

## Women In The Law – Pro Bono

# Tanya M. Douglas Of MFY: Advising The Poor

*The Editor Interviews Tanya M. Douglas, Supervising Attorney, MFY Legal Services.*

**Editor:** How did you become interested in pro bono law?

**Douglas:** As an undergraduate at Cornell University, I was involved in a number of community and political issues. Then, I attended Cornell Law School and did an internship at the legal aid clinic. After law school, I worked at Bronx Legal Services for seven years before joining MFY Legal Services.

**Editor:** What are your responsibilities at MFY?

**Douglas:** As a supervising attorney, I supervise two projects, the Disability Advocacy Project (DAP) and the New Starts Initiative (NSI). DAP case handlers represent clients in their claims for Supplemental Security Income and Social Security benefits. Proving that a client has a disability requires a lot of research and the ability to read medical records. It also means that the representative must first help clients find their medical records, which can be difficult.

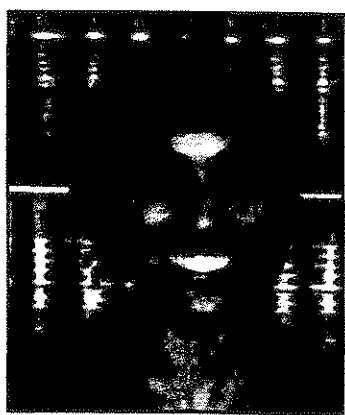
One case was a young man in his thirties who was schizophrenic. There was an issue about past substance abuse, and the judge was skeptical about his psychiatric impairment being independent of substance abuse. Since he was in the Special Education Program during elementary school, I obtained copies of his Special Education records. These records contained results of his psychiatric examination and documented his significant psychiatric problems about twenty years ago. I submitted these records at the hearing and proved he had a psychiatric condition that pre-existed the substance abuse. These records helped him receive Social Security disability benefits.

I also supervise the NSI project. During the first two years of this project, we focused on issues people immediately face when they are making the transition from welfare to low-wage jobs. A significant number of our clients are now making this transition. We are starting to look at the next level of issues affecting low-wage employees. There are a number of issues such as rights to health insurance and childcare and claims for wages.

We had an interesting case of a former welfare recipient who was a single parent and started to work. However, her earnings were \$43 over the childcare subsidy allowances that were based on a ten-year-old chart. The chart had not been updated to reflect the cost of living rates in ten years. We were able to convince the agency to update their chart so our client was able to qualify for benefits.

**Editor:** Do you help people with drug problems who might have legal difficulties?

**Douglas:** If they are trying to get disability benefits, we refer them to an appropriate rehabilitation program so that they can qualify for benefits. However, if a person's only condition is substance abuse, that person is not eligible for dis-



Tanya M. Douglas

ability benefits. Since mortality rates are high for people who are drug users or have AIDS, Social Security death benefits are also an issue. We help relatives claim death benefits. However, they are often shocked to learn that the benefit is only \$255. This does even cover the cost of burial, let alone the other costs that are involved.

**Editor:** Do you also help people establish small businesses?

**Douglas:** We help micro-entrepreneurs who may face a number of issues. One example involves New York City street vendors who need a vending license but often encounter legal barriers. We provide legal advice and/or representation to help them obtain a license. We also help them with tax questions.

We offered legal advice to a client who was starting her own business working out of her home. She had two small children, one of whom had a chronic illness. The fact that she could work from home meant that she could take care of her children.

**Editor:** I understand NSI is not governmentally funded. Does that give you more latitude with respect to the services you provide and the kinds of people you help?

**Douglas:** Yes. There are restrictions imposed by government funders such as the Legal Services Corporation (LSC). When you receive federal grants, you are sometimes restricted to a narrow area of the law. Therefore, you can only treat part of a client's problem. The NSI project can be more flexible with clients. Being completely privately funded allows us to take a more holistic approach and deal with a variety of civil legal issues presented by our clients.

