

The Metropolitan Corporate Counsel®

Northeast Edition

www.metrocorpcounsel.com

Volume 14, No. 8

© 2006 The Metropolitan Corporate Counsel, Inc.

\$10 per copy

August 2006

Pfizer's Extraordinary Commitment To Children Awaiting Adoption

By Lynn Kelly

Each year thousands of foster children in New York City are eligible for adoption. Expediting the adoptions of foster care children who have been freed for adoption is a critical component of the child welfare reform movement in New York State. In May 2003 New York State Chief Judge Judith Kaye spearheaded the "Adoption Now" initiative and called upon the City's legal community to get involved in helping more foster children get permanent homes.

Responding to Judge Kaye's challenge, the private bar in New York City, with leadership and support from Pfizer, organized a collaborative Pro Bono Adoption Project (the "Project") providing free legal representation to adoptive parents. Pfizer conceived of the Project and brought interested firms and nonprofit organizations together, interfacing with the Family Court and Administration for Children's Services ("ACS"). The appointment by Pfizer of a fulltime Pro Bono Counsel proved to be an effective way of increasing pro bono activity and responsiveness to emerging legal needs in times of crisis. Jean A. O'Hare, Senior Corporate Counsel, is Pfizer's first full-time Pro Bono Counsel. She has been with Pfizer since 1988. MFY coordinated the project, provided mentoring and technical support and assistance to the pro bono lawyers. The Legal Aid Society trained participating attorneys.

Since the Project began in 2004, approximately one hundred attorneys were trained to provide pro bono representation through the Project. These attorneys were from the following eight

large New York City law firms and Pfizer:

Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft
LLP

Kaye Scholer LLP

Latham & Watkins LLP

Pillsbury Winthrop LLP

Proskauer Rose LLP

Shearman & Sterling LLP

Stroock & Stroock & Lavan LLP

Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP

Most foster parents represented by the Project are low income, with 43% living at or below the federal poverty level. Approximately 70% of the clients have incomes below 187.5% of the poverty level. Many of these clients are working poor families, while others receive some form of public assistance.

Pfizer has been a catalyst for involvement of law firms in all of their pro bono activities, whether as trainers at the seminars or partners in delivering direct pro bono legal services to the disadvantaged. During the course of the Project, Pfizer also funded Adoption Day and Adoption Week. It is not surprising that Pfizer's pro bono efforts have won accolades. MFY Legal Services, Inc. awarded Ms. O'Hare the Matthew G. Leonard Award for her work with the Pro Bono Adoption Project and the Family Court. The Project received the Golden Heart Award from the City's Commissioner of the Administration for Children's Services.

The stories of the individual families helped through the Pro Bono Adoption Project were very touching and have helped to motivate others to participate in pro bono efforts to improve the New

Pro Bono Adoption

Continued from page 40

York City Family Court. At the adoption of one of the children helped by volunteer lawyers through the Pro Bono Adoption Project, the judge asked the adoptive mother if she knew what it meant to adopt the child. The mother dutifully recited the legal responsibilities attendant on becoming an adoptive parent. The judge then turned to the young child and asked "What does the adoption mean to you?" The child responded with one word - "Everything." There was not a dry eye in the courtroom.

Nonprofit boards benefit from diverse membership and having in-house counsel on the board brings the resources of corporations to bear on the issues of scarce legal services. A Pfizer attorney, Margaret Madden, was recruited to join MFY's Board of Directors. Ms. Madden co-chaired the 2006 MFY's Spring Dinner Theater Benefit with Timothy G. Reynolds of Skadden Arps ensuring a successful event in support of MFY's work.

Our organization has benefited from partnering with Pfizer. Pfizer's commitment to the problems facing children awaiting adoption was simply extraordinary. From conceiving of the project, to bringing together nonprofit partners, to recruiting law firms, to hosting trainings and motivational parties for the Family Court to handling individual cases, Pfizer was there. Our organization has really benefited from working with Pfizer and now, with an attorney from Pfizer on our Board of Directors, we look forward to a longstanding relationship.

Pfizer thanked us for providing them with "an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of New York City children." We all benefited from working together with corporate counsel, law firms, the court and the legal services program.

Lynn Kelly is Executive Director, MFY Legal Services, Inc.

Please turn to page 42