

# Taft Promise Neighborhood Offers a Lesson in Community Transformation



Soon after the last bell of the day rings at Taft Elementary School, Community Legal Aid Staff Attorney Michelle Wrona Fox is just getting started. Her tiny back office, which she borrows from the school's social worker, Mary Boyd, streams with a regular flow of community members seeking legal support. As a Taft Promise Neighborhood partner organization, Legal Aid not only provides families in the impoverished Youngstown neighborhood with legal counsel, but connects with them on a personal level through Wrona Fox. She grew up in the neighborhood and also attended the elementary school where today she brings clarity to the phrase: *giving back to the community*.

"It's very rewarding in a personal sense because I'm able help people improve their lives. Giving back to the neighborhood is something very important to me," says Wrona Fox, who holds office hours every Tuesday from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. at the school.

Legal Aid's work at the school, which Wrona Fox describes as the neighborhood hub, is dedicated to increasing students' educational outcomes.

"What better way to reach families than to be involved in the school? We help to stabilize families' homes by solving civil legal issues. When you stabilize homes you reduce the trauma of poverty and all of the other ancillary issues the children go through. And when you reduce trauma, children tend to perform better in school and have a better likelihood of graduating," Wrona Fox says.

With Legal Aid support, Taft families ease around what would otherwise be a maze of obstacles interfering with their children's education. Consider the grandmother responsible for her school-aged granddaughter yet without custody and the legal right to enroll her in school. Think about the family spending precious income on home repairs neglected by a landlord. Consequently, unable to make rent payments, the family faces eviction. What about the fourth-grader longing to attend school but unable to get there without bus passes?

Wrona Fox's presence at the school, helping families through such situations, "has made a tremendous difference," says Boyd. "Sometimes families are afraid to reach out to attorneys. Having Legal Aid here, with Michelle who is very personable, families feel comfortable."

On a chilly winter afternoon, Mary Cooper, whose granddaughter attends Taft Elementary School, meets with Wrona Fox. She talks about a peaceful home life, one now less stressful thanks to resolved issues and energies focused on her granddaughter's education.

"It's nice, much better," she says, explaining that prior to receiving Legal Aid support, she found herself trying to patch together a real-life puzzle of disjointed pieces, including a bad loan on a car that stopped running.

While absenteeism from school wasn't among Cooper's dilemmas, Wrona Fox says it is a concern shared by the school and its families. To tackle the issue head on, Wrona Fox presented a program on attendance law for school families. As a result of the program, Boyd says the school's attendance numbers have increased.

"We had an attendance party to celebrate," says Boyd, noting that 37 students and their parents were honored at the event – complete with pizza – for perfect attendance. "I think it's only going to get better."

Likewise, on several other fronts, Boyd adds that Legal Aid "is a very valuable resource in our community today."

Through its Neighborhood Law Project, Legal Aid works with a network of social service agencies to provide Taft Promise Neighborhood residents with resources ranging from health care to housing. Meanwhile, in addition to the Taft Elementary School weekly "pop-up" clinic run by Wrona Fox, Legal Aid Attorney Patti Dougan offers legal support to neighborhood residents every Wednesday from 9 a.m. to noon at Youngstown's Former Fire Station No. 14. Legal Aid also participates in the neighborhood's work re-entry fairs, literacy programs and other Taft Promise Neighborhood revitalization activities.

"We've built relationships with community partners to identify the wraparound issues families are facing and to put resources in place to resolve them," says Legal Aid Managing Attorney Rachel Nader.

Nader, who leads Legal Aid's Neighborhood Law Project, describes a holistic, "village" approach to uplifting the Taft Promise Neighborhood. When the needs of its residents are met, the process of individual and community transformation begins.

"We want to take an underserved area and put light back on it," Nader says. "When you have 16 facets, you have a jewel."

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