

Client Dorothy and three teenage children...

Abused Children's Lives Restored

Dorothy Long* was determined to keep Michael,* Christopher,* and Karen,* out of Florida's foster care system. In 1999, the teenagers were adjudicated dependent due to parental abuse, and placed in the care of their step-aunt. Dorothy accepted responsibility for all three children, and over the next five years developed a loving parent-child relationship with them.



The 48-year-old nurse's assistant came to Bay Area Legal Services when the State of Florida terminated the modest public assistance benefits she received on behalf of the children. State workers explained that Dorothy was "not related to the children by blood, and, therefore, ineligible to receive benefits."

Bay Area Legal Services' Attorney, Jeff Grabel, helped Dorothy appeal the State's decision. "I believe the State has advanced a policy by which dependent children, who are the responsibility of the State, are deprived of basic necessities simply because they have the misfortune of not having a relative caregiver with the specified degree of blood relationship," said Grable. "The State should provide financial assistance to dependent children whether or not they are blood related."

With the help of Bay Area Legal Services, Dorothy eventually adopted the children. She is now the legal parent of Michael, Christopher, and Karen, and receives a monthly adoption subsidy. She did not, however, abandon her appeal against the State. The dedicated caretaker is determined to change the State's policy. A decision is expected from the Second District Court of Appeal within months, and, if successful, will provide public assistance to a greater number of deserving, dependent children.

"Bay Area Legal Services has been a great help to me and my family," said Dorothy. "I don't know what I would have done without their help. My attorney is a good lawyer and friend. He listened to me when I felt I had more that I could handle."

"I can't find words to express how I feel about Bay Area Legal Services," Dorothy continued. "Thanks a lot, and may God bless you."

*names have been changed for confidentiality