis of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 4th Circuit, Lofgren received funding for the project as a result of a Skadden Fellowship. She is one of just 28 law school students/alumni nationwide to receive the award in 2012, and the only one from UM Carey Law.

"The unfortunate reality in this economic climate is that it is difficult for non-profit organizations to expand into new areas and take on new staff, even as the need for legal services is growing," says Lofgren. The Skadden Fellowship, she says, allows both HPRP and Lofgren the critical opportunity to fill an unmet legal need by providing direct representation to a homeless population that is growing and that has unique reasons behind its homelessness—including abuse, rejection because of sexual orientation, gender identity or pregnancy, or "aging out" of the foster care system.

The two-year fellowship, which has been described as a "legal Peace Corps," provides participants a salary and benefits commensurate with an entry-level staff attorney position in the non-profit sector.

"[The Homeless Youth Law Project] is a perfect fit for my background," explains Lofgren, who holds an undergraduate degree in family studies and a master's in social work from the University of Maryland, the latter, she says, a boon in helping her understand the bigger picture. "[This work] resonates with me," she says. "Providing critical support to a young person in crisis can be transformative—it can help them achieve lasting stability and prevent future episodes of homelessness or other problems."

"I've always enjoyed working with young people," Lofgren adds. "They're always energizing and they keep that creative part of your brain active ... and your heart, too."

Lofgren expects to be hands-on in all aspects of the project, including connecting with youth at drop-in centers and shelters. She's also looking for ways to involve pro bono attorneys to represent homeless youth on certain issues and plans collaborations with local organizations and advocacy groups like Health Care for the Homeless, Public Justice Center, Baltimore Homeless Youth Initiative, and Y.E.S. (Youth Empowered Society).

Once the Skadden Fellowship funding ends, Lofgren hopes to establish a program that will be permanent, though with one codicil. "In social work, we're always trying to work ourselves out of a job," she explains. "The ultimate goal is to end homelessness, understanding that it might not happen for a long time but believing that it can and *will* happen." ■

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