



## ANNUAL MEETING 2011

### [Disabilities]

### Attorneys help smooth transition to life after high school for disabled children

By Amy Jasiewicz

Families of children with disabilities must face complex issues as they prepare their child for life after high school. Despite this, the most important advice offered by a panel of expert attorneys to these families was simple and clear: it's never too early to start planning, and self-advocacy by parents and students is critical to success.

#### Helping families

"For kids with special needs, it is even more important to think about what they are going to do after high school," said Program Chair Adrienne J. Arkontaky of White Plains (Littman Krooks LLP). "The thing that bothers me the most is when parents say they don't know what their child is going to do after high school, and their child is 18. They don't know where to look or whom to talk to about this. We need to help these families."

Arkontaky was among the panelists for the Annual Meeting program sponsored by the Committee on Issues Affecting People with Disabilities. It examined how attorneys can help parents prepare for the critical post-high school transition period. Whether a student plans to enter college, the workforce, a vocational program or adult services, transition plans should address: identifying and qualifying for public services and benefits, continuing health care coverage, guardianship issues, advance directives, living and travel arrangements, and estate planning.

#### Transition plan

Long before it's time to graduate, a transition plan targeting the unique needs of a child should be developed and included in their Individualized Education Program, Arkontaky said. Districts are required to have a transition plan in place by the age of 16, but it can be developed sooner.

Once a meaningful goal is identified, such as college or other post-secondary education, the next step is to determine what challenges the student must overcome to reach that goal, and what support services or programs are needed to move forward, she said.

#### Advocacy

Teaching a special needs student to advocate for him- or herself is critically important as he or she enters adulthood. Arkontaky said parents should ask themselves the following questions about their children: "Can they



**Be prepared**—Adrienne J. Arkontaky, a White Plains attorney discusses the need for parents of children with disabilities to plan ahead for their child's life after high school. She was chair of an Annual Meeting program sponsored by the Committee on Issues Affecting People with Disabilities. *[Photo by Richard Smith]*

self medicate? Can they get from the dorm to the classroom? If they have mental health issues, will they know their triggers and recognize when something is bothering them and be able to seek help?"

For parents of children transitioning from the special education system to adult services programs, parents should research which agency would provide services—either the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities or the Office of Mental Health, explained Lisa K. Friedman of New York (Law Office of Lisa K. Friedman). Additional investigation is needed to learn about government benefits, such as Medicaid, Social Security, Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities, and Supplemental Security Income, she said.

Assuming that the proposed state budget cuts will affect special needs programs, the panelists urged attorneys to encourage their clients to become involved in advocacy for the programs their child will need someday. "You want to make sure that the services are there down the road. I can't emphasize that enough. Know what's going on and be out there advocating. That's the only way we are going to preserve what we have," said Friedman.

Nancy H. Halleck of Albany (New York State Office of Mental Health) is chair of the committee. Christine M. Doran of Albany (New York State Office for People with Developmental Disabilities) and Melinda R. Saran, vice dean of Student Affairs, University at Buffalo Law School, also participated in the program.

*Jasiewicz is a freelance writer in Niskayuna and former editor of the State Bar News.*

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