

Pro Bono Foster Care State Mentoring Program Set to Expand This Year in NY

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By Dan M. Clark | July 12, 2019 at 04:00 PM



A small group of attorneys in Manhattan are working to make a big impact on a handful of young adults aging out of the foster care system through a pilot program established by the state Office of Court Administration that's expected to grow this year.

Six attorneys from Manhattan law firm Willkie Farr & Gallagher and one of its clients are involved as mentors in the program as of now. Their hope, they said, is that others will follow in the coming years.

It's the only program of its kind in New York, where state court officials collaborated with attorneys from Willkie to launch it last September. It was the brainchild of New York State Chief Judge Janet DiFiore and Matilda Cuomo, the mother of Gov. Andrew Cuomo and widow of former Gov. Mario Cuomo who runs the broader New York State Mentoring Program.

Mitch Auslander, a partner in Willkie's litigation department, now leads the program at the firm. He, along with Matilda Cuomo, had been speaking with DiFiore about the state's overall mentoring program when the chief judge suggested they create something similar for those aging out of foster care.

"We said, that sounds fantastic," Auslander said.

The idea behind the program, Auslander said, is to provide guidance to young adults who've received services from the state for part of their life, if not most of it. The program is geared toward young adults between 18 and 21 years old, which is when individuals age out of the state's foster program.

Willkie immediately volunteered to pilot the program, offering three of its own attorneys to serve as mentors. They then reached out to a longtime client, Marsh & McLennan Cos., to gauge their interest.

Marsh jumped at the idea, offering three of its own in-house attorneys, said Lorraine Feldman, an assistant general counsel at the firm.

“Willkie just made sense because we are a longtime partner with Willkie on our legal matters,” Feldman said. “They came to us expressing this opportunity and the general counsel thought it sounded interesting.”

Two judges from New York City were tasked with organizing the program. Justice Jeanette Ruiz, administrative judge of the New York City Family Court, worked on the initiative with Justice Karen Lupuloff, who affectionately referred to herself as a “cheerleader” of the program.

“This kind of mentoring program takes time and takes commitment. So, in a large part I’m a little bit of a cheerleader,” Lupuloff said. “I push because it’s so important and everyone recognizes how important it is.”

Six young adults were recommended for the program by the Legal Aid Society, Lawyers for Children, the Children’s Law Center, and the Administration for Children’s Services. Many of them had gone through a special foster care transition court overseen by retired Justice Paul Grosvenor, who now serves as a judicial hearing officer.

“It’s the lawyers who identify who they think would best fit,” Lupuloff said. “They’re doing it carefully because you need to, because we want the kids, themselves, who can be committed to it.”

Each of the six attorneys meet with their assigned mentees at least once every two weeks for sessions that last more than an hour. Sometimes it’s just a one-on-one discussion. Other times, it’s a group activity. During one meeting, they discussed what mentees should look for in a healthy relationship, for example.

“That is a very difficult topic for people who have been in foster care their entire childhood,” Feldman said.

Other times, they speak with their mentees about how to accomplish their long-term goals, such as graduating college or finding a job. In some of those cases, the mentees have already made progress, Auslander and Feldman said.

That’s because the mentors have typically done more than just meet with their mentees; they’ve started to take an active role in their lives. Omar, Auslander’s mentee, got a job delivering on foot, for example, but his goal was to get a driver’s license to make deliveries by car.

“We were able to arrange for driving lessons and an appointment to get his driver’s license, and a car to get him to his test,” Auslander said.

Isaiah, another mentee in the program, told his mentor that his mother had always said she wanted him to be a carpenter before she died. So, his mentor arranged for him to have carpentry lessons, Auslander said.

Feldman’s mentee is in college and wants to eventually become a paramedic. She was gifted a stethoscope by the mentors this year as a token of their support for her plan. But the best thing she could do for her mentee, Feldman said, was just to be there for her when times were tough.

“She had such a rocky year for various personal reasons, but I supported her throughout her ups and downs, even knowing she might quit school,” Feldman said. “But she didn’t. She hung in there, she pulled through, hit the books, and finished strong.”

Each of the mentors were required to go through training from the New York State Mentoring Program ahead of volunteering. That gave them skills on how to interact with the mentees in ways that would help improve their character in a constructive way, rather than what may be viewed as apprehensive.

Auslander said the mentees were leery of the program at first, but that changed as they got to know their mentors. Omar, for example, was surprised to find out he was living in the same neighborhood where Auslander grew up.

"At one point in the year we discussed with them what our backgrounds were and they were shocked to find out our backgrounds, in many cases, were not that different than theirs," Auslander said.

Part of that is to make the mentees more comfortable with the program, but it's also to show them that, despite what's happened in their past, they have an array of opportunities for the future. Just holding meetings at the offices of Willkie and Marsh, for example, is a way of telling them they could belong in such a place if that's what they wanted.

"We're lawyers and they look up to us that way," Auslander said.

But the future of the program doesn't have to be limited to attorneys, Auslander and Feldman said. It's not all about the legal expertise involved, though that can sometimes help. It's more about providing a support system for the mentees where they haven't had one before.

"I don't think lawyers would necessarily do a better job with this than business executives, or other industries, as long as you have people who really care," Auslander said. "This was a natural fit for lawyers because of the family court connection, which makes it attractive all the way around."

The program is expected to double later this year, with three more attorneys from both Willkie and Marsh signing on to become mentors. That will bring the total to 12 mentors — six from each. The mentors already involved will stay with their current mentees.

The mentees are allowed to stay in the program as long as they want, with a goal of developing a deep relationship between them and their mentors. The cutoff for joining the program could also be raised to age 23 in the future, assuming it continues to be successful.

"I would love it to become that the 25- or 30-year-old mentee can pick up the phone and call the mentor," Lupuloff said. "That would be a wonderful, natural result."

Lupuloff and Ruiz expect the program to expand to 20 mentor-mentee pairs next year, and possibly have participants outside Manhattan by then. Each cycle starts in September.

Other law firms and companies are welcome to reach out to the program's participants to express interest in joining it, Lupuloff said. If they're skeptical on whether this kind of pro bono effort will be worth their time, she said, all they need to do is ask those already involved.

"The mentors now have found this so impactful for them — so meaningful and so wonderful, and heartwarming of them — that all a prospective mentor needs to do is speak to a current mentor and they're going to be convinced," Lupuloff said.

<https://www.law.com/newyorklawjournal/2019/07/12/pro-bono-foster-care-state-mentoring-program-set-to-expand-this-year-in-ny/>