

*"To injure no man,
but to bless all mankind"*

BOSTON • WEDNESDAY
JANUARY 23, 2002



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Internet address: www.csmonitor.com

\$1.00

Lawyers defend poor – if they mend their ways

By Patrik Jonsson

Special to The Christian Science Monitor

ATLANTA

HANDS pushed deep into his duster, Douglas Ammar marches with a boyish bounce through the rough-and-tumble Auburn Avenue section of Atlanta.

During the day, panhandlers stop walkers every few feet, while at night the area turns into a bazaar of fenced goods and illegal drugs. Yet Mr. Ammar, the chief attorney for a unusual law firm serving these lawless neighborhoods, says he sees only virtues like "hope" and "redemption" in the urban bleakness.

It's here that Ammar and his band of "social worker lawyers" are pioneering a new approach to legal-aid work. In exchange for free legal representation, the attorneys require that their indigent clients make a sacrifice of their own. The defendants have to rehabilitate themselves through drug counseling or social-aid programs.

From New York, to Knoxville, Tenn., this "tough-love" philosophy of reforming the man or woman behind the crime – as opposed to just resolving their cases – is steadily catching on.

"We're really bleeding across the lines of established lawyering," says Ammar, director of the non-profit pioneers of this approach, the Georgia Justice Project (GJP). "We're redefining the role of public lawyers in society."

In its 15 years of legal representation from their headquarters inside an abandoned school, the GJP has proved to be a model for fixing a system where 70 percent of ex-cons go back to prison within two years of release. While 45 percent of Atlanta's poor defendants return to jail, only 18 percent of the GJP's clients get in trouble again.

"We have a very low turn-over rate," the former street minister says. "After all," he says, sweeping his hand across the bustling street dwarfed by Atlanta's skyscrapers, "these are our people."

In the GJP's experience, many accused criminals have little trust in the free-of-charge lawyers assigned by American courts. And some experts say that sentences imposed by a system that the defendant thinks is "unfair" is hardly going to inspire personal reform.

"The usual story is that you get five minutes with the lawyer in a holding cell," says Robert Askins, Jr., a former GJP client whose addiction once led him to a life of thugging. "You're hardly getting a real lawyer."

Facing strict sentencing guidelines and huge workloads, it's hard for many public defenders to provide the services of a "real lawyer," says Cait Clarke, director of the National Defender Training Institute in Washington. "Public defenders are often like people trying to play tennis with both hands tied behind their back. On the court, they can't do the job they're supposed to do."

By contrast, Ammar's lawyers carefully research each case, interview family members, write long letters to clients in jail, and even give them a job mowing lawns after they come out. In fact, it may be the only law firm in the country to run a lawn-care division on the side for its clients. Its motto? "Grass, roots, justice."

"By providing people with competent counsel and ways of making them useful and productive citizens, they're actually protecting the community from further antisocial behavior," says Stephen Bright, who heads the Southern Center for Human Rights here. fenders, a group of about 30 lawyers and social workers, operate their "tough love"

A SIMILAR philosophy is taking hold of public defenders everywhere. In New York, the Bronx Defenders, a group of about 30 lawyers and social workers, operate their "tough love" reform out of an art deco space wrought out of an old ice factory. And the public defender's office in Knoxville, Tenn., has changed its name to the Community Law Office in order to reflect a new mission of "community advocacy." Similar gambits are shaping up in Harlem; Athens, Ga.; and Miami.

To be sure, these lawyers represent only a fraction of public defenders across the country, many of whom are lone wolf litigators loathe to involve "do-gooders" in the serious practice of law. "This is not a concept the defense community will buy into across the board," says Mark Stephens, the elected public defender in Knoxville. "There is growing recognition that public defenders are uniquely situated to be most effective in reforming defendants."



PATRIK JONSSON

EX-CON: A law firm reformed ex-criminal Robert Askins Jr.

As a result, lots of private investment has gone into such gambits in the last three years: Mr. Stephens, for example, is building a \$2.5 million community law center in a rough part of Knoxville. The Bronx Defenders just recently moved into their renovated digs. The GJP, meanwhile, raised nearly \$1 million in less than three months in order to makeover an old industrial hall near Auburn Street for spacious new offices.

But as public investment in the indigent aid system has gone from \$251 million to \$662 million in the past 20 years, taxpayers are reluctant to pony up more cash to prop up "folks who aren't necessarily saints," says Julie Mayfield, one of GJP's board members.

Indeed, the GJP is unique in that it manages to survive by donations alone, while most public defenders are paid directly by the state. Unlike most legal aid groups, the GJP rejects 90 percent of applicants. Sizing up those most likely to turn their lives around is the hardest part of the job, says Mr. Ammar, who makes less than \$40,000 a year.

In Ammar's office, full-body hugs and pep talks on beat-up couches are part of the daily ritual. At the same time, those who stray from their contract with the GJP soon find themselves looking for a new lawyer.

Such "conditional love" is exactly what Leon Smith says he needed. Three years after his last prison stay, Mr. Smith is now sober and top dog at the law firm's landscaping company. "For poor defendants it's so often helpless," he says. "GJP brings a spark to you. It does so much to have someone out there fighting for you."