

Legal Services of Eastern Michigan 1998 Annual Report



LEGAL SERVICES OF EASTERN MICHIGAN
AN ORGANIZATIONAL OVERVIEW

Legal Services of Eastern Michigan (LSEM) offers free civil legal services to low income people from three full service offices: Flint, which also houses the administrative offices; Saginaw; and Midland as well as a satellite office in Bay City. Regular office hours in outlying areas, telephone intake, and other unique methods of service delivery result in the same level of quality service to both urban and rural areas. The firm's budget is spent in proportion to the poverty population in each county. No county is neglected.

LSEM is a highly sophisticated law office. The firm makes excellent use of technology to provide more productive, quality service. The staff's legal work is supported by an excellent law library available on CD-ROM and one of the most complete brief banks on poverty law in the country. The highly qualified staff gets regular training locally and regionally. Advocates are assisted by an equally capable management and support staff. LSEM is also able to expand its services by enlisting the help of over 400 Pro Bono attorneys who offer clients free legal service.

The firm's priorities are those legal issues that focus on survival concerns. LSEM now specializes in the following areas of poverty law: family law, including domestic violence; housing; public benefits, including health; senior law, including elder abuse; education, and employment law, including Workfare. LSEM is just beginning the development of its units in education and employment which were identified as priorities in its recent program review.

The firm assists clients through community legal education, brief service, counsel and advice, as well as representation which can take the form of negotiated settlements or litigation. LSEM is proud of its ability to settle cases short of litigation. In the past three years LSEM has resolved approximately 75% of its cases without use of litigation.

In 1997 LSEM served over 16,278 poor people or more than 1,356 clients per month. This is a 15% increase over the number of clients served in 1996. This increase in service was due to an expansion of senior services, improved intake, more use of clinics and pro se kits, and greater pro bono involvement. Of those served in 1997 all live at 125% of poverty level or below. Minorities comprised xx% of LSEM's client population. LSEM's implementation of a new computerized intake system, addition of priorities, and expansion of staff in the coming year will result in an additional significant increase in the number of clients it is able to serve.

LSEM is equally proud of the fact that it has a history of delivering legal services at a rate lower than any other legal services agency in the state. LSEM's wise use of limited resources enable the firm to deliver the greatest amount of direct client service in the most cost effective way, without sacrificing quality. The firm's funding comes from: the federal Legal Services Corporation (LSC), a Community Development Block Grant, Region V and Region VII Area Agencies on Aging, United Way of Genesee and Lapeer Counties, the Rollin M. Gerstacker Foundation, the Environmental Protection Agency, large corporate contributions, and private donations.

SUMMARY OF SERVICES

Quality of Service

During its many years of service, Legal Services of Eastern Michigan (LSEM) has earned a nationwide reputation for delivering quality legal aid to low income people. That standing is seen in the closing opinion given by James P. Churchill, United States District Federal Judge of the Eastern District of Michigan, in Castillo v. Miller, June 6, 1995 stated, "I have been a state or federal judge for 30 years. I know of no group of lawyers who have done more to protect disadvantaged people from the misuse of power than those associated with Legal Services of Eastern Michigan." In addition to its expertise in delivering quality service, LSEM is noted for the staff's ability to fill requests for training in poverty law to advocates throughout the country.

Family Law

Over the years LSEM's family law unit has handled divorces, custody disagreements, and issues of domestic violence. In recent years, LSEM has refocused the manner in which it delivers these services in order to build greater awareness of legal rights and create greater self-sufficiency among clients. LSEM now focuses on self help workshops which teach clients how to represent themselves in divorces and custody matters. In the Flint office, LSEM is piloting a hot line, manned by a family law attorney, to address such family law questions as custody matters, divorce issues, guardianship, advice regarding visitation etc. some of which would not ordinarily be handled. Cases with complex issues can be referred to the Pro Bono Program. LSEM still represents individual clients who are disabled or for other reasons unable to represent themselves. This unit works very closely with area shelters, and is an active member of local coalitions that have developed protocols for handling domestic violence and securing Personal Protection Orders. Priorities within this unit may change as the practices of the Family Court are firmly established.

Housing

Over the years the work done by the Housing Unit has changed from being responsive only to individual housing questions, to becoming proactive. The unit's current priority is to keep people in decent, safe, and sanitary housing. The unit directly responds by handling landlord/tenant issues, land contracts, mortgages, and other property ownership issues. Positive resolution of such cases prevents people from becoming homeless. In addition, much Community Legal Education is done through distribution of printed material on topics like: homeowner issues, repairs, the dangers of lead poisoning and how to address it, and how to file cases in small claims court. Much of the material used in these programs was created by LSEM advocates, and specifically addresses its clients' unique needs. In this way clients are empowered to help themselves and cases need not necessarily go to trial.

