Letter from HAP Board President, Grant S. Palmer, Esquire

Dear loyal friends, supporters, and volunteers,

This past year has been a busy and successful time for the Homeless Advocacy Project (HAP). In addition to starting new projects with the Department of Behavioral Health, expanding our work with the Department of Human Services (DHS), and planning to launch a new SOAR Justice Project, HAP prevailed in its lawsuit against New York City. In April, U.S. District Judge William Pauley III approved a settlement agreement in HAP v. New York City that makes it possible for homeless individuals born in New York City to obtain their NYC birth certificates, even when they don’t have a government-issued photo ID. Thanks to the effort of HAP and its volunteer attorneys, New York City’s new policy allows attorneys to use their own state-issued photo IDs to obtain birth certificates on behalf of their clients. Birth certificates are often the first step to accessing critical state identification which is necessary for subsidized housing, treatment, and a host of other social services essential to independent living. HAP has been delighted by the reaction from providers across the country who had been stymied in their efforts to help their NYC-born clients move on. You can read more about the case, including the pleadings, agreement, and press, by visiting HAP’s website at www.homelessadvocacyproject.org.

2017 marks the 10th Anniversary of HAP’s SOAR Project in Philadelphia. Through SOAR, HAP helps disabled homeless adults and youth aging out of dependency and delinquency care to secure immediate access to disability income and accompanying medical insurance on a rapid basis. In July, HAP expanded its work with DHS to offer SOAR to disabled caregivers of children under DHS care as a tool to prevent family dissolution as well as support stability for family reunification. The purpose of this contract is to decrease the growing number of disabled youth who become homeless upon aging out of the DHS system and to mitigate the risk of homelessness for DHS-involved families working towards reunification.

HAP’s formal partnership with the Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services (DBHIDS) began in July 2017. In a new contract, HAP will help some of the most medically fragile and disabled adults in our community access rapid SSI/medicaid benefits through HAP’s SOAR Project. SSI/SSDI is a major factor in helping these clients become stabilized.

We appreciate your continued interest in and support of the Homeless Advocacy Project. Together, we are working to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness in Philadelphia.

Sincerely,
Success Story—HAP’s SOAR Project

Lincoln Financial Group Senior Counsel and Homeless Advocacy Project (HAP) Adopt Coordinator Volunteer Nancy Smith met CB at a 2012 HAP legal clinic at The Salvation Army Eliza Shirley House. CB, a 52-year-old woman, had recently been released after serving five years in prison and was suffering from serious mental health symptoms and rheumatoid arthritis. Nancy met with CB several times and obtained medical evidence and other information to evaluate this client’s case for inclusion in HAP’s celebrated SOAR Project (an initial SSI/SSDI disability fast tracked application process). After thorough evaluation and despite the fact that CB was seriously impaired, Nancy determined that CB’s case did not meet the SOAR criteria due to insufficient medical treatment and documentation of CB’s impairments. Nancy advised CB that she should seek additional treatment and explained that she would be happy to re-evaluate her case in the future.

Many months later, after additional medical treatment, CB contacted Nancy who again spoke with the client’s doctor and therapist, obtained additional medical evidence, and was able to fully document CB’s severe rheumatoid arthritis, psychiatric ailments, and the resulting functional limitations. Nancy submitted a SOAR claim and after advocating on CB’s behalf for over a year, CB was awarded SSI benefits, including months of back benefits for the period during which her claim was pending. With her SSI income, CB was finally able to move from shelter into a home of her own.

Since 2010, through HAP’s legal services programs, Nancy and her team at Lincoln Financial Group have represented 215 homeless clients with birth certificate cases, including complicated out of state cases, Section 8/PHA Housing and utilities cases, and multiple SOAR cases.

Nancy is a Vice President and Assistant Corporate Secretary for Lincoln Financial Group. Nancy joined the HAP Board of Directors in 2013 and currently serves as a Vice President on HAP’s Executive Board. She is also the Adopt Coordinator at HAP’s legal clinic at The Salvation Army Eliza Shirley House.

HAP’s SOAR Project is ranked as the number one program in the country, helping homeless disabled adults and youth aging out of foster care obtain SSI/SSDI benefits on a rapid basis. The Project has maintained a 98% approval rate while rapidly securing SSI/SSDI benefits for more than 1,900 clients with an average of only 52 days wait time from filing to determination. SSI/SSDI claims for homeless individuals outside of the SOAR Project are approved only 10% to 15% of the time, which means most homeless claimants face an arduous appeal process that can take more than two years until a decision is reached—a wait during which the person, too sick to work, is trapped in homelessness, trying to survive with no income.

