

## The Children's Lawyer

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*By Karin Tanabe for Bisnow on Business*

"If the Jacks children had been clients, they would be alive today," says **Judith Sandalow**, Executive Director of the **Children's Law Center**, regarding the four local girls recently found dead in their home after apparent warning signs of abuse. "The District is in dire need of improved mental health services and improved family-centered substance abuse treatment," Sandalow testified to the **DC Council Committee on Human Services**. "Firing a few social workers or **publicly criticizing** an agency will not adequately protect children or address the problems that led to the Jacks' deaths."

Sandalow, whose career would fit a John Grisham novel, graduated from Yale Law and began her career doing indigent **criminal defense** work for juveniles charged with serious crimes—from drug possession to murder. She has been at the helm of CLC, a **non-profit** providing legal services to children and families and helping at-risk children find safe, permanent homes, since 1999.

Outside the courtroom, Sandalow began caring for foster children and in 1996 adopted **two sons**, then seven and nine. "All of a sudden I was a single mom with two sons who needed me and five clients facing life without parole who needed me to work till midnight. I chose my sons," says Sandalow who left her criminal practice to monitor **DC prisons** for the federal court.

Approached by a CLC **board member** in the late '90s who said they had no money but needed an executive director, Sandalow became a **volunteer fundraiser**. When she joined as executive director there were three paid staff. Today there are **65** helping **1,000 children** a year.



*"We wanted art but it had to be cheap!" Sandalow says, praising the stenciled **murals** that adorn the office.*



*Desk chairs are so passé. “This is how I spend most of my time,” she tells us channeling her inner yogi.*

“Both my children have **special needs** from a life of neglect and abuse. I understand the problems and that drives my work,” says Sandalow. The CLC handles cases falling under the categories of adoption, custody, abuse and neglect, special education, domestic violence and government benefits. Clients come from the courts and social workers but also through the **Children’s National Medical Center** and direct referrals.

Sandalow and CLC are currently trying to save **Positive Nature**, an after-school program providing therapeutic services to at-risk and emotionally disturbed youth. “My kids went to a therapeutic after-school program—I don’t know what I would have done without it. When my kids were in crisis, I refinanced my home for my son to go into a residential program—most families can’t afford that.” Sandalow’s oldest son **Antonio**, now 20, is currently doing a year of service as a teacher’s assistant with **AmeriCorps** in New Orleans.

“One story after another will make you cry but I want to make those stories end. I would love for us to go out of business. I would love to have no more kids that need us.”



*The CLC team. “Our lawyers are the top in their field. They could leave here to join major law firms and triple their salaries.”*