
Special Ed Advocacy Center 2008 Report

2008 was the Special Ed Advocacy Center's 4th full year as an institution dedicated to ensuring that children with disabilities in the Chicago area receive all appropriate educational services provided under law.

Between January 1, 2008 and September 15, 2008, the Special Ed Advocacy Center assisted 432 families by answering intake calls and representing parents and caregivers; conducted a dozen educational seminars at parent support group meetings, Centers for Independent Living and other disability groups; and attended numerous resource fairs for law students, teachers and the special needs community.

The Special Ed Advocacy Center continued to work on its seven major objectives in 2008:

- Providing free legal services to low-income parents and caregivers of children with disabilities seeking to obtain appropriate educational services for their children;
- Answering intake questions from parents and caregivers of children with disabilities on issues concerning special education law;
- Conducting educational conferences, lectures and seminars;
- Creating an informational website;
- Creating educational brochures and manuals;
- Creating an advisory committee comprised of parents and caretakers of children with disabilities as well as some current and former special education students; and
- Offering legal internships and volunteer positions to help train special education attorney advocates.

2008 Accomplishments

- Providing free legal services to nearly 500 low-income parents and caregivers of children with disabilities seeking to obtain appropriate educational services for their children;
- Averaging two to three new client request for services per day;
- Conducting almost two dozen educational seminars;
- Guest Lecturer, DePaul and Kent Law School; and
- Adjunct Professor of Law, Special Education Law Seminar, Loyola University Chicago School of Law.

Providing Legal Services

Since May 2004, the Special Ed Advocacy Center (“SEAC”) has provided free, competent legal advocacy and representation to parents and caregivers who might not otherwise receive legal representation. The SEAC focuses its services on parents and caregivers whose income is at or below 125% of the Federal Poverty Income Guidelines.

During 2008, the SEAC staff and volunteer attorneys provided free legal services to nearly 500 low-income parents and caregivers of children with disabilities seeking to obtain appropriate educational services for their children.

The SEAC focused on the substantive and procedural aspects of special education law, and on a broad range of lawyering skills. The SEAC’s work encompasses factual investigation; extensive document review (Individualized Educational Plans (“IEPs”), school and medical records, and team assessments); drafting correspondence, complaints and pleadings; attending meetings; contacting and interviewing expert witnesses; conducting research; preparing memoranda of law; and handling the general disposition of cases.

The SEAC’s clients were obtained through outreach to PTAs, parent groups, child advocates, disability agencies, resource organizations, private practice attorneys, teachers, school administrators, Regional Offices of Education, churches and other religious organizations, as well as numerous community groups throughout the Chicago area.

Answering Intake Calls

During 2008, the SEAC staff and volunteer attorneys answered more than 250 questions from concerned parents and caregivers of children with disabilities such as:

- How do I get special education services for my child?
- Does my child have to try out a placement before it can be found inappropriate?
- Can I refuse to consent to have my child receive special education services?
- What can I do if the school is not following my child’s IEP?
- How does a 504 Plan differ from an IEP?
- How does mediation work in a special education case?
- Can the IEP team change my child’s classroom without my permission?
- What happens when my child ages out of special education?
- How do I get my child placed in a private school?
- What happens when I disagree with the IEP developed for my child?
- What is meant by filing a “complaint”?
- Can I get my public school district school to pay my child’s tuition at a private school?
- What is meant by Delegation of Rights?

Conducting Educational Conferences

In addition to providing free legal services, the SEAC sought to educate parents, caregivers, and school personnel concerning their mutual rights and responsibilities. The SEAC's staff conducted educational conferences free of charge with the intended purpose of transforming the complex area of special education law into simple, understandable language that parents and other non-attorneys can utilize. Additionally, the forums allowed parents and caregivers to ask questions concerning special education law and teaches parents and school personnel how to work together both cooperatively and effectively.

The SEAC's staff gives speeches, provides public comment, author articles for periodicals, author letters to the editor, and engages in dialogue with the general public so as to enhance general awareness and understanding of issues concerning the special education students being served in Illinois schools.

The SEAC conducted educational conferences, gave interviews, and participated in events with groups including but not limited to the following during 2008:

January

- Speaker, Aspire Children Services (January 24)

February

- Speaker, Grayslake Parents Resource Group (February 28)

March

- Participant, State Senator Matt Murphy's Roundtable Discussion on Developmental Disabilities (March 1)
- Guest Lecture, Kent Law School Disability Law Seminar (March 11)
- Speaker, Northwestern Illinois Center for Independent Living (NICIL) (March 15)

April

- Guest Lecturer, School Law Seminar, DePaul Law School (April 21)
- Participant, Hanover Township MHB, Community Meeting (April 24)
- Exhibitor, Options Transition Fair, Stevenson HS, Lincolnshire (April 29)