Public Benefits

Protecting the safety net that is available to assist clients in meeting survival needs is an area of law in which LSEM has been aggressively involved for many years. Public Benefits Advocates work hard to insure income maintenance and adequacy of health care for the poor. The focus of the program has changed with the advent of Legal Services Corporation's imposed restrictions and changes in welfare legislation. Instead of challenging general regulations and statute, LSEM now actively pursues individual cases through the mandatory hearing process in an attempt to set precedent for the types of coverage that will be available to clients in the future. How welfare changes have affected recipients of SSI, for example, has made this unit's work increasingly important during the past year. This unit will also work jointly with the new Employment Law unit on the Workfare requirements that are affecting much of our client population.

Senior Law

LSEM has two Senior Citizen Law Centers that serve its entire service area. LSEM has been offering senior services for over 20 years. Educational workshops to make seniors aware of their legal rights is an important component of this program. The Centers use all of the legal specialties available within the firm as seniors' problems dictate need. In addition special expertise is available to deal with Medicare and Medicaid issues, Social Security, and elder abuse issues including: physical, mental, and emotional abuse and neglect, as well as financial exploitation. The firm has a highly skilled staff that is widely known for its work in this area of law and their expertise is often called for by other senior agencies as well as private attorneys. Elder Abuse services are the newest addition to the services available through the Senior Citizen Law Centers, and these services meet an ever growing need within the senior population.

Education Law

Education law is a new priority that was added as a direct response to the input received through the priority survey. Since LSEM has delivered limited services in this area before, it already has a base of knowledge from which to begin. The members of the unit are receiving additional extensive training which will build on this foundation. Focusing on this area is one way LSEM can fulfill its mission to "break the cycle of poverty. The two areas that are being considered for attention in this area are cases involving Title One, the primary federal funding bill for K-12 education and the Perkins Act, the primary federal statute affecting vocational education. Title One cases are important in ensuring that poor children have the same access to education as other children. The Perkins Act provides for vocational education, and LSEM's responsibility becomes to ensure that it affords all children the same opportunities. Equal access to vocational education also becomes important when seen in the light of the Workfare portion of the new welfare legislation.

Employment Law

Employment Law, too, is a new priority. It was added in response to the whole new set of legal questions surrounding employment that are arising from Workfare legislation. In addition, there are general legal questions related to employment such as discrimination in hiring, wrongful discharge, unemployment, etc. that must also be addressed. Employment and regular income bring with it possible questions regarding garnishments for payment of old debts. In many cases, all of these legal questions are being answered for a population that is entering the workplace for the first time. Meeting these needs is an important new area of law with which LSEM can assist the poor.

Evaluation

In order to maintain the quality and integrity of the program ongoing evaluation is done. Outcome objectives are set for each program area, and records are maintained to ensure that these objectives are met. Three types of records are kept: statistical, cases opened, cases closed, number of clients benefited, etc.; milestone, status of specific project tasks and outcomes achieved for clients stated in measurable terms where feasible; and advocacy, narratives outlining specific cases. In addition client satisfaction surveys are completed by every client who receives more than brief service. The management team reviews all evaluation reports quarterly. At those times recommendations can be made, based on the data being gathered, about how best to fine tune each program so that it is most successful in meeting client needs. In addition, the Board reviews program priorities annually and a complete assessment of priorities is done every 5 years.

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

During 1997 Legal Services of Eastern Michigan (LSEM) did a complete priority review to increase its responsiveness to client needs. In looking at the results of the survey and LSEM's accomplishments for the year, I was reminded how the delivery of legal services, and LSEM in particular, has changed since it started 47 years ago. I lived the past 25 years of that history, and I am using this year's annual report as a retrospective to share the story of LSEM's evolution.

Legal Services of Eastern Michigan (LSEM) has its roots in local bar associations providing voluntary services to the poor. Flint established a legal aid society in 1951. With the advent of the War on Poverty in 1965, the federal government funded separate legal aid organizations in Genesee, Saginaw, and Bay-Midland counties. To provide the most efficient and cost effective service to clients, these organizations merged with LSEM. With the formation of the federal Legal Services Corporation and access to expansion grants in the late 1970's, LSEM expanded to include six new counties. The agency's current service area includes: Arenac, Bay, Clare, Genesee, Gladwin, Gratiot, Isabella, Lapeer, Midland and Saginaw counties.

LSEM has changed dramatically since its inception. Not only has the firm enlarged its geographic region, it has greatly enhanced its services. LSEM has spent the past 25 years fulfilling its mission to offer quality legal services to poor people reactively by responding to individual legal needs and proactively by working to break the cycle of poverty that traps the poor. Commitment to this mission has affected the types of cases LSEM handles, the methods it uses to deliver service, and resulted in the pursuit of legislative advocacy which has the potential to change clients' lives. In spite of LSC restrictions on the type of work legal services agencies can do, massive cuts in LSC funding, devastating cuts in funding for programs that benefit the poor, and changes in welfare legislation, LSEM has adapted and continued to pursue its mission to help the indigent. Its efforts are chronicled in this report.

