

# **Community Legal Aid**

A non-profit law firm serving the legal needs of low-income individuals and families in central northeast Ohio



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## **Attorneys take on volunteer project at Akron Children's**

### **Buckingham, Legal Aid partner to help families**

Local attorneys are volunteering their time to help families with children with special needs.

Buckingham, Doolittle, and Burroughs, LLC, has teamed up with Community Legal Aid to provide assistance in filing for and processing guardianship requests.

“This work is extremely important,” said Shelley Walker, director of social work at Akron Children’s Hospital who is coordinating on the project. “When a child with disabilities is unable to care for themselves, they have a parent or guardian there who can care for them. But when that child turns 18 and is legally considered an adult, the responsibility falls to them.”

Walker explained that in most of these cases, that child – transitioning to adulthood – is unable to make decisions for him/her self because of a mental disability.

“Guardianship is the answer for these families,” she said. “It legally allows another adult appointed by the court to make decisions for the young adult’s medical, financial, and other needs.”

The Guardianship Project is an expansion of Legal Aid’s medical-legal partnership HEAL (Health Education Advocacy and Law). The non-profit law firm has collaborated with Akron Children’s Hospital for the past several years on this project, which is how it identified guardianship as an area of need.

Joel Davidson, a pediatrician with Akron Children's and one of the lead physicians on the HEAL program, said the new program is an exciting expansion to the medical-legal partnership.

"HEAL already does so much for our families in terms of access to justice," he said. "I'm excited that we're beginning to involve the pro bono community in our partnership. I know our patients will benefit, and our hope is that the firm and its employees also find it beneficial through the added experience and involvement in the community."

Davidson said that when he's mentioned the new program to families, they have expressed great interest that there is help available to them.

"These are kids who will require life-long care for their conditions," he explained. "Thanks to medical improvements, many are living into adulthood. The partnership with Buckingham law firm will give families the legal backing they need as they grow out of the children's system."

"It's a relatively straight-forward process for an attorney, and the Probate Court works very hard to be accessible to families, but it can still feel overwhelming for some parents or guardians to navigate," explained Marie Curry, Legal Aid's managing attorney for HEAL. "It can be especially burdensome for those in lower income brackets, who often are working more than one job, caring for their family outside the hospital, while also navigating the medical needs of a sick child."

These are the families Buckingham is aiming to help.

"We are honored to partner with Community Legal Aid and Akron Children's Hospital to help these families, said attorney Melinda Smith Yeargin of Buckingham. Giving back to the community is part of our culture, and this pro bono project is a great opportunity for us to help this underserved population in a meaningful way."

The firm engaged in talks for much of 2017 with Legal Aid's Volunteer Legal Services Program to find the perfect opportunity, and then landed on the Guardianship Project.

"We knew this would be a great way for our attorneys to gain valuable experience while fulfilling a need within our community," said John Slagter, managing partner of Buckingham. "More importantly, it's the right thing to do."

Jennifer van Dulmen, Legal Aid's deputy director, worked with Buckingham to identify the project.

"This is what great pro bono partnerships are all about," van Dulmen said. "We have hundreds of volunteers who take on cases for our clients every year, and their work is so valuable. But when the leadership of a firm backs a project like this from the ground up, it just exponentially increases the impact."

Once Akron Children's determines there is a medical need for a guardian, Legal Aid's team of intake specialists and paralegals screen clients and collect basic information. Then, the case is sent to Buckingham and assigned to an associate.

“What makes this project so special is that it’s really focused on the needs of a unique population,” van Dulmen explained. “These children have special needs, even for health patients. Guardianships ensure that they receive uninterrupted, continuous care.”

This project will help families through what is already an emotional process, said Probate Judge Elinore Marsh Stormer.

“Establishing a guardianship for a loved one is always emotional,” she said. “This innovative program will make a difficult time much easier.”

Buckingham officially launched the project this month with a training session for those who will be taking cases.

“We are asking each of our attorneys to take one to two cases per year,” Slagter said. “As they gain more experience, and as the hospital is able to identify more families, we can reassess the number of cases and hours we dedicate to the program each year.”

Davidson said that the addition of attorneys to the care team is critical for these cases.

"The details are just so complex," he said. "We as the medical team are aware of some of the details that families face in transition to adulthood, but to have the legal experts involved is so important to making that transition smooth. It allows those families the time to focus on their kids and the care they're receiving."

For more information on HEAL, visit [www.communitylegalaid.org/HEAL](http://www.communitylegalaid.org/HEAL). To learn more about Legal Aid’s volunteer attorney program, visit [www.communitylegalaid.org/VLSP](http://www.communitylegalaid.org/VLSP).

To learn more about Buckingham, Doolittle, and Burroughs, LLC, visit [www.bdbl.com](http://www.bdbl.com).

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