

Assuring Justice Through Civil Legal Aid

By Laura Tuggle Issokson
Southeast Louisiana Legal Services

For almost 50 years, Southeast Louisiana Legal Services (SLLS), previously known as New Orleans Legal Assistance Corp. in the New Orleans area, has provided award-winning, life-changing civil legal aid. SLLS is Louisiana's largest non-profit provider of free civil legal aid. Our mission is to help low-income and other vulnerable people achieve justice through direct case work, advocacy and community legal education. We serve half of Louisiana's low-income population. In many parts of our 22-parish service area, SLLS is the only legal safety net available for families and children in crisis.

SLLS began in 1979 with a grant from the Legal Services Corporation. Back then, SLLS gave legal help to poor people in five northshore parishes. In 2003, SLLS merged with the New Orleans Legal Assistance Corp. (NOLAC), which served the greater New Orleans area since 1967. SLLS grew by 12 more parishes when we more than doubled our footprint through expansion to Baton Rouge, Hou-

ma and the surrounding region. We now have six offices, 85 employees and operate five Self-Help Desks in partnership with local courts. We are embedded on-site with community partners, like hospitals, health clinics, community colleges, domestic violence shelters, senior centers and homeless shelters, to ensure that civil legal aid is part of a holistic solution to making a difference in people's lives.

Having an SLLS lawyer prevents loss of family, food, shelter, income, medical care or personal safety. Last year, SLLS handled more than 11,000 cases, reached another 12,050 people through community education, and provided legal information to more than 120,000 more through the public information website we administer, *LouisianaLawhelp.org*. Priorities for our work include:

- ▶ protecting domestic violence victims and abused children;
- ▶ preserving homes, improving housing conditions and defending housing rights;
- ▶ safeguarding the rights of special populations like disaster victims, seniors,

veterans, the homeless or people living with disabilities;

- ▶ increasing the income of consumers and the working poor;
- ▶ improving health, education access and employment opportunity; and
- ▶ providing self-help resources, community education, and legal information to the public

The direct economic impact of our 2015 work for clients was \$17.7 million, an almost 3:1 rate of return on investments in justice. Pro bono lawyers working with SLLS donated 5,465 hours of service valued at almost \$1 million while law students racked up more than 10,000 hours of volunteer service.

As we approach our 50th anniversary in the New Orleans area, SLLS is excited about the future of civil legal aid. To learn more about SLLS and how you can help, review our 2015 Annual Report online at www.slls.org, like us on Facebook, or sign up for our newsletter.

Laura Tuggle Issokson is executive director of Southeast Louisiana Legal Services and can be reached at ltuggle@slls.org.

Update / Pro Bono Project, New Orleans

In the last year, The Pro Bono Project embarked on two new projects to engage volunteers. The Project is working with Southeast Louisiana Legal Services (SLLS) and Daughters of Charity in a medical-legal partnership that adds lawyers to the healthcare team to address health-harming determinants from a legal standpoint. Volunteers can participate in clinics, educational outreach and direct representation of clients by contacting our staff attorney, Patricia Guzman-Weema at (504)581-4043 or email pweema@probono-no.org.

Starting in April, The Project also assumed responsibility for the self-help desk at the 24th JDC in Jefferson Parish. Volunteers help self-represented litigants fill out court-approved forms for family law matters and explain the steps they need to take in order to successfully complete their cases. Since no legal advice is given but only legal information, volunteers don't have to be attorneys to help out. To participate, email Siri Alay, our Louisiana Delta Service Corps/AmeriCorps volunteer, at salay@probono-no.org, or sign up through VolunteerSpot: <http://vols.pt/V61fy2>.

—Linton W. Carney
Chief Legal Officer, The Pro Bono Project, New Orleans

Cup of Justice: Half Empty or Half Full?

By Judge (Ret.) Leon L. Emanuel III
Legal Services of North Louisiana

Upon accepting the helm as the new director of Legal Services of North Louisiana (LSNL), I was immensely grateful for the entrustment and privilege to serve the LSNL's client community. Understanding current challenges of "access to justice" for the poor, I quickly recognized that greater opportunities are emerging to answer the question: "Is the Cup of Justice half empty or half full?"

LSNL, along with fellow state legal services programs, is uniquely positioned to work with the National Legal Services Corporation, Louisiana Bar Foundation, Louisiana State Bar Association and the Louisiana judiciary in a plethora of positive and innovative ways. In addition, Louisiana's recent access to justice initiatives readily promotes confidence for more meaningful delivery of legal ser-

vices to low-income populations.

Looking towards the future to answer the stated question, "Is the Cup of Justice half empty or half full?," LSNL enthusiastically embraces the answer by its core vision of helping more people. In 2017, LSNL will utilize additional funding opportunities provided by the Louisiana Bar Foundation, Department of Housing and Urban Development and City of Shreveport to achieve greater access to the client community. LSNL will better train its attorneys regarding consumer debts, foreclosure prevention, juvenile expungements and housing law. LSNL also will become more instrumental in counseling pro se litigants for court hearings to ease the burden upon judges and private attorneys.

