



The Voice

Legal Aid A Tool to Fight Poverty

LASP sees the issues confronting poor people every day – unstable or unsafe housing, minor criminal records that prevent employment, limited access to health care, hunger, domestic violence. Legal aid can sometimes mitigate the effects of poverty, which for families like R's, can mean the difference between a bleak future for a child, and a hopeful one.

R is a disabled child, and in order to succeed in school he needed special services. But his family's attempts to secure them had been stymied. At the same time, his family did not always have enough to eat, and had poor housing. They were living on the edge. LASP intervened to obtain the SSI award that R was entitled to. This ensured not only support at school, but provided income to the family to help meet R's needs. The added income helped the family stabilize their housing and keep food on their table.*

In "Finding the Next Big Idea to Fight Poverty," (American Bar Association Winter 2012, Vol. 15, Issue 3), David Lash wrote, "Lawyers can do more to combat poverty than can any other group of professionals." Lawyers who are part of civil legal aid programs like LASP, whether staff or volunteer, improve the lives of poor people in very direct ways by improving access to housing, health care, food and income support programs.

Civil legal aid also helps poor people avoid unnecessary or erroneous costs that could further deepen their poverty, challenges debt collectors that prey on the poor or elderly, and evens the playing field so that people with minor criminal records can find stable employment and move out of poverty.

As the Legal Services Corporation said in its FY 2016 Budget Request to Congress, "Investment in civil legal aid is one of the most effective ways to ... help stabilize and grow the nation's economy."

In other words, legal aid is a powerful anti-poverty tool.

**Neither the clients' actual names nor photos are used.*

From the LASP Case Files*



LASP Helps Widow Untangle Benefits Mistake

Ms. H* is a 68 year-old widow whose only source of income is a Social Security Administration (SSA) widow's benefit.

When she came to LASP she was scared, vulnerable and overwhelmed. She had just received a letter from the SSA assessing a staggering \$47,000 overpayment. More importantly, she would have no income for two years because the SSA was stopping her monthly benefit until the debt was repaid.

Ms. H's LASP attorney carefully reviewed all of her information and zeroed in on the problem: the overpayment was caused by fraudulent conduct by Ms. H's late ex-husband that occurred after Ms. H divorced him, and long after they separated.

The overpayment was not Ms. H's fault.

Because she had an attorney, Ms. H was protected. She continued to receive her benefits which protected her from falling into poverty.

Serving Bucks, Chester, Delaware and Montgomery Counties Since 2001

Mission

The mission of LASP is to provide quality legal representation to low-income and vulnerable people from Bucks, Chester, Delaware and Montgomery Counties; to empower them to solve problems without legal representation through legal education and increased access to the courts; and to change community practices and systems that cause or aggravate poverty.

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“To deny any person their human rights is to challenge their very humanity.”

- Nelson Mandela

Please Note: Articles in this newsletter are intended to provide general information and not specific legal advice. If you have a specific legal problem, you should consult an attorney or call our toll-free Helpline at 1-877-429-5994.



Community Education and Outreach

LASP offers community legal education, staff in-service training and outreach about our services to a variety of groups in our four-county region. To schedule a LASP representative for an upcoming event, call Keshia James, Esq. at 610-275-5400 x131.

Working Together to Fight Poverty

LASP draws on the experience of outside organizations such as the Public Utility Law Project (PULP) to help us better serve our clients. When LASP attorneys need advice about — or troubleshooting around — clients’ utility issues, they consult with PULP staff. PULP in turn relies on the work we and other Pennsylvania legal aid organizations do to identify systemic problems and advocate on a larger scale.

PULP helps Pennsylvania’s low-income residential utility and energy consumers connect to and maintain affordable services. The organization has found that some low-income households in Pennsylvania, including those in counties LASP serves, **pay upwards of 30% of their income for utilities**

“It’s a significant problem for our clients,” says Patrick Cicero, PULP’s Executive Director.



It’s like pulling out dominoes — the whole house tends to topple.”

