



Position Paper on Foster Care

The Junior Leagues of New Jersey State Public Affairs Committee (SPAC) was formed out of concern that abandoned babies were being placed in an overcrowded municipal hospital in Newark for extended periods of time. The Junior Leagues of Newark, Montclair and The Oranges & Short Hills appealed to the elected freeholders for an infant shelter in Essex County. Due to the work of the three Leagues in effecting this change, members became acutely aware of the need for improved services for children. This issue prompted the reactivating of the State Public Affairs Committee in April 1970 to study the problems of New Jersey's abandoned, abused, and neglected children and to work toward changing the state's laws affecting children.

Child Placement Review Act

SPAC was heavily involved in advocating for the Child Placement Review Act, which created Child Placement Review (CPR) Boards -- court-appointed, trained citizen volunteers in each NJ county who monitor the cases of all children placed outside their home by the Division of Child Protection and Permanency (formerly the Division of Youth and Family Services, formerly Child Protection Services). Board members review case plans and conduct interviews of interested parties, and make recommendations to the Court and the Division about what they perceive to be the best interests of the child. Following passage of the Child Placement Review Act by the NJ Legislature in 1978, several SPAC delegates went on to serve on and lead both Child Placement Review Boards and the Child Placement Advisory Council, the entity tasked with monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the Act itself.

In 2010 the Director of the Administrative Office of the Courts issued a Directive changing the manner in which CPR boards conduct their review function. In response, SPAC convened two stakeholder forums to discuss the impact of the changes. Over 40 representatives from more than 15 government and independent agencies participated, and all agreed on the need for continued citizen review and for greater oversight of the many entities involved in the child placement process. Specific recommendations in a report issued after the second forum included improving communication and data sharing by all stakeholders in order to meet the new 45-day CPR review deadline; providing CPR boards with the ability to follow up on missing information after the 45-day deadline has passed; and enhancing judicial education and training as it relates to the child placement process.

The Child Placement Advisory Council is working with the Administrative Office of the Courts to complete an evaluation of the new review process. Upon completion of the evaluation, SPAC will continue to work with the Child Placement Advisory Council and determine the next necessary steps to discuss with the Director or staff.

Aging Out

Since its earliest days, SPAC has also focused on the challenges faced by older youth who are removed from their homes by the child welfare system. At a time when many member Leagues worked to establish and volunteer in residential group housing for hard-to-place adolescents, SPAC advocated for policies and programs to benefit these youth, who are at high risk for educational deficits, economic insecurity, homelessness, early childbearing, and other adverse outcomes.

For the past five years, two current SPAC members whose Leagues' service areas include most of Essex County (Oranges & Short Hills, and Montclair-Newark) have co-chaired an Education & Career Fair in Newark for youth who will soon "age out" of foster care, meaning they will no longer be eligible for support from the child welfare system. Essex County, home to Newark, has the highest percentage of foster youth in the state, and as recently as 2007, one percent of all foster youth in the nation could be found in Essex. Reforms to the child welfare system have reduced these numbers significantly, but Essex County still ranks first in the state for the number of youth in out-of-home placement. And sadly, while the overall numbers of youth in foster care are declining, the number of youth who age out of the child welfare system continues to rise.

The Essex County Education & Career Fair features over 40 exhibitors representing area colleges and technical schools; employers and apprenticeship programs; and a wide range of social service agencies. The fair is part of a day-long conference, which aims to prepare teens and young adults for the transition from foster care to independent living by educating them about their rights and entitlements, by providing important information about education and career planning, and by encouraging the youth to advocate for themselves. This annual program is hosted by Rutgers-Newark School of Law, and other important partners include Court Appointed Special Advocates of Essex County, the Superior Court of New Jersey – Family Part, the Division of Child Protection and Permanency, and the youths' law guardians. After many years of coordinating this project, the co-chairs have developed "turnkey" materials to help sister Leagues or other nonprofit organizations sponsor similar events.

SPAC maintains a continuing commitment to promote policies that benefit children in foster care and other out-of-home placements. Delegates will monitor state programs and proposed legislation designed to impact these youth, advocating for solutions that are in their best interest. In doing so, SPAC helps give voice to some of our society's most vulnerable citizens.