

The Multi-Ethnic Domestic Violence Project of the Women's Law Center of Maryland, Inc.

Outreach and education are critical to MEDOVI's efforts to assist domestic violence victims. O'Kane speaks to counselors, community groups, law enforcement personnel, and other attorneys to educate them about VAWA and what to do when they encounter victims of domestic violence.



Pictured here: (seated) Jessica O'Kane, MEDOVI Project Director, with University of Maryland Law School interns Sara L. Shannon and Priya Sharma.

“ACCESS IS AN IMPORTANT CONCEPT in the implementation of the Women's Law Center's mission of ensuring a legal system that provides justice and fairness for women. We strive to create and foster access for women in many areas—access to justice, access to information, access to resources, and access to power and influence. To achieve independence and self-determination, women must have access in all these arenas.”

These deep-seated words on the website of the Women's Law Center of Maryland, Inc., serve to appropriately describe the fuel that feeds the fire within the Center's quest to provide advocacy and education to survivors of domestic violence in immigrant communities through its Multi-Ethnic Domestic Violence Project (MEDOVI).

MEDOVI enables non-English speaking people who have been abused by a family member or a romantic partner to obtain orders of protection. Any person with a language barrier can access the service because of the Center's commitment to secure an appropriate language interpreter.

The MEDOVI Project was established in October 1998, and enjoys a very successful history of providing critical outreach, information, and representation services to foreign-born victims of domestic violence. MEDOVI has provided representation in protective order hearings, and, in October 2000, it expanded its services to include representation in battered spouse self-petition proceedings. Through its multilingual voice mail system, MEDOVI handles inquiries from victims and the service providers who assist them. Victims can leave a message in English, Spanish, Russian, Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, French, Arabic, Farsi, Hindi, and Urdu.

MEDOVI has conducted extensive out-

reach and public awareness activities, including the placement of information posters on transit buses throughout Baltimore City. The MEDOVI Project also facilitated the translation of the Center's publication, *Battered: What Can You Do?* (and its subsequent addendum) into multiple languages. The booklet is available in English, Spanish, Russian, Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese. Initially, MEDOVI concentrated its efforts on Spanish, Korean, and Russian domestic violence victims in Baltimore City. Over the years, however, the Project has expanded its focus to include additional jurisdictions and immigrant groups.

The Woman Behind the Project

As director of MEDOVI at the Center in Baltimore, Jessica O'Kane admits that she has found her dream job, while abused immigrant women in Maryland have found someone they can turn to for

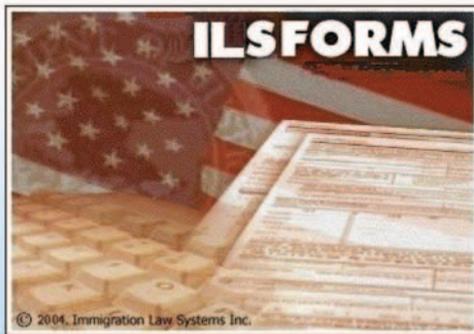
help. However, O'Kane is not just the MEDOVI Project director, she *is* MEDOVI. With help from just two law student interns, O'Kane provides a variety of legal services to victims of domestic violence. She also reaches out to those in the community who come into contact with these victims so they can tell the victims who to call for help. For the past year, the Project has been funded for only two days a week. Fortunately, it recently received funding for four days a week, enabling the Project to assist more foreign-born victims of domestic violence.

While MEDOVI existed before O'Kane was hired, it was O'Kane who revitalized MEDOVI and made more people aware of its services, and how the Project can help abused women. "I have always been a social worker at heart," says O'Kane. "I became a lawyer in order to help people. My interest in immigration law began with a political

asylum case that I volunteered on when I was a student at New York Law School." She credits her law professor, AILA member Lenni Benson, with making her aware of the importance of providing this type of representation.

Upon graduating from New York Law School in 1998, O'Kane accepted an attorney position with the Administration for Children's Services in New York. She prosecuted abuse and neglect claims brought as civil actions. This was excellent training for her future position at MEDOVI, as she gained valuable experience interviewing clients, conducting research, preparing court documents, making court appearances, and assisting more senior attorneys with appeals and special projects. She also interviewed, trained, and supervised paralegal and law intern staff.

O'Kane then took a two-year hiatus to work as a zoning and leasing →



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PRO BONO PROFILES

CYRUS MEHTA of Cyrus T. Mehta & Associates, P.L.L.C. has been handling pro bono cases since he started practicing immigration law. His first pro bono case was on behalf of a Sri Lankan journalist seeking asylum in the United States. He also represented a Bangladeshi woman in a pioneering gender-based asylum case. His firm continues to provide pro bono representation to asylum-seekers, and along with his associate, Christina LaBrie, Cyrus



Cyrus Mehta



Christina LaBrie

travels to Brooklyn, NY, to conduct clinics for people who have been affected by the post-9/11 policies against immigrants. These clinics are performed in conjunction with the Council of Peoples Organizations. These clinics also are organized to assist people on a pro bono basis with a variety of immigration matters, *e.g.*, N-400 applications, consular issues, and student reinstatement applications.

