

# Meeting in the Middle

*Juvenile justice seminar unites social workers, legal community*

*Photos by Mike Eidelbes*

For Steve Overstreet, a social worker who's spent more than two decades working with runaways and homeless youths, meeting with representatives of the legal community is commonplace. Unfortunately, discussions with police officers, judges and court staffers, and child protective services workers usually occur under the worst of circumstances.

So when the Michigan Network for Youth and Families held a day-long seminar at State Bar headquarters in Lansing on legal training for people who work with runaways and homeless kids, Overstreet leapt at the chance to participate.

"This is the first time the network has ever done anything quite like this," said Overstreet, who works at the Common Ground Sanctuary in Royal Oak. "And this is the first time I brought five staff [members]."

Overstreet and his co-workers were among the 35 or so attendees at the March 16 event organized by the State Bar Justice Initiatives Committee and Equal Access Initiative (EAI). The seminar grew out of an EAI release of 500 copies of "Information on Family Legal Issues," a CD-ROM that addresses various aspects of juvenile justice. After speaking with Network representatives, EAI recruited lawyers, judges, and law enforcement officials who regularly deal with youths to share their insight with the group.

Among the topics discussed were the juvenile justice process, juvenile law rights, abuse and neglect issues, parental power of attorneys, and legal rights of homeless students. Perhaps the most important message was that, despite the sometimes adversarial relationship between the juvenile justice and social services sectors, both sides are working toward a common end.



*Robert Heimbuch, who works with the juvenile division of the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office, addresses social workers at the Michigan Network for Youth and Families legal training seminar.*

"It's a good reminder that teaming with the other agencies and people that our youth may be involved with is a good thing and can help accomplish more that way," said Erin Matuz of Bethany Christian Services in Fremont. "Meeting with a judge doesn't always have to be adversarial or looked at as a bad thing if you can come up with a plan to get things accomplished."

"Law enforcement is typically not pro-youth," said Overstreet. "[These kids] have problems, but there's not a lot of considera-

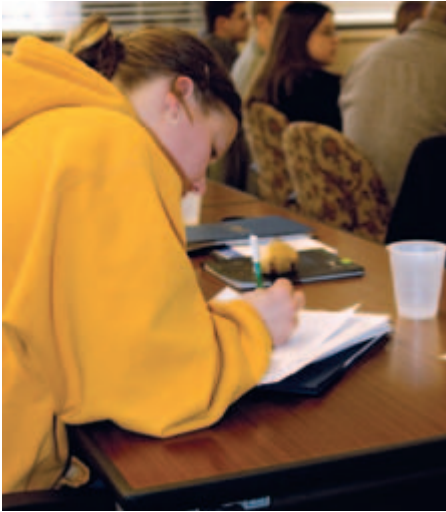
tion for how they got where they are and what they've gone through. In our business, we see what their history has been, and it's unbelievable most of the time that they've turned out as well as they have considering what they've been exposed to."

Matuz and Overstreet, who've both been in the field for a number of years, have managed to cultivate relationships with the members of the legal community they interact with on a regular basis. For social workers who are either new to the profession or intimidated by the justice system, the opportunity to meet judges, attorneys, police officers, and others in a collegial setting and examine issues from their viewpoints, regardless of whether they take anything else away from the seminar, is a huge step.

For example, a morning session evolved from a roundtable discussion to a back-and-forth dialogue, with social workers and panel members representing the legal system—including a police detective, a juvenile prosecutor, and a circuit court referee—exchanging information and ideas on ways to foster a more productive working relationship.

"To hear different perspectives from law enforcement, attorneys—all who are interested in helping youth, which isn't typically the case with law enforcement in our work—was great," said Overstreet, whose organization offers a free legal clinic once a week. "It

*These kids have problems, but there's not a lot of consideration for how they got where they are and what they've gone through.*



*Erin Matuz of Bethany Christian Services in Fremont takes notes during an afternoon session of the Michigan Network for Youth and Families legal training seminar.*

was nice to hear the differences and how different attorneys, judges, [and] referees handle various situations.”

In addition to that interaction, seminar attendees also were pleased to get a chance to focus on the issue for an entire day and have juvenile justice experts at their disposal.

“To be able to provide us with information and ask questions of them, it makes a big difference,” Matuz said. “There are so many gray areas, especially with juveniles. To be able to maybe get a clear answer, or to know all the options available to us, it’s really valuable.”

Both Matuz and Overstreet were hopeful that the Michigan Network for Youth and Families would offer similar events in the future, and not just for the learning experience or making contacts with the legal community. The seminar also serves as an affirmation to the social services sector that their work is valued and appreciated.

“To find people in law enforcement and the legal system who really are passionate about helping kids is refreshing,” Overstreet said. “It validates what we do.”

*To learn more about the “Information on Family Legal Issues” CD-ROM or to view the information online, please visit <http://www.michiganequalaccess.org>.* ◆

*Mike Eidelbes is a staff writer for the Michigan Bar Journal. He can be contacted by e-mail at [meidelbes@mail.michbar.org](mailto:meidelbes@mail.michbar.org).*