

NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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IMPACT OF SUBSTANCE DEPENDENCY WITHIN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

EDISON — It's an issue often fraught with public misunderstanding: Can parents, still in the throes of battling substance dependency problems, manage to care for their children, or is abuse of alcohol or drugs effectively to be deemed child neglect, warranting removal from the parents' home?

Seven families this month, including some with histories of addiction, will be honored by Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) for essentially getting their lives back together, dealing with their substance dependency issues, and then being in position to have their removed children returned to their care and custody.

The seven families are part of LSNJ's annual celebration known as Family Reunification Day. The event, open to the public, will be held June 23 at 2 p.m. in the New Jersey Law Center in New Brunswick.

“Reunification Day has been an enormously emotional event, capturing the outpouring of feelings and touching embraces of parents and children so elated to once again be back together as a family.” says Jeyanthi Rajaraman, supervising attorney for LSNJ's Family Representation Project. “It is a truly heartwarming gathering and provides a wonderful opportunity to celebrate the important accomplishments of parents and the many professionals who support them in

getting their children home safely. Over the years it has become a model in highlighting the tools, services and support system necessary to achieve a successful reunification.”

The focus this year is on issues parents with substance dependency problems face, including even an occasional slip-up when attempting to reorder their lives and regain the custody of their children. That, for example, might entail — as in the case of one of the parents to be honored — when a mother’s determination to go the straight and narrow in dealing with past addiction issues may well hit a temporary curve, such as a relapse, but reuniting the child to the mother still may be best for the child.

The message is that substance dependency or addiction may not always equate to child abuse or neglect under the law.

Every year the state Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCP&P) removes several thousand alleged neglected or abused children from their parents’ custody and about half or so eventually are returned to their parents. State records show abuse of alcohol and drugs is a major factor in triggering the removals, with DCP&P every year referring some 3,400 parents to substance abuse programs.

This year’s seven sets of parents being honored will tell their stories of their road back to being united with their children — and how that is playing out today. That includes Jalisa (her first name only) who acknowledges she struggled with alcohol addiction when her infant son was removed by state authorities about five years ago.

Jalisa’s own words offer much insight in the trials and tribulations of a parent trying to overcome addiction, a goal often impeded by temporary lapses.

“My son was my life, he was my everything, but I didn’t realize (addiction) was a problem until I knew that I was hurting him more than I was hurting, you know, myself. And I was blanking out, winding up in jail, like forgetting things, like physically harming myself.”

Now in her early 20’s Jalisa says that when the choice between consuming alcohol and marijuana or caring for her son came sharply into focus, the turnaround began. “I just felt as though like enough was enough — like because he needs me more than I need myself.”

Federal and state law, “as well, as humanity and common sense,” require that first priority be given to reunification once families become involved with the child welfare system, notes LSNJ’s Rajaraman.

Recently LSNJ brought together several experts to discuss the issues facing parents with addiction problems and the obstacles, even those parents in recovery, may face. One of their primary points was that a history of addiction should not automatically be a barrier to reuniting a family or keeping a child in the household. And they maintained there are some judges who unfortunately treat or consider addiction almost synonymously with child neglect — essentially viewing evidence of drug use as the same as evidence of child neglect

Emma Ketteringham, managing director for the Family Defense Practice at Bronx Defenders, said, “I think what we are trying to move toward is... that actually a more case-specific, family-specific inquiry is necessary,” keying instead on “how the parents care for their children or how they are as parents.”

Added Dr. Susan Neshin, medical director of Jersey Shore Addiction Services Healthcare Inc., “Our parents all want their children back. ...Now in some cases it may not be appropriate for that person because they really can’t be a good parent. But then again that is a rare case. As long as they make treatment a priority and have a commitment to abstinence, even if there are

stumbling blocks along the way — and there are always going to be — as long as that commitment is there, there’s hope.”

LSNJ’s Family Reunification Day event is part of the American Bar Association’s annual celebration of and support for reunification.

In addition to honoring the seven sets of families, the LSNJ program in New Brunswick also will recognize several individuals with major roles in the reunification process. Known as “Family Reunification Day Heroes,” they include Daniel Derasmo of the Passaic County Public Defender’s Office, Tiffany Sawyer of the state’s Law Guardian Office, DCP&P caseworkers Andrea Stewart from Passaic County and Kristin Koehler from Morris County, and foster parent Kayne Carter.

Guest speakers at the event will be Atlantic and Cape May County Superior Court Judge Julio L. Mendez; Dr. Robert G. Newman, president emeritus of Continuum Health Partners hospital network in New York; and RISE Magazine writer Piazadora Footman.

Legal Services of New Jersey, located in Edison, heads a statewide system of seven non-profit corporations which provide free legal assistance in civil matters to low-income people in all 21 counties of New Jersey.

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