HAP and Advocacy

HAP’s commitment to advocacy on behalf of men, women, and children who are homeless or unstably housed in Philadelphia has never been more critical. In partnership with other organizations at the local, state, and national level, HAP actively voices its opposition to any proposal that threatens access to healthcare, food, education, housing, and other vital services that our clients, especially those most vulnerable, rely upon for survival. On the federal level, HUD’s proposed budget cuts, including the total elimination of the US Interagency Council on Homelessness, are alarming. Vigilance is needed to guard against federal and state changes to the Medicaid program that would likely cause HAP’s clients significant hardship. HAP opposes any changes that will make it harder for poor individuals and families to access the healthcare they need and deserve.
Volunteers—One of HAP’s Most Treasured Resources
Each year, HAP’s staff of 13 (8 of whom are attorneys), plus a dedicated corps of 350 volunteer lawyers, paralegals, and law students provide legal services to homeless individuals and families at 125 legal clinics in 25 shelters, transitional housing sites, overnight cafes, and soup kitchens across Philadelphia. Forty-three law firms and corporate legal departments have also “adopted-a-shelter” and staff a HAP legal clinic at their shelters on a monthly or bimonthly basis.

We spoke with two volunteers to learn more about their pro bono experiences with HAP.

Louise Cummings is an attorney at Comcast Cable, working with the content acquisition group under cable legal and with networks on licensing transactions.

Louise began volunteering with HAP in early 2016 when she joined Comcast’s newly formed Pro Bono Committee. Her Comcast colleague and HAP Board Member, Michael Eagles, volunteered at the Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission’s bimonthly HAP legal clinic, jointly adopted by Comcast and Ballard Spahr. Mike encouraged Louise to get involved with HAP.

Suzanne Lufadeju works at Ballard Spahr in Wilmington, specializing in commercial litigation.

Last year, Suzanne attended an on-site SOAR (SSI/SSDI Outreach Access and Recovery) training at Ballard Spahr led by HAP staff attorney Meg Retz. It was here that Suzanne and Louise first met and where Meg encouraged them to work together on a case.

Louise and Suzanne have since collaborated on two important cases. In September 2016, they helped a 33-year-old mother of three who was disabled by severe PTSD obtain $1,000+ a month in SSDI benefits. This past May, they secured SSI benefits for a 65-year-old transient woman with schizophrenia and HIV. These benefits allowed their clients to move from emergency shelters into apartments of their own.

Louise has been very active in coordinating some of the bigger birth certificate clinics at PECO, Project HOME, and the Free Library of Philadelphia. She loves giving back and helping other attorneys, paralegals, and administrators to engage in pro bono activities. Louise has wisely observed that people have a misperception about the face of homelessness. She explains that people don’t understand that two-thirds of the homeless population are parents with children living in emergency shelter, invisible to the general population. Louise spoke with a colleague who recently volunteered at a birth certificate clinic. He said it was amazing to meet the women and their children at the clinic, to talk to them, and to help them get their IDs. Louise feels that she is giving back two-fold: she’s helping clients and directly educating her colleagues about the true face of homelessness.

Suzanne’s volunteer efforts with HAP focus primarily on SOAR cases. Being a mother herself, Suzanne enjoys helping other women with children so that they can support their families. Suzanne gets satisfaction from assisting those who need help and who would otherwise have trouble navigating the system. Suzanne explains, "I see our helping them as a way to give them the support they need to move beyond poverty and homelessness."

To learn more about HAP’s volunteer program, please contact Marsha Cohen, HAP Executive Director, at marsha@haplegal.org.
HAP Annual Benefit
Homeless Advocacy Project hosted its Annual Benefit on April 6, 2017. Led by Event Co-Chairs Sara Brandes, Sandra Madden, and Jennifer Seme, this year's Benefit raised $210,000 through sponsorships, ticket sales, private donations, and a silent auction. Many thanks to the Fundraising Committee consisting of HAP Board Members: Laura Grossi-Tyson, Margie Morris, Jeff Palazzese, Carol Nelson Shepherd, Madeline Sherry, Nancy Smith, Blaine Stanley, and Tom Wamser.

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Save the Date | HAP Annual Benefit | April 5, 2018

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