The emphasis for the coming year is to carry forward the new priorities established in 1997. This is being done by specialty area as advocates meet to discuss what types of new issues may arise in each area and how they can best be addressed. Regardless of what type of cases are handled, emphasis will be placed on doing impact work. The urgency for such work to be done surfaced as the greatest single need cited during the priority review process. One of the ways in which this need will be met is to work more effectively with client groups. This is the latest change in LSEM's evolution, and one which I am excited about leading.

The past 25 years have been filled with challenges. The firm is fortunate to have had the wisdom of far-sighted Boards of Directors, diligent and spirited staff, and talented volunteer attorneys, who have tirelessly worked to give LSEM clients the best possible legal service. I thank them for the positive impact on clients that has been made possible through their combined efforts. Their work has made LSEM a state and national leader in the field of poverty law. I see 1998 and the beginning of the new millennium that stretches before us as an opportunity for LSEM to build on its 25 years of experience in providing equal access to justice for the indigent.

Sincerely,

EDWARD J. HOORT
Executive Director

THE CLIENT SPEAKS

I think that it is a wonderful service for senior citizens in need.

My attorney made me an active participant in my own defense, He expressed confidence in my abilities and treated me with respect. As someone who has lived in a state of indigence for the four years since my divorce, I expected to be treated as the indigent so often are and to get what I paid for -- nothing. My attorney renewed my faith in human nature.

I am very satisfied, because the advocates got on the job right away and got it done. They saved our home.

I was treated as if I mattered, and there was legitimate reason for my requesting services.

The paralegal helped me get SSD which I had been trying to get on my own for over 2 years without results. I wish there was some way I could show my appreciation.

The attorney did an especially wonderful job of always being available and just being there to encourage me and build my self-esteem.

The advice I got helped me get restarted in the right direction and helped in getting me relocated in a place that I needed. Thanks very much.

The paralegal was over to the nursing home very quickly. I wish I could get this kind of service in other areas of life. Also she could tell just how my husband felt and what he was going through. She took a lot of stress off the whole family.

Some of the clauses in my lease were against my rights as a tenant. Now I know I have rights. I will consult a lawyer before signing another lease.

The help I got from legal aid let me know that you don't have to take matters into your own hands. If you are right, you can go to court and win.

My paralegal helped me get SSI for which I was denied so many times before.

The paralegal really did understand all of my problems with Social Security. I am very grateful.

The staff was very understanding concerning difficulty of my disability. Also very supportive. They were patient - my condition tends to make me unclear in my thought processes.

I needed help and someone was there for the first time. The attorney handled not only my divorce but also took care and time to assist me with qualified legal help and guidance in all areas that concerned me. The attorney was a solid rock for me when I needed dire Legal Assistance.

The attorney always listened to my problem and followed through with me.

The attorney and staff were courteous, knowledgeable, and helpful.

Specialty	Number Served	Percent
Employment	39	4%
Consumer	344	33%
Education	9	1%
Domestic	295	28%
Health	1	0%
Housing	163	15%
Juvenile	0	0%
Income	94	9%
Maintenance		
Individual Rights	2	0%
Miscellaneous	106	10%
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	1053	100%

Specialty	Number Served	Percent
Employment	75	0%
Consumer	604	4%
Education	81	0%
Domestic	5231	32%
Health	280	2%
Housing	7018	43%
Juvenile	10	0%
Income	2583	16%
Maintenance		
Individual Rights	56	0%
Miscellaneous	340	2%
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	16278	100%

Revenue	Amount	Percent
Legal Services Corporation	982,408	45%
Private Attorney Involvement	245,602	11%
Older Americans Act	101,468	5%
United Way	81,500	4%
Center for Civil Justice	678,113	31%
Private Foundations	57,559	3%
Other	25,434	1%
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	2,172,084	100%

Expenses	Amount	Percent
Total Personnel	1,354,669	78%
Total Other Expenses	388,952	22%
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	1,743,621	100%

Revenue	Amount	Percent
Legal Services Corporation	969,397	57%
Private Attorney Involvement	259,495	15%
Older Americans Act	87,385	5%
United Way	81,507	5%
Center for Civil Justice	240,039	14%
Private Foundations	25,000	1%
Other	46,923	3%
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	1,709,746	100%

Expenses	Amount	Percent
Total Personnel	1,378,072	74%
Total Other Expenses	482,795	26%
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	1,860,867	100%