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EAST BRUNSWICK ATTORNEY TRAINS THE ARC OF NJ LEADERS IN HELPING INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES NAVIGATE THROUGH COURT SYSTEM

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ -- Ann L. Renaud, an East Brunswick attorney who specializes in serving the needs of those with mental health issues, is providing pro bono training for The Arc of New Jersey staff to help them better prepare and support their constituents who face criminal charges. The session will take place at The Arc of New Jersey offices, a private, nonprofit advocacy organization committed to enhancing the lives of those living with intellectual and other developmental disabilities and their families.

"All too frequently those with intellectual disabilities and mental health challenges find themselves tangled in legal issues. Communication is key to assuring an appropriate outcome in court," said Renaud, a partner with Ramp Renaud & Hlavenka of East Brunswick. "Many of my clients face nearly overwhelming challenges, including alcoholism, autism, bipolar disorder, depression, intellectual disabilities, drug addiction, and schizophrenia. These disabilities can sometimes lead to unintended but inappropriate behavior. When that behavior results in criminal charges, it's critically important to ensure that the courts fully understand what is going on in defendants' lives."

At tonight's session, Renaud will train representatives of four programs of The Arc of New Jersey: the Developmentally Disabled Offenders Program, the Family Advocacy Program, the Citizen Advocacy Program and the NJ Self-Advocacy Project. The Arc advocates work with private and court appointed attorneys to help those with intellectual disabilities prepare for court proceedings, coordinate with families of those with intellectual disabilities and seek legislative and policy changes to improve the lives of those with intellectual and other developmental disabilities.

The Arc of New Jersey advocates for individuals with intellectual disabilities in recognition of that fact that at least 25,000 people with intellectual disabilities are in the nation's prisons, and some studies indicate that the actual number may be twice that. They know that one out of every 20 of the 500,000 prisoners in the United States has an intellectual disability. Studies also indicate that 4 - 9% of the offender population has an intellectual disability. In New Jersey, approximately 860 - 1,935 of the 21,500 inmates in the state correctional system may have an intellectual disability,

Renaud will discuss how effective interactions with the courts. "It is important for advocates to know how to best help their clients face the consequences of actions that may have been prompted by their disability issues," Renaud said. "Defendants, their families and the non-profit groups dedicated to

helping them need to communicate effectively with the key players in the court system -- judges, prosecutors and police – so they understand that a disability may contribute to inappropriate and sometimes criminal behavior. Recognition of the contributing factors helps the courts render decisions that are appropriate and beneficial to both the defendant and the community.

With relevant information, courts can consider treatment as an option for sentencing. “Advocates can help the courts recognize and take into account a client’s mental condition,” Renaud said. “Someone with a bipolar disorder experiencing a manic high, for instance, is not just another person arrested for disorderly conduct and resisting arrest. An alcoholic picked up for DWI may need to be enrolled in a counseling program rather than just sentenced to jail. A person with intellectual disabilities may commit a crime without realizing he or she is committing a crime.”

“We need to become advocates for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and mental health issues, seeing them not as problems to be managed but as possibilities to be unleashed,” Renaud said.

For more information, please visit www.arcnj.org and www.rampandrenaud.com.

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