

Free online resources for judges and attorneys

Those members of the criminal justice system who help abused children can access Texas Lawyers for Children's online resource center free of charge.

By Patricia Hogue

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Judges and attorneys across Texas can access—for free—a wealth of materials and resources to help in handling child abuse cases. Texas Lawyers for Children (TLC), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, has created an innovative Online Legal Resource and Communication Center to provide valuable technology and resources to court-appointed solo practitioners and government attorneys all across Texas. TLC created a one-stop shop to consolidate critical child abuse-related information from across the state, where judges and attorneys can also use secure communication tools to pose questions and discuss court improvement ideas with their colleagues.

To highlight the benefits and ease that TLC's Online Center provides to legal professionals currently handling child abuse cases, I would like to share a bit of my own experiences on the road to technology, along with a solemn reminder of how limited we once were and how much more effectively we can work on behalf of children today. Back in 1993, when I started at the Dallas County Criminal District Attorney's office, "technology" consisted of a single county terminal per workroom on which to check criminal histories and a copy machine down the hall to replenish my supply of pre-printed, fill-in-the-blank form motions. Legal research meant actual physical hours in the appellate library, located on the tenth floor of our building (just a hop and a skip on the elevator or up four to six flights of stairs [on a day with a patient judge]) and spending countless hours peering through volumes of the West's Law Digests, Vernon's Statutes, and Southwestern 2nd Reporters as I evaluated the merits of my cases and prepared for trials. I did share access to a secretary with word processing in the mid-1990s during my first child-abuse division stint, but the felony courts still had about a 1-to-50 secretary-attorney ratio. By 1999, when I returned to the child abuse division, my research hours diminished considerably, thanks to the generous help of my wonderful colleagues in the appellate section who just happened to be across the hall from my office. (Thanks again to the whole gang!) That was also the year I was provided an actual modern-day computer on my desk and was given a password to Lexis or Westlaw for prosecutors. Oh, such fond memories!

I am thankful that these days, county government attorneys now have access to far more advanced technology and resources to prepare daily dockets, get ready for trial, and enlighten judges and juries. I bet many of today's law school grads are unlikely to fathom such an environment as they enter their first years of practice at firms that are light years away from where I started. However, many of you reading this article still face the challenges of overcrowded and underfunded court systems, especially those in the lovely rural settings of our great state. Adequate county budgets that provide for the latest and greatest technology and training still lag far behind our comrades who started their legal careers at big firms where the expected protocol to "leave no stone unturned" is supported with resources including unlimited access to Westlaw and Lexis; expert witnesses for consultation and trial; online form banks; advice and support from mentors; teams of support staff; and endless budgets for legal conferences and trainings.

Additionally, despite the greatest attempts by law schools to prepare young lawyers to face the

challenges of the modern world, there are still many facets of real life, love, and law that are given little or no attention in the academic setting. Take child abuse, for example: How many of us took a course in the dynamics of sexual abuse within the family or the intricacies and causes of brain injury in infants? As a prosecutor or court-appointed ad litem, you hit the ground running and often do so totally on your own.

Fortunately for the prosecutors in Texas who handle child abuse cases and the hundreds of attorneys across Texas that serve as court-appointed ad litem for abused children, there is a resource available that brings the tremendous big-firm kind of support system to all large and small county offices and solo practitioners throughout the state. The TLC Online Legal Resource and Communication Center, located at www.TexasLawyersforchildren.org, features highly organized resources and collaborative tools (including private email networks) specifically tailored for Texas judges and attorneys who handle child abuse and neglect cases.

Although the site focuses primarily on civil cases, there is ample information relevant to criminal child abuse cases as well. The resource center, designed for fast and easy use, provides hundreds of case summaries linked to the full text of the cases, a brief bank, more than 200 legal forms in Microsoft Word format, articles, manuals, medical and psychological references, practice tips, a conference calendar, links to Texas statutes, and much more. When a TLC subscriber clicks on any of the more than 1,300 topics in the list, the search result contains only information specifically regarding that topic so that the user avoids wading through irrelevant information.

One of the most valuable aspects of the Online Center is the community network that helps to resolve both individual and systemic issues that arise daily in child abuse cases and the court system. Judges and attorneys, both seasoned and brand-new, are connected to one another and can benefit from the exchange of information and share resources. TLC now has over 1,800 judges and attorneys registered to use its services, who estimate that they handle cases involving over 89,000 children.

As a one-stop shop, TLC's Online Center provides what Texas lawyers spread out across 254 Texas counties need: free, immediate access to legal research, forms, medical and psychological information, experts available for questions, and mentors on specific legal issues to trial preparation. Please contact TLC's toll free number 800/993-5852 or email me at patricia.hogue@texaslawyersforchildren.org with any questions. Judges and attorneys who wish to access the Online Center may do so by going to www.TexasLawyersforChildren.org and clicking on "Register" on the red menu bar.

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