Recent law grad helps navigate mental health maze

Program aims to give assistance to low-income children experiencing psychiatric problems

**BY EMILY DONOVAN**

*Law Bulletin staff writer*

A Chicago attorney who graduated from law school only last year has created the kind of medical/legal program that could have helped her own family growing up — and won a $100,000 fellowship along the way.

Amanda M. Walsh graduated from the Loyola University Chicago School of Law in 2015 and was awarded the 2016 Kimball R. Anderson and Karen Gatsis Anderson Public Interest Law Fellowship by The Chicago Bar Foundation.

As a staff attorney at the nonprofit organization Legal Council for Health Justice and an Equal Justice Works fellow, sponsored by Baker & McKenzie LLP and Walgreen Co., Walsh created and runs the Chicago Medical-Legal Partnership for Children program at Sinai Health System's Under the Rainbow.

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Walsh explained that she provides the kind of assistance she wishes her family had received when she was growing up.

Walsh's mother is schizophrenic, and her dad has a bipolar disorder in addition to dealing with alcoholism. They lived in poverty in Traverse City, Mich. Walsh was placed in the foster care system and lived with her grandmother.

"Had (my parents) been able to get the mental health treatment they needed, 100 percent I would not have had to be separated from them," Walsh said.

She said her background makes her better understand her clients, who often don't expect their attorney to have dealt with similar issues.

Walsh said she is patient when clients give long explanations of their situation or when a client may be too anxious about their legal issue to call her back promptly.

"If we had a legal advocate working with us on all of these types of issues, I think that's how I would have wanted that advocate to work with us," she said.

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What makes Walsh special is how she created the work she wants to do, said Anita Weinberg, clinical professor of law and director of the ChildLaw Policy Institute at Loyola University of Chicago as well as Walsh's former adviser.

"I think that she's really developing a model that could well be picked up and duplicated elsewhere over time," Weinberg said.

After two months of preparation, the program went live in February.

Clients schedule an appointment with her during her on-site office hours on Mondays and Tuesdays. Sometimes, a therapy patient will bring up a domestic violence or immigration issue, and the therapist will walk them straight down to Walsh’s office. Clinicians often stop Walsh in the hallways and pick her brain, using hypothetical examples to ask about possible legal cases.

But Walsh works mostly with parents. She writes up intake, counsels and either litigates the cases herself or refers out cases in areas of law that Legal Council for Health Justice doesn’t cover. She's opened 100 individual legal cases for 55 individual clients so far.

"I'm always amazed when I walk through the hallways of Mount Sinai," Yates said. "It's just teeming with patients."

Walsh goes to other Legal Council for Health Justice attorneys who focus in different areas of the law for advice on certain cases. The nonprofit has three different kinds of medical/legal partnerships — Chicago Medical-Legal Partnership for Children, AIDS Legal Council and the Homeless Outreach Project — and 11 attorneys and six paralegals.

Once a client is in her office, Walsh often discovers he or she has many more legal issues than the one for which the child’s therapist mentioned to her. Walsh's 100 cases come from just 44 families.

She once sat down with a mom and discovered nine cases: a home foreclosure, an employment dispute, child support, child custody, all three children needing special education and two children potentially qualifying for supplemental Social Security income.

"It really, really blooms," Walsh said.

About half of those cases are closed through brief advice or referring certain kinds of cases out to pro bono organizations like LAF, Lawyers' Committee for Better Housing or the National Immigrant Justice Center.

The most common legal issue she deals with is special education. She also sees a lot of cases involving custody arrangements and Social Security supplemental security income for disabled children from low-income families as well as U visas for nonimmigrants who have been the victim of a crime and the Violence Against Women Act petitions for clients who were undocumented immigrants.

Ballestas said patients come from all over Chicago and even outside city limits to visit the clinic, located in the Lawndale neighborhood. More than half of its clinicians are bilingual, speaking Spanish and English, and Walsh has access to one of the

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hospital’s translators to interview parents who only speak Spanish.

The clinic also has a deaf and hard-of-hearing program, which attracts even more underserved patients.

“That is incredibly rare,” Ballestas said of the program. “That is like a unicorn.”

Ballestas said Under the Rainbow patients are between 3 and 18 years old and deal with the same array of mental health issues any other population may face, including attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder or mood disorders.

But what’s different, she said, is that the low-income populations Under the Rainbow serves come from communities where families have been exposed to community violence, school violence or domestic violence for generation after generation, something that can exacerbate mental health issues.

Many of the patients Walsh serves wouldn’t otherwise get legal help, Yates said, because people are often unaware of pro bono resources available to them or may not recognize how lawyers can help with problems like being cut off from Medicaid.

Ballestas said Walsh’s legal services have had a long-term positive impact on the clients she’s helped; some Under the Rainbow patients otherwise feel hopeless as mental health issues and legal problems compound.

“They see that the system has failed them in so many ways that there’s a very low expectation that anything will change,” Ballestas said.

In some cases, Ballestas explained, a seventh-grade student with cognitive delays will have a second-grade reading level and little chance of succeeding in high school, so it takes an advocate like Walsh to step in and make sure a realistic individualized educational plan is set and sustained for the rest of the year.

“The self-esteem, the confidence and the empowerment for the family, that is going to last much longer,” Ballestas said.

Walsh has been prioritizing legal issues based on clinicians’ recommendations but said she hopes to find pro bono volunteers to make sure even more cases into the future get handled.

She also plans to create community training programs, like the American Civil Liberties Union’s Know Your Rights campaign, on the ins and outs of U visas and Violence Against Women Act petitions.

Ballestas said Sinai Health Systems has been proud to pioneer Walsh’s behavior health/legal partnership, and she would like to see it continue and even perhaps expand to their adult clinics.

To Walsh, the high demand for her legal services at Under the Rainbow indicates that more mental health patients and families of patients could need legal help, too.

“At the end of the day,” she said, “Under the Rainbow is one clinic.”