



Center for Public Policy Priorities

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NEWS RELEASE

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NATIONAL STUDY: STUDENT LOAN DEBT KEEPS LAWYERS FROM ENTERING OR STAYING IN THE CHILD WELFARE FIELD

AUSTIN— Too many of the nearly 28,000 kids in Texas' foster care system (and the over 500,000 foster children nationwide) lack stable legal representation and are voiceless in the court proceedings that profoundly affect their lives. A first-ever study of children's attorneys reveals why: many lawyers cannot afford to enter or remain in this low-paying practice area due to overwhelming student loan debt. Over two-thirds (68%) of lawyers surveyed owe at least \$50,000 in student loan debt and nearly a quarter (24%) owe \$75,000 or more.

"All life-altering decisions for foster children, including determining whether they will remain in foster care, return to their family, have legal ties to their birth parents severed, or be adopted, are made in court," said F. Scott McCown, Executive Director of the Center for Public Policy Priorities in Austin. "Texas foster kids deserve lawyers who are well trained and capable of making good decisions. Far too often, the high cost of student loan debt keeps lawyers from entering the child welfare field or staying in it long term."

Solution

To address the effects of high student loans on attorneys and children in the foster care system, the study recommends that Congress institute a loan forgiveness program for lawyers currently practicing dependency law and those interested in entering the field, as well as for other committed professionals interested in devoting their careers to children.

The Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, a national blue-ribbon panel, has already recommended that Congress explore such a program. In addition, the Commission has urged adequate compensation for child advocates, reasonable caseloads, and enhanced training as further incentives to encourage interested attorneys to remain in this field. The American Bar Association and the National Association of Counsel for Children recently urged similar reforms to encourage recruitment and retention of child advocates.

In the past month, two bills were introduced in Congress with provisions on loan forgiveness programs for attorneys—"We Care Act," S1679 (Sens. Mike DeWine, R-Ohio and Jay Rockefeller, D-W. Va.), and "Fostering our Future," HR3758 (Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Pasadena).

In Texas, an amendment to SB6 was proposed in the 2005 regular legislative session that would provide loan forgiveness for social workers (<http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/data/docmodel/79r/amndtext/pdf/SB000062240.PDF>). While it wasn't approved and wouldn't have affected attorneys in the child welfare system, "the acknowledgement that we need good people to enter and stay in the child welfare system and that loan forgiveness is an effective way of achieving that goal is a good first step," McCown said.

More than 300 children's attorneys in 43 states were interviewed in the survey conducted by the Children's Center of Los Angeles (CLC) with the assistance of the American Bar Association and the National Association of Counsel for Children. The survey was issued by Home At Last, a national project supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts aimed at raising awareness about the need to improve the nation's foster care system. For more information, visit <http://www.cppp.org/initiatives.php>.