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Cook County Assistant Public Defender Lakshmi Jha speaks to high school girls in a courtroom at the Criminal Court Building as part of the Women Everywhere educational program. The Chicago nonprofit is backed by several area bar groups who plan volunteer activities with high school girls and women and children in need.

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Program offers girls view of the courts at 'conversational level'

By **JORDYN REILAND**

LAW BULLETIN STAFF WRITER

For a 19th year, a nonprofit will bring more than 500 high school girls into local courthouses to learn about the law.

Women Everywhere wants the students to learn about the justice system and career opportunities in various legal and judicial fields. This year the organization labeled its program as Conquering Challenges with Courage.

Women Everywhere is backed by several area bar groups who plan volunteer activities with high school girls and women and children in need.

This year's series of tours began March 15 when more than 100 students toured the Markham courthouse, where they met and interacted with female judges, lawyers, prosecutors, sheriff's deputies and other court personnel.

Today, students visited the Leighton Criminal Court Building. On Thursday, hundreds more will visit the Daley Center, the Skokie courthouse, the Domestic Violence Courthouse and the Dirksen Federal Courthouse.

Cook County Associate Judge Melissa A. Durkin, a co-chair of the Women Everywhere program, said the tours provide students an opportunity to interact at a more "conversational" level.

"It's good that the students can come into the court system and meet a judge," Durkin said. "It's important that people have positive experiences with the court system rather than only negative experiences, which some of them may have had."

Participating Chicago public schools include Simeon Career Academy, Schurz High School, Raby High School, Sullivan High School, Taft High School, Whitney Young Magnet High School and the Ogden International School.

Durkin said these types of events are important motivators for young women because "you cannot be what you cannot see."

"If you see a woman judge or you see a woman lawyer, police officer, assistant state's attorney or public defender, then you are more likely to think that you can do that," she said.

After the tours, students at the Daley Center and the Dirksen Federal Courthouse will attend a luncheon with two former victims of human trafficking. Students at other court buildings will have lunch and hold activities at their respective locations.

Marian Hatcher, senior project manager and human trafficking coordinator at the Cook County Sheriff's Office, and Brenda Myers-Powell, co-founder and executive director of the Dreamcatcher Foundation, will speak of their past experiences and the lessons they learned.

Durkin said she hopes Hatcher and Myers-Powell will inspire the students who may otherwise feel their destiny has been predetermined.

"I think some of these young ladies are from neighborhoods with a lot of violence and not a lot of good job opportunities," she said. "[The speakers] will demonstrate that if you're determined, passionate, intelligent and hardworking, you can do anything no matter what your background is."

The program is now expanding beyond Cook County. The Lake County Circuit Court is looking to start its own Women Everywhere program and has already reached out to one area school. Durkin

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Participating students are also eligible for college scholarships.

In addition to the tours, Women Everywhere also hosts community service days each summer where lawyers, judges and law students volunteer for area agencies that provide services to women and children, Durkin said.



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