

# METRO

FROM B1

## Help is marshaled for families on edge

Tony has progressed from taking seven medicines a day to being drug-free, his mother said.

He has become a bright, artistic, almost always polite boy of 8. And his family is on track to escape poverty.

Tony is "happy, happy, happy, magnificent, marvelous," he said, during a recent visit with his attorney, Mallory Curran.

"I'll never forget Mallory," Precious Smith said, her voice crackling. "Tony will never forget her."

Curran, armed with letters from Tony's doctors, wrung from slow-moving bureaucracies life-altering support for the family — Medicaid, Social Security, food

## Contact information

To contact the Legal Aid Society or the Family Advocacy Program it established with MetroHealth Medical Center, call 216-861-5217 or 216-687-1900.

stamps, public housing and special education classes.

For Tony and many other MetroHealth patients, Curran's pediatrician-backed prodding, through letters, phone calls and her presence at hearings, slashes weeks and months off the usual delays in receiving public assistance and special education.

Curran has done so for about 150 families since January 2003, when she and the hospital started the Family Advocacy Program. It's one of a kind in Ohio and one of just 23 across the country, all emulating the first, created at Boston Medical Center in 1993.

Curran's lifealtering assistance costs the families nothing.

The program was started with grants from the Skadden and Gund foundations and the Legal Aid Society.

Pediatrician Robert Needlman said he sees a half-dozen families a week who could use Curran's help. "But she's only one person,

so I try to send her just two a month," he said.

About 75 percent of the families who see MetroHealth pediatricians receive Medicaid, because they are poor. And poverty aggravates many childhood illnesses.

Kids with allergies or asthma suffer more if they are living with cockroaches and rodents, Needlman said. They need more medication, more visits to the doctor, and their parents lose time from work.

Until Curran gets involved.

She motivates landlords to clean up their properties, remove mold and lead and kill cockroaches and rodents. She pushes Cleveland school officials to start or speed up testing and placement for learning-impaired children who need special education.

Curran hopes to have co-advocates soon.

"We want to — need to — expand, add another attorney and some law student interns," said Melanie Shakarian, a Legal Aid Society spokeswoman.

Curran, 29, was paid just \$37,500 last year, about a third of what she could have made at any prestigious law firm in the region.

Shrugging off the thought, she said, "We're needed here."

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