**Editor:** How are your services affected by government funding?

**Douglas:** A significant amount of our funding comes from LSC, which is funded through Congress. LSC funded programs have received less and less funds in the last few years. Although the amount of LSC funds has been decreasing, the number of poor people who need legal assistance has been increasing. This greatly impacts our ability to service

clients. Additional funding would enable us to assist more clients and not turn clients away.

One restriction is income guidelines. Clients have to meet certain income guidelines. Because these guidelines follow the poverty guidelines, they are fairly low. I think they should be a little higher because some of our clients who start to work become ineligible for our service even though they are considered the working poor. The ideal thing would be to look at someone's net income and not gross income. This truly tells you how much money they have.

**Editor:** How is VOLS involved in the work of MFY?

**Douglas:** VOLS is one of MFY's partners. They come to our monthly meetings and provide significant support by discussing relevant issues. They also provide us with pro bono attorneys to assist clients with legal problems outside our traditional areas of practice.

**Editor:** Have law firms been helpful?

**Douglas:** This past summer, I organized MFY's summer associates program. A group of students stayed with us for the whole summer, and an additional group of summer associates from large law firms spent two weeks with us. It was a good experience for the summer associates because they had client contact, a chance to go to court with our attorneys and an opportunity to observe client interviews. They saw how their assistance directly affects the lives of poor people. Summer associates often come back to help us. For example, Mike Carroll, now an associate at Willkie Farr, organized a fundraiser for us at a club called the Float that raised a significant amount of money.

**Editor:** Are there other ways that people can help?

**Douglas:** Monetary donations and equipment are always appreciated. We welcome volunteers because their presence allows us to concentrate on other matters. It would be great to have more attorneys and paralegals to help us with litigation. Also, more paralegals would help us in our community outreach efforts.

**Editor:** Which area is in greatest need of support?

**Douglas:** DAP needs more bilingual staff to do outreach to the Asian population. There are not enough attorneys who speak the clients' languages. Also, the Social Security Administration needs more bilingual Chinese speaking staff. We have made efforts to work with the Social Security Administration to address this issue.

Some Asian clients do not appeal decisions denying them claims for disability benefits. The decisions are in English. When people attempt to file an appeal, the Social Security district office may not have staff who speak their language. So the clients are turned away or asked to come back.

**Editor:** How do you advertise your services?

**Douglas:** Perhaps our best advertisement is referrals by other clients. We also publicize the availability of our services by holding monthly community events in Chinatown, East Harlem and elsewhere. We distribute fact sheets developed by our community outreach coordinator. We are in the process of translating them into Chinese. We also send out flyers to a number of community-based organizations.

**Editor:** Do you work with community organizations?

**Douglas:** Yes. We have a number of partnerships with different community-based organizations that offer educational or vocational programs. We have a community partner in Chinatown called the Chinese American Planning Council. They provide social services for the Chinatown community. We go there once or twice a week to do intake. We have also done outreach work with them.

In East Harlem, we go to Scan-LaGuardia, which is a group of about twenty different organizations. One of our attorneys who speaks Spanish goes there and does intake appointments for housing matters and screens for other legal issues. We go to clients in their neighborhoods so they do not have to travel to us.

**Editor:** How can interested readers volunteer to help?

**Douglas:** They should call 212-417-3700 and ask to speak with me or with Lynn Kelly our Executive Director.

## Corporate Counsel Organization Highlights

### Cyber Crime Seminar Slated

Foundstone Inc., a provider of security services and education, this month will launch a series of security classes in New York City under the title Understanding Cyber Attacks. The classes, designed specifically for lawyers, are taught from the perspective of "white hat" hackers and a cyber crime prosecutor. The class provides hands-on experience, demonstrating how Internet-based crime is conducted and what federal statutes apply to each of these

actions.

The instructors for the course are Kevin Mandia, a computer forensics expert, and Marc Zwillinger, a former cyber crime prosecutor. The class will take place on Friday, February 9, at the Crowne Plaza Manhattan, 1605 Broadway, Fourth Floor, Suite 401/402, New York City. The program fee is \$750. For further information, including specific class hours, call (877) 913-6863 or access [www.foundstone.com/NY](http://www.foundstone.com/NY).