May

- Speaker, Orchard Village, Respite Meet and Greet (May 1)

August to November

- Adjunct Professor of Law, Special Education Law, Loyola Law School

September (Scheduled)

- Speaker, Aspire Children Services (September 24)
- Speaker, Countryside (September 27)

October (Scheduled)

- Speaker, Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center Behavioral Health Services, Psychology Trainees (October 1)
- Speaker, Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD) Lincolnshire (October 13)
- Speaker, Local Area Network (LAN) 65 (October 15)
- Participant, North/Northwest Cook County and Lake County Work Group (October 16)
- Speaker/Participant, Hanover Township Mental Health Board Life Changes Disabilities Expo (October 25)
- Speaker, Grayslake Parents Resource Group (October 30)

November (Scheduled)

- Speaker, Midwest Adoption Conference (November 2)
- Speaker, Lake County Center for Independent Living (November 13)

Creating a Website

The SEAC's website (www.specialedadvocacycenter.org) operates as a free public resource and information center for issues concerning special education law.

In 2008, the SEAC continued its attempt to make our website more user-friendly, more informative and more interactive. The website will continue to be expanded into 2009 to include podcasts, weblogs, educational brochures, manuals, informational articles, copies of press releases and links to other special education resources.

Creating Educational Brochures

In 2008, the SEAC's staff continued to design and distribute free educational brochures and manuals. During 2008, the SEAC introduced 3 new brochures: Delegation of Rights, Least Restrictive Environment and Mediation. Further, the SEAC is completing translation of its general brochure into Spanish and Polish.

Creating an Advisory Committee

In 2008, the SEAC continued to develop and grow an Advisory Council comprised of parents and caregivers of children with disabilities, lay advocates, school representatives, medical and mental health professionals, speech therapists, occupational therapists, and social workers.

Offering Legal Internships and Volunteer Opportunities

In 2008, the SEAC had numerous legal interns, legal externs and volunteers who assisted the SEAC staff in ensuring that children with disabilities in the Chicago area receive all appropriate educational services provided under law. The SEAC wishes to extend special thanks to our three summer interns and externs especially Loyola Law School legal extern, Judith Levitan.

Leadership and Staff

2008 Board of Directors:

President: Ms. Terry Pastika Secretary: Ms. Bethany Thompson
Vice-President: Ms. Bethany Thompson Treasurer: Ms. Michele Fugger

Director: Ms. Jill M. Dressner

2008 Staff:

Ms. Jill M. Dressner, Executive Director/Attorney at Law

Support, Contributions and Donations

The SEAC's financial support came from numerous individual donations and grantmaking foundations including but not limited to:

The Blowitz-Ridgeway Foundation
Anonymous Family Foundation
Donald P. and Byrd M. Kelly Foundation
DuPage County Bar Foundation
Hanover Township Mental Health Board
Illinois State Bar Association
Roberts Charitable Foundation
Rice Foundation

The SEAC complies with all record-keeping and filing requirements mandated by state and federal law. Our corporate records are available for inspection at our office and are on file with the appropriate governmental agencies. The SEAC does not release the names of our individual donors nor do we sell our mailing list to other groups.

For further information about the SEAC, please contact us at:

SPECIAL ED ADVOCACY CENTER

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Fax (847) 397-7011
Email seac@specialedadvocacycenter.org
Website
www.specialedadvocacycenter.org

Special Ed Advocacy Center Intake Form (Client Request for Services Form)
Return form by mail 1935 Plum Grove Road PMB 274, Palatine, IL 60067 or fax (847) 397-7011.

DATE _____ TOWNSHIP _____

FIRST NAME _____ LAST NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

HOME TELEPHONE _____ OTHER PHONE _____

EMAIL _____ FAX _____

CHILD'S NAME _____

CHILD'S DATE OF BIRTH _____ GRADE LEVEL _____

ETHNICITY _____ RACE _____

SPECIAL NEEDS _____

TOTAL FAMILY INCOME _____ NUMBER OF INCOME EARNERS _____

NUMBER OF DEPENDENTS _____

INCOME SOURCE: PUBLIC BENEFIT \$ _____ SALARY \$ _____

CHILD SUPPORT \$ _____ SS/SSI \$ _____

OTHER \$ _____ SOURCE _____

PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT _____

POSITION/TITLE _____

PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT _____

POSITION/TITLE _____

HOW DID YOU HEAR ABOUT SEAC? _____

REASON FOR NEEDING ASSISTANCE FROM SEAC (attach additional sheet(s) if necessary):

FORM OF REPRESENTATION

___ Advice Only; ___ Information Only; ___ Brief Service: _____;

___ Attend IEP; ___ Mediation; ___ Administrative Hearing; ___ Litigation.

NOTE: INFORMATION IS GATHERED FOR STATISICAL PUPOSES ONLY.