

# Women's Advocacy Project Unveils New Legal Initiatives

By Linda Phan, Elizabeth Lippincott and Diana Philip

In response to the increasing demand for legal services for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, the Women's Advocacy Project (Project), based in Austin, has recently launched several new legal initiatives to help victims. The Project, known statewide for its range of services that encourage the use of legal protections to end intimate partner violence, has developed four new innovative programs: The Pro Se Sexual Assault Protective Order, Legal Access Initiative Program, Teen Justice Initiative, and the Domestic Violence CLE Program.

## ***Pro Se Sexual Assault Protective Order***

The Women's Advocacy Project unveiled its Pro Se Sexual Assault Protective Order Packet at the 2005 Texas Association Against Sexual Assault (TAASA) Conference in March to focus on the safety and legal concerns of sexual assault survivors. Understanding the difficulties faced by pro se applicants, the Project developed the packet to make protective orders against sex offenders easier to obtain for victims, prosecutors, and advocates. This new legal tool includes detailed instructions on how to navigate the legal system and provides forms for each step of the court process leading up to the granting of a protective order.

The protective order packet, which was made possible by a grant from the Office of the Texas Attorney General, was developed to encourage statewide use of the new Sexual Assault Protective Order statute. The statute, codified in Chapter 7A of the Code of Criminal Procedure, makes sexual assault survivors eligible for protective orders against their attacker, in the same way that domestic violence survivors are eligible for protective orders against their batterer. The Project hopes that the new protective order packet will encourage prosecutors to utilize the new statute, and empower survivors in assuring their own safety by seeking protective orders.

## ***Legal Access Initiative***

The Women's Advocacy Project has also launched the Legal Access Initiative program (LAI) to assist advocates in expanding the scope of legal services available to domestic violence victims. One of the initial objectives of the program is to identify geographical regions in Texas where obtaining timely and effective legal services for victims pursuing civil actions has been difficult. These critical victim services include legal advice and representation for protective orders, divorce actions, suits seeking child custody, visitation and support, as well as modifications to previously established court orders.

LAI director Diana Philip, assists advocates in underserved regions by assessing the unique challenges advocates face when securing services for their clients. After determining the shortfall of legal services in the targeted communities, the LAI pro-

gram then facilitates negotiation for a more collaborative legal network. Philip works to achieve this objective by serving as a consultant to the advocates and the legal community – prosecutors, legal aid offices, local bar associations, law schools and private attorneys.

## ***Teen Justice Initiative***

Bronwyn Blake, recipient of the first University of Texas Law Faculty Fellowship in Public Interest Law, will join the Women's Advocacy Project to head the new Teen Justice Initiative program. Motivated to action by the shocking stabbing of Otralla Mosley, an Austin high school student who was murdered by her 16 year-old boyfriend, Blake proposed the Teen Justice Initiative to address the issue of legal access for adolescents faced with domestic violence.

Made possible by the UT Law Faculty Fellowship, the Teen Justice Initiative will be a new endeavor for the Women's Advocacy Project as a subset of its Justice Initiative Program, which provides coordination and oversight of statewide legal efforts that serve victims of domestic violence. The new teen program aspires to similar goals by providing legal services to teens in Austin and developing a model safety plan for schools.

The Teen Justice Initiative will collaborate with SafePlace's Expect Respect Program, a national model for taking school-wide action against domestic violence. The Expect Respect Program assesses the social climate of schools, develops responses, and educates teens about speaking up and getting help. The Teen Justice Initiative will extend the Expect Respect Program goals by serving as its legal arm through assisting teenagers to take legal action, such as obtaining protective orders.

## ***Continuing Legal Education Programs***

Finally, the Project is offering a new continuing legal education course to promote awareness in the legal community about domestic violence and the laws governing family violence in Texas. "When Friends, Family, or Clients are Faced with Domestic Violence: What Every Lawyer Should Know" is a free one-hour credit course provided to law firms interested in combating domestic violence.

The course covers information regarding the incidence of family violence in Texas and how it affects friends, family, and even the workplace. In addition to a basic introduction to family violence, the course identifies the main civil and criminal statutes governing family violence and provides practical information on protective orders and other legal and non-legal remedies that can be taken to enhance safety.

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