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Erie County Bar Association builds a bridge of support for homeless children with unique signature program

Erie, PA January 26, 2009 — Nine years ago, the Erie School District gave the ECBA an alarming statistic: every year over 350 students from the Erie City School District become homeless. “We were astonished. It seems almost impossible that so many children could be suffering the very worst of poverty, and still trying to get an education,” says Sandra Brydon Smith, Executive Director of the Bar Association in Erie, Pennsylvania. Due to this alarming fact, the ECBA tackled the problem head on. They raised over \$100,000 and created a bridge of support which became a signature community project and brought national attention to the ECBA.

Today, *Attorneys & Kids Together (AKT)* not only supplies backpacks, books, school uniforms, and computers to homeless students, they provide a higher level of support: mentoring.

“The impact of homelessness on literacy in children is profound,” Smith says. According to a report produced by the Better Homes Fund, *Homeless Children: America's Newest Outcasts*, homeless children face a multitude of challenges that impact their ability to receive an education including hunger, lack of appropriate health care, and emotional stability. “We recognized that each child would need more than just school supplies. They would need interaction with a caring successful adult.”

The AKT program matches a volunteer attorney with a child to provide mentoring and encouragement. Volunteers help their mentees establish goals and teach them life skills such as appropriate dress and taking pride in their appearance and studies. Smith adds, “By showing these children that they can make positive choices and that there are adults within the legal system who truly care about their future and well being, we hope to provide some foundation so they can succeed in school.”

Smith admits that there is still a lot more work to be done. At present, there are more homeless children in America than at any point since the Great Depression, and the current economic crisis means that there could be even more homeless children in Erie. “We need to be prepared to help every child we can. AKT will need to be flexible in meeting the changing educational needs of students living in homeless situations. It’s a community effort – local attorneys working with school districts, shelters and others to do what we can in supporting the educational needs of students in homeless situations.”

Recently, the ECBA received the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth’s (NAEHCY) 2008 Distinguished Service and Leadership award for contributing to the educational needs of approximately 1,450 homeless students in the Erie area. The NAEHCY’s annual awards were created to “recognize outstanding service...provided to children and youth experiencing homelessness.”

For more information on the Erie County Bar Association visit www.eriebar.com.

Mission Statement: The Erie County Bar Association serves the lawyers, judges and the public of Erie County, Pennsylvania by assisting our members in the practice of law and by engaging in activities that promote the public’s understanding of and respect for our American system of law and justice.



ERIE COUNTY BAR ASSOCIATION

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