

NEWS RELEASE

Legal Services of New Jersey
100 Metroplex Drive at Plainfield Avenue
P.O. Box 1357
Edison, New Jersey 08818-1357

Contact: Harvey Fisher
Office Phone: 732-529-8430
Cell Phone: 908-616-9941
E-mail: hfisher@lsnj.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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A SECOND CHANCE FOR PARENTS TO PARENT

EDISON— This past December the holidays were especially meaningful and joyous for Kisha. She got her kids back.

That's when the Essex County woman, once deemed by state child welfare officials to be an unfit mother, had her three children returned to her care and custody. It has been a struggle but she has dealt with her drug problem and taken other steps to turn her life around.

There are many other success stories like Kisha in New Jersey, a state in which the Division of Child Protection & Permanency (DCP&P) handles cases involving some 45,000 children a year, of which about 7,000 are removed from their parents' custody usually because of neglect or abuse.

Every year Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ) pays tribute to families that have been successful in doing what was required to bring their families back together and bond anew. In past years the event was called Family Reunification Day. Today the celebration has been changed to Family Unification Day because the emphasis is not only on reuniting families but, just as importantly, doing what's needed to keep already "intact" families from falling by the wayside.

This year's LSNJ's Family Unification Day will be held Thursday (June 21) at 2 p.m. in the New Jersey Law Center in New Brunswick. Kisha and nine other families from Camden,

Burlington, Hudson, Gloucester, Essex, Middlesex and Passaic Counties will be cited and relate their stories and elation when they got their children back or received extra help in keeping their homes intact despite many pressing issues often related indirectly or directly to lack of finances.

Poverty, says Jeyanthi Rajaraman, supervising attorney for LSNJ's Family Representation Project, encompasses some 90 percent of families involved with DCP&P. It is important to understand how lack of finances can impact a family in obtaining, for example, decent housing and overcoming barriers related to poverty in accessing immediate services for drug, mental health or domestic violence issues.

As she put it, "The goal of Legal Services of New Jersey is to ensure and focus on increasing prevention tools in order to secure intact families. Part of providing effective prevention is to address poverty and know that its wide-ranging adverse impacts are not reason to remove a child from a family. LSNJ is committed to identifying ways to secure safe and healthy homes for children with their families through prioritizing best prevention practices and reducing unnecessary removals."

In that regard, there is Cannitta, the mother of three young children, who experienced firsthand the difficulties in finding places that she could afford in Middlesex County. She and the children effectively rode the homeless route, roaming from brief stays with friends, to welfare hotels and to shelters, but could not find permanent living quarters. Even today her eyes well with tears as she recalls being unable to scrape up the \$75-a-day rent in shabby hotels. Sobs carry her words: "I was calling anybody and everybody for money. I did the best that I could."

Ultimately, citing homelessness, the state moved in and removed her three kids - ages 2, 4, and 6 - and put each separately in different foster homes.

It was a horrendous period for her. “I missed the days with my babies. Birthdays missed, Halloween. I missed Christmas, my daughter’s first day in school. I never (before) missed a first. Never. Never. Those moments I can’t get back.”

The June 21 event that will include the stories of the Kisha’s` and Cannitta’s families is part of the American Bar Association’s celebration of Reunification Month and is open to the public. If such past celebrations are indicative of what will occur, there is likely to be an outpouring of emotions with lots of hug and kisses and tears among the ten families being cited as the special day’s “honorees.”

Superior Court Judge Daniel J. Yablonsky will be the keynote speaker.

Also being cited as Unification Day “heroes” are resource parents, social workers DCP&P caseworkers, attorneys and others instrumental in helping the families.

Legal Services of New Jersey (LSNJ), located in Edison, heads the state’s Legal Services system, a network of five independent non-profit corporations and has been providing free essential legal aid in civil matters to low-income people through offices in all 21 counties for more than 50 years. Since its inception, LSNJ has provided representation in more than 2.4 million cases.

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