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## *Inside This Issue:*

- *About the Cover -page 3*
- *Annual Meeting, May 20, 2008 - page 4*
- *Couples Who Live and Work Together - page 20*

## State's Legal Professionals Mobilize to Gain Fairness for Kids

Leslie Gresham

Georgia Appleseed JUSTGeorgia Project Manager

A formidable volunteer team of legal talent began canvassing the entire state in mid-2007 to build a profile of Georgia's juvenile justice system that may eventually assist in its reform.

This coordinated effort by hundreds of attorneys and staff from A-list firms was done in support of an initiative by JUSTGeorgia, a coalition advocating for more equitable justice and social service systems for children. The JUSTGeorgia Coalition ([www.justga.org](http://www.justga.org)) is anchored by the Georgia Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, Barton Child Law & Policy Clinic of Emory University and Voices for Georgia's Children.

"Lead" firms were enlisted and mobilized to conduct personal interviews with stakeholders in all 10 state judicial districts. Input gathered from these stakeholder interviews is included in reports prepared for each district by their assigned lead firm.

A compendium of all district reports and a just completed model juvenile code by the State Bar of Georgia's Young Lawyers Division will contribute to development of a 2009 legislative package that JUSTGeorgia hopes will create a new Georgia Juvenile Code in the near term and, ultimately, bring change to system practices covering health, education and children's services.

While pro bono efforts supporting children are not unusual for any of the participating firms, the overall interest in this project was a bit out of the ordinary. *Nelson Mullins* attorney **Taylor Daly** remarked that the diversity of participation among her own associates was remarkable.

Said Ms. Daly, "We've worked on other pro bono projects with large numbers of people before, but the JUSTGeorgia project involved over 60 individuals just from Nelson Mullins, including attorneys, paralegals, administrative assistants, project assistants, summer associates, and college interns."

**Shunta Vincent** said her colleagues at *DLA Piper* responded with similar enthusiasm as the project dovetailed nicely with the firm's community service philosophy. "We have a large global presence and are working to increase awareness of *DLA Piper's* local pro bono efforts since we joined the Atlanta legal market in 2006. [JUSTGeorgia] has given us an opportunity to contribute locally and actively put into action our firm's earnest position that lawyers must absolutely work to improve the communities in which we live, whether it's providing pro bono legal services or non-legal services."

*Nelson Mullins* and *DLA Piper* shared responsibilities for covering some of the 16 counties of the 3rd judicial district that include Bibb, Crawford and Peach Counties.

Volunteer recruiting and coordination responsibilities fell to Georgia Appleseed, led by former juvenile court **Judge Sharon Hill**. Over 130 volunteers attended a March 2007 training seminar hosted by *King & Spalding* and facilitated by The Fanning Institute from the University of Georgia. CLE credit was given to each attendee.

Volunteers identified a long list of stakeholders to be interviewed including juvenile court judges, prosecutors, attorneys, guardians ad litem, Court Appointed Special Advocates, representative of the Department of Family and Children Services, legislators, and children in foster care within their assigned districts. Lead firms had to compile information taken from the personal interviews and enter it into summary reports, a responsibility that attorneys like **Frank White** of *Arnall Golden Gregory* found both challenging and insightful.

"This was a unique pro bono project for me, in particular,

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## Pro Bono - JUSTGeorgia

because I had to synthesize all of the individual stakeholder interviews into our summary report for the entire district,” said White, whose team worked on the 27 county 8th district in east central Georgia. “Because I relied so heavily on the efforts of my colleagues, the process felt far more collaborative than the usual pro bono project, which typically involves more of a solitary effort. It also gave me an opportunity to see work produced by lawyers at AGG that I ordinarily would not have occasion to.”

Even before wrapping up their reports in April this year, many of the volunteers in the JUSTGeorgia project identified common observations and experiences from the interview subjects throughout the districts. Much of what they learned about the juvenile justice system and how kids fair inside it is distressing, but many like **Roger Gustafson** of *Hunton & Williams* did find reason to be optimistic.

“From over 46 interviews, we know parts of the system are dysfunctional, and some of the stories from foster kids are just tragic. But I have to say, the commitment by stakeholders to the kids in the system – the commitment to their welfare – is nothing short of amazing.”

### Participating Lead Firms- JUSTGeorgia

*Alston & Bird* - Judicial District 2

*Arnall Golden & Gregory* - Judicial District 8

*Hunton & Williams* -Judicial District 6

*Jones Day* - Judicial District 7

*Kilpatrick Stockton* - Judicial District 10

*King & Spalding* - Judicial District 1

*McKenna Long & Aldridge* - Judicial District 4

*Smith Gambrell & Russell* - Judicial District 9

*Sutherland Asbill & Brennan* – State Summary Report

*Troutman Sanders* - Judicial District 5

*DLA Piper* - Judicial District 3

*Morris Manning & Martin* - Judicial District 9

*Nelson Mullins* - Judicial District 3



In November 2007, during a breakfast to officially announce the JUSTGeorgia initiative to reform Georgia’s juvenile justice system, **Leslie Gresham**, JUSTGeorgia’s Coordinator for *Georgia Appleseed* (left), presented apple-themed gift baskets to **Taylor Daly** of *Nelson Mullins* (middle), and **Robert A. Schmoll**, *Jones Day* (right), in recognition of their pro bono efforts.