



JOHN F. CASTELLANO

Director & Attorney-in-Charge
Mercy Haven, Inc.

After one year of achieving his initial desire to become a teacher, John F. Castellano decided to join the long line of family members who entered the law field.

"Within that year, things changed from wanting to teach to going to the idea of law as a means to serve the poor and underserved," Castellano said.

Castellano entered the Maurice A. Deane School of Law at Hofstra University, concentrating in criminal defense. However, he changed direction in the last semester of his third year.

"I had a work-study job at Nassau/Suffolk Law Services where I was really informed about the enormous legal emergencies the poor encounter on the civil side," he said.

As he approached graduation, Castellano submitted an application to become a staff attorney at Nassau/Suffolk Law Services and, in 1976, he became one of the first attorneys at the organization's first Suffolk location, where he provided free legal services to a population virtually without other access to counsel.

In 1997, Castellano joined Mercy Haven, Inc., a nonsectarian, nonprofit organization in Islip Terrace with a mission to acknowledge the dignity and potential of people who are homeless, living with mental illness or living in poverty by providing housing, advocacy, education and life skills development. As founding director and attorney-in-charge of Mercy Haven's Mercy Advocacy Program, Castellano led the organization to provide free counsel to those most in need.

Under his direction of MAP, Mercy Haven has represented clients who face life-threatening risks such as termination of public assistance, Social Security, disability, Medicaid and Medicare payments; termination of food stamps; evictions, foreclosures and termination of utilities. More than 2,400 cases have been opened by the Mercy Haven legal advocacy program since MAP's inception. The MAP program has gone on to be replicated by various delivery systems in other states.

Castellano also pioneered a mental health law project representing chronically mentally ill persons on their civil legal emergencies. In 1979, he created a funding proposal to address the need of a statewide community support system for the thousands of people who needed access to attorneys after being deinstitutionalized. His proposal was funded and led Nassau/Suffolk Law Services to be one of the first organizations across the state to provide legal backup for case workers as they strive to serve and support their discharged psychiatric patients.

Law intends to set standards of conduct for individuals, corporations and government, Castellano noted. The battle that exists, he further explained, is the tension that is played out every day in Congress and in each state legislature.

"We see a huge struggle and we ask, 'How are we going to govern ourselves?'" he said. "That question is alive and very vibrant in a democracy - but the poor and the powerless need as many people to be able to support their plight. The law means a lot and there is a struggle to try and create just laws, but it has to include the voiceless and the powerless."

Castellano has mentored law interns and students, provided seminars for mental health providers and presented workshops at statewide conferences. Recognized with many awards, he most recently received the 2012 Sanctae Crucis Award from Holy Cross College, where he earned a bachelor's degree in psychology.