

The State Bar of California  
California Young Lawyers Association

## 2010 Jack Berman Award of Achievement



**Sonia R. Fernandes'** wide ranging creative and effective advocacy in 2009 on behalf of vulnerable children and women was productive and noteworthy for rendering outstanding service to both the community and the profession.

Sonia is Staff Counsel for the State of California, Department of Managed Health Care, where she serves the public interest ensuring that enrollees get the health care they need. She

investigates and litigates matters involving health plans and the requirements of managed health care laws, ensuring quality, and continuity of care for enrollees, and challenges the improper denial of medically necessary treatment. In addition, Sonia oversees investigations into the deceptive marketing practices of discount medical plans which masquerade as health insurance, and as team leader, spearheads the Department's prosecution of unlicensed discount health card purveyors, some of which target the minority and low income communities.

Sonia identified and prosecuted a novel and complicated matter involving a pattern and practice of improper denial of a diagnostic test and tool used to guide treatment of patients with breast cancer. Sonia's investigation against one of California's largest health plans resulted in the health plan revising its medical policy to cover the test, and retroactively paying approximately \$470,000 in denied claims. Sonia's findings contributed substantially to providing the underpinnings of a 2009 settlement in which the plan agreed to pay an administrative penalty of \$2.5 million, and also agreed to significant changes in its future operations.

In the community, Sonia's work to protect women and children spans multiple organizations and projects. As a board member of Women Lawyers of Sacramento (WLS), Sonia played a major role in creating the Ad Hoc Child Protection Committee and has chaired it since its inception in 2008. She has been instrumental in the Committee's success in raising awareness of two significant issues impacting women and children in that community; human trafficking and sexual exploitation of children and protecting children in the foster care system.

In the area of human trafficking, Sonia focused on educating the legal community about this growing problem and creating a network of attorneys to assist trafficking survivors. In April 2009, Sonia was the primary force in organizing a training on legal remedies for human trafficking victims. In September 2009, WLS co-sponsored

a six-hour training session by the Coalition to Abolish Slavery & Trafficking. The committee made its first "match" when it was contacted by Sacramento Rescue and Restore Coalition in need of a Spanish-speaking attorney to represent a human trafficking victim. Sonia's efforts have laid the groundwork for an effective network of advocates providing assistance to this vulnerable population.

In the area of child protection, Sonia focused the Committee on raising awareness of the continued issues within Sacramento County Child Protection Services (CPS) and on providing aid to children in the foster care system. Sonia drafted an open letter from WLS to the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors urging the Board to take immediate action implementing the recommendations of the independent review board hired to investigate CPS following several recent deaths of children within the foster care system. The Board of Supervisors initially stated they would not take action on the recommendations within the report for 90 days. As a result of WLS' letter, bolstered by the efforts of other organizations, the Board of Supervisors lifted their self-imposed stay and instead immediately reviewed the independent report and began implementing changes within CPS.

Sonia's interest in improving outcomes for children in foster care was demonstrated early in her career, as a Staff Attorney at Sacramento Child Advocates, Inc. (SCA). Since joining SCA's advisory board in August 2008, she helped increase SCA's visibility in the legal community, and has brought the talents of Women Lawyers of Sacramento to SCA's aid. In addition, Sonia drafted resolutions addressing the needs of teen parents in foster care, consistent with legislative findings that young parents in foster care need additional support.

Sonia serves on My Sister's House advisory board, and volunteers monthly in their legal clinic assisting victims of domestic violence. She guides these victims with compassion as she prepares their documents for restraining orders and other family law matters, and assists victims as they prepare for their court appearances.

In 2009, Sonia also served as Director-Elect of the Operation Protect and Defend (OPD) Events Committee. OPD educates high school students about the importance of our Constitution and the civil rights and liberties it guarantees. Sonia has dedicated her own time and energies to integrating and educating underprivileged high school students through this program.

Whether it is her work as a board member of SCA, WLS, My Sister's House, OPD, or her work with the Asian Pacific and South Asian Bar Associations in which she mentors law students on the importance of public service, Sonia embodies a clear way of life in which she takes every opportunity to protect those who cannot protect themselves.

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*In 1992 California Young Lawyers Association established the Award of Achievement for Distinguished Service to the Profession and the Public to recognize the public service of a new or young lawyer. In 1994, CYLA Board of Directors renamed the award in memory of Jack Berman, who demonstrated outstanding service to the profession and the public by providing substantial pro bono legal assistance. Mr. Berman died tragically in the 101 California Street shooting in San Francisco on July 1, 1993.*