- Patrick Cicero,
Executive Director,
Pennsylvania Utility
Law Project



“The biggest thing we see is people not being able to afford to maintain essential utility services which leads to a kind of spiral downward. Parents can potentially lose kids when water service is cut off, or renters can be being evicted and lose Section 8 or subsidized housing if they don’t maintain utility services. It’s like pulling out dominoes — the whole house tends to topple,” says Mr. Cicero. He adds that over the past 10 years, the price of utility services (gas, electricity, water, telephone) has trended upward, with a significant increase in shut-offs that are directly related to affordability.

The cost of utilities, housing and health care eats up a large proportion of a poor person’s income. When legal problems arise in these or other areas but are not addressed, the financial consequences can be severe, pushing people further into poverty or making it more difficult to climb out of poverty. **Legal services can stop the downward spiral.**

Tapping into the expertise of organizations like PULP better equips LASP to fulfill its mission of ameliorating the circumstances that can cause or aggravate poverty.

Surveying the Community

Priorities ... Barriers ... Communication

This summer we began conducting a needs assessment survey which seeks feedback from our clients and community members about what their most pressing needs are. The assessment will also help us determine what barriers our clients face when trying to access our services, how LASP can best communicate information about civil legal topics, and help us set our priorities.

Conducting periodic needs assessments helps us determine the most beneficial and efficient allocation of our resources. We partnered with Temple University Harrisburg Nonprofit Evaluation Services & Training (NEST) to help us design the survey.

Surveys have been distributed via paper copy to clients as well as electronically via our website and social media. Community conversations will be held in each of the counties where we work, and findings and recommendations will be shared later in 2016.

LASP News

Cy Pres Award

LASP received a generous **cy pres award** through Cary Flitter of Flitter, Milz, P.C. The \$69,000 award will be used by LASP to provide legal assistance to clients in the area of consumer law. In 2016, Mr. Flitter has procured over \$100,000 in cy pres funds for LASP.



L to R: Cary Flitter, Esq.; Elizabeth W. Fritsch, Executive Director, LASP; Carolyn R. Mirabile, President, Montgomery Bar Association; William Shimer, Managing Attorney, LASP Montgomery County office.

Photo courtesy of the Montgomery Bar Association.

Counties

Bucks

As she starts her third year with LASP, Staff Attorney Rodlena Sales joins our Bucks County Pro Bono Team as the Attorney Pro Bono Coordinator. Ms. Sales aims to recruit young attorneys to join LASP's volunteer corps and encourage current pro bono attorneys to volunteer more frequently.



Chester

It's now easier to get civil legal help in southern Chester County. LASP's newest outreach site is located at the resource center at Kennett Area Community Service (KACS) in Kennett Square and is available on the third Monday of each month from 12 p.m. - 3 p.m.

Delaware

Delaware County Community College students who are part of the schools' KEYS program learn about LASP's services through our regular presentations there. KEYS (Keystone Education Yields Success) is a Pa. Dept. of Public Welfare program designed to help recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program succeed in community college.

Montgomery

LASP hosted a free CLE program — "Divorce Primer for Pro Bono Volunteers in Montgomery County" — and reception in recognition of our incredible pro bono volunteers who are helping to remove barriers to justice.



Left to Right: Pro bono volunteer Bruce Baldwin; CLE presenter Michael Kelley, LASP Montgomery County Staff Attorney and Pro Bono Coordinator, and chair of the Montgomery Bar Association Legal Aid/Pro Bono Service Committee; CLE presenter and Family Law attorney Maria Gibbons; William Shimer, Managing Attorney, LASP Montgomery County; and Colleen Consolo, pro bono volunteer.

Fall Newsletter

What's Inside:

Legal aid as an anti-poverty tool
Surveying community needs
County news

Connect with LASP



Expungements and Pennsylvania's New Record Sealing Law *Join us for 2 CLEs*

Attorneys can learn more about the impact of Pennsylvania's record sealing law, which goes into effect on November 14, at two CLEs, one in Delaware County and one in Bucks County.

The CLEs are free for pro bono attorneys.

October 25
Delaware County Bar Association
www.delcobar.org

October 26
Bucks County Bar Association
www.bucksbar.org

FREE LEGAL HELP

Legal Aid of Southeastern PA provides free civil legal services for low-income residents of Bucks, Chester, Delaware and Montgomery counties.

For free help, call:

LASP Helpline
1-877-429-5994
Mon-Fri, 9 am-1pm
TOLL-FREE

Se habla español.
www.lasp.org