Cyrus is involved with Sakhi, an advocacy organization for domestic violence survivors in the South Asian community. Through Sakhi, he has conducted workshops to train volunteers on VAWA issues, and has taken on pro bono representation of battered spouses. His firm also has close ties to the Asian & Pacific Islander Coalition on HIV/AIDS, having provided several pro bono consultations to noncitizens with HIV/AIDS on complex immigration issues.

In his capacity as chair of the Committee on Immigration and Nationality Law of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York, Cyrus organized a massive project to mobilize the bar to represent people before the §245(i) deadline of April 30, 2001. After 9/11, he also organized several trainings to represent special interest detainees and those placed in removal proceedings due to special registration.

In his capacity as trustee of the City Bar Justice Center and chairman of the AILF Board of Trustees, Cyrus continues to think of ways to provide pro bono representation.

specialist in Montvale, New Jersey. However, she did not feel the same satisfaction in negotiating leases, conducting zoning analyses, or coordinating zoning applications. She longed to return to the practice of immigration law. And once she had decided that helping people was more important than her personal income, she returned to New York in October 2002 as an associate at the immigration law firm of Mark N. Fish and Associates. Her immigration practice included both employment- and family-based matters.

O'Kane's office was right across the street from the New York INS office and she developed a good rapport with the officers there, which helped her achieve positive results for her clients. She practiced immigration law with the firm until May 2004 when she decided to leave New York for Maryland. Looking back on how she acquired the Project director position, O'Kane says, "It was the perfect combination of immigration law, family law, and social work."

As Project director, a significant portion of O'Kane's time involves assisting victims with filing petitions under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). Domestic violence victims may be "conditional" lawful permanent residents because they received their resident status based on an approved immediate relative petition (Form I-130) filed by the abuser. MEDOVI assists these victims in removing the conditions by preparing and filing Form I-751 with a waiver of the requirement that a married couple file jointly to remove the conditions. O'Kane reports that she has been receiving approvals from the Vermont Service Center in 2½ to three months.

One of O'Kane's most memorable cases while working with MEDOVI was one involving an abuse victim who had suffered a head injury but was reluctant to seek help. Upon receiving a call from the sheriff, O'Kane spoke with the victim through an interpreter. As O'Kane was calling to find shelter for the woman while she waited on the phone, the husband came home and the sheriff arrested him. Unfortunately, the victim was not aware of her legal rights and believed her husband when he told her that he could have her deported.

Building Alliances

Outreach and education are critical to MEDOVI's efforts to assist domestic violence victims. O'Kane speaks to counselors, community groups, law enforcement personnel, and other attorneys to educate them about VAWA and what to do when they encounter victims of domestic violence. As a result of this outreach, various organizations and police officers refer victims to MEDOVI. O'Kane also receives referrals from U.S. Representative Benjamin Cardin's (D-Md.) office. She also speaks to immigrant groups to let them know that even the undocumented have the right to get help from the police.

Agencies with which MEDOVI has worked include but are not limited to law enforcement agencies and representatives; domestic violence programs; programs serving immigrant populations; and health and social services providers. MEDOVI also provides the following pro bono services:

- Assisting victims of domestic violence and/or other crimes, who are not married to U.S. citizens or U.S. lawful permanent residents, to obtain other relief, such as deferred action for those who would qualify for a U visa classification as a violent crime victim who cooperates with law enforcement to prosecute that crime or a T visa classification for victims of human trafficking.
- Obtaining interpreter/translator services for victims.
- Providing victims with referrals and other information to achieve their safety.
- Assisting victims to complete petitions for protection orders.
- Accompanying victims to a Temporary Protective Order hearing, to the court commissioner's office, or to criminal proceedings.
- Representing domestic violence victims at Final Protective Order hearings.
- Assisting victims in contempt proceedings to enforce protective orders.

- Assisting victims to modify existing protective orders.

The Project's current interns are law students from the University of Maryland. One is new while the other has returned for a second semester with MEDOVI. They primarily handle the petitions to remove conditions (Form I-751) and self-petitions (Form I-360) under O'Kane's supervision. The MEDOVI Project can use assistance from AILA members to help domestic violence victims file self-petitions and applications to adjust status to permanent resident, along with ancillary filing of applications for employment authorization. You can contact her at jessica_okane@yahoo.com. 

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