LSNL has a heritage deeply rooted in providing legal help to indigent cli-

ents. LSNL is comprised of Shreveport, where offering legal aid predates the national Legal Services program; Monroe, where legal services extends throughout the immensely poor territory of northeast Louisiana; and Natchitoches, where true Louisianians extol the commitment for giving.

Under new leadership, LSNL shall continue to distinguish itself for addressing the unique and diverse legal needs of people living in poverty throughout north Louisiana. LSNL will accentuate the values of determination and steadfastness, while striving to ensure that the Cup of Justice is not half empty, but instead, more than half full.

Judge (Ret.) Leon L. Emanuel III is executive director of Legal Services of North Louisiana and can be reached at jlemanuel3@gmail.com.

Update / Northshore Pro Bono Project of Southeast Louisiana Legal Services

When tragedy strikes, first responders selflessly serve and protect the public. Despite the inherently dangerous nature of their jobs, statistics show that 80 percent to 90 percent of first responders do not have even a simple will.

This year, the Northshore Pro Bono Project of Southeast Louisiana Legal Services (SLLS), located in downtown Covington, decided to change this surprising statistic and give back to those who give so much. With funding provided by the Jock Scott Community Partnership Panel of the Louisiana Bar Foundation, SLLS partnered with the Louisiana State Bar Association's Young Lawyers Division to coordinate four free Wills for Heroes events to both St. Tammany and Washington parishes. The Wills for Heroes Foundation works nationwide with organizations like the Northshore Pro Bono Project to provide free wills and other estate planning documents to America's first responders. Qualified first responders include active, volunteer and retired police officers, firefighters, paramedics, corrections and probation officers. Working together, the community events were a huge success! Approximately 83 first responders benefited from the service, all thanks to the many local lawyers, paralegals and area businesses who generously volunteered their resources and time to prepare wills, living wills, and healthcare powers of attorney.

If you or your firm is interested in this or other volunteer opportunities, email Cynthia M. Bordonaro, pro bono coordinator for the Northshore Pro Bono Project, at cbordonaro@slls.org.

—Cynthia M. Bordonaro
Pro Bono Coordinator, Northshore Pro Bono Project

The Future of Civil Legal Services in Louisiana

By Gregory L. Landry
Acadiana Legal Service Corp.

What civil legal services will look like in the immediate future depends on what funding is available and how effectively we capture and leverage that funding to best serve those in need.

We have a tri-partite governmental system. No one would think of charging citizens to access one of the executive branch agencies for assistance or to speak to their legislators about needed change. Yet, we complacently accept that to access the third branch of government for needed services, even if dragged into it unwillingly, one must pay to do so. Pretending that most non-attorneys can enter that arena and get “equal justice” is delusional. Demand will steadily increase as the open-market cost of legal help continues to rise, the middle-class shrinks,

and so many of our citizens fail to receive the education or life skills training necessary to avoid many of the most common legal problems.

The recent trend to stagnant or decreasing governmental funding will necessitate formalizing development work if we are to effectively compete in the non-profit grant sector for the scarce funding of day-to-day operations. A significant challenge will be raising compensation to levels at which bright, motivated legal workers can make this work a career, instead of an entry-level job in which we pay to train them so that they can quickly leave us to earn a living wage in the private sector.

Non-profit legal service providers will focus on select legal areas and services in which limited funding can have the greatest impact on the lives of the great-

est number of people.

Technology will play a larger role to maximize the work a reduced legal staff can do. As in medicine, “preventative law” will prove to be a force multiplier, through online legal educational materials and webinars, community legal education outreach, and even computerized legal systems and smartphone apps.

As the baby boomers and first-wave Gen Xers age out of our workforce, we will have to increasingly focus on training and preparing the next generation of like-minded legal professionals to take up the promise of our Pledge to become a nation of “justice for all.”

Gregory L. Landry is executive director of the Acadiana Legal Service Corp. and can be reached at greg@la-law.org.

Update / Shreveport Bar Association Pro Bono Project

In June, the Shreveport Bar Association’s Pro Bono Project was awarded a substantial grant to help fund our new Protective Order Project. This new project started on July 1 and we are excited to announce that, from that grant, we are able to hire a part-time staff attorney, Heidi Kemple Martin. Heidi will provide free legal representation to victims of domestic violence by obtaining protective orders. Heidi is thrilled to be joining our team at the Pro Bono Project. This project is supported by a grant from the Community Foundation and the United Way Grant Fund of the Community Foundation. In addition to this grant, we also received a grant from the Louisiana Bar Foundation to hire a paralegal to help with this project.

To further support the Louisiana Supreme Court-mandated Access to Justice Initiative, we are also happy to announce that we were awarded a grant from the Louisiana Bar Foundation to help fund a self-represented litigation legal forms kiosk that will be maintained at the Shreveport Bar Center. It is important to recognize that this obligation extends to all those in need of legal services, including those unable to afford an attorney. The Pro Bono Project is able to do all that we do because of the support we receive from our grantors, the Louisiana Bar Foundation, Legal Services of North Louisiana, the Community Foundation and the United Way.

—Nellie Walton
Shreveport Bar Association Pro Bono Project