



Southwest Virginia Legal Aid Society Strategic Plan 2008 and Beyond: Mission & Vision Goals, Objectives, and Strategies

October, 2007

THE MISSION OF SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA LEGAL AID SOCIETY

It is the mission of SVLAS to champion equal justice for low-income Virginians and to work to remedy the conditions that burden the low-income community. To these ends we strive

- **to provide high quality, courteous, and effective legal services to low-income families and individuals facing serious threats to their personal, economic or family stability**
- **to work with others to identify and respond to problems faced by those in the low-income community within our region.**

STATEMENT OF CORE VALUES

We believe that successful and high quality legal aid programs:

- Zealously represent their clients.
- Treat clients and applicants with respect and dignity.
- Have respect for the goals and outcomes desired by each client.
- Promote understanding of and sensitivity to the circumstances of those living in poverty.

- Work closely with others to identify and address the most pressing needs of the poor.
- Actively involve themselves with the communities they serve.
- Make the availability of their services known and accessible.
- Maintain a healthy and fulfilling work environment for staff.
- Provide effective training and resources for staff.
- Create strong relationships and partnerships within the legal community.
- Foster effective and thoughtful leadership, governance, and administration.
- Encourage open communication and collective decision making.

OBJECTIVES

In recent years a lot has been done by SVLAS to improve the quality of legal services provided to low-income people in southwestern Virginia. SVLAS has:

- ✓ Created a Centralized Intake Unit that improved access for clients;
- ✓ Improved the uniformity of services available to clients across the region;
- ✓ Improved staff skills through readily available training and effective supervision;
- ✓ Improved use of technology;
- ✓ Increased attorney compensation to aid in recruitment and retention;
- ✓ Secured new sources of funding to maintain or increase the level of client services;
- ✓ Established scores of new partnerships with regional agencies;
- ✓ Conducted a comprehensive needs assessment and annual reviews.
- ✓ Partnered with the private bar to provide services to low-income people.

Our overall assessment is that the services that are being provided to applicants who are determined to be eligible are of high quality. We continue to strive to fulfill our own stated mission and to reflect our core values in our work. We support and aspire to fulfill the Legal Services Corporation Performance Criteria. While these things are laudable, we know there is room, and there is desire, for improvement.

As we examine our services, their accessibility to clients, and their impact in the low-income community, several facts are apparent:

First, many low-income people and staff members of other non-profit organizations do not know that our legal aid program even exists. Many others know that SVLAS exists but are mistaken or unsure of the types of the services that we provide. The inherent risk in such an environment is that those low-income people with critical legal problems may not know to contact us.....they may not know that we are here and eager to be of service. While we are not in a position to **dramatically increase the number of cases** we accept for full representation, we are in a position to help ensure that **those who need us the most know we are here and eager to be of service to them.**

Secondly, while we have done a lot to improve access to our services since reconfiguration, anecdotal information suggests that a troubling number of applicants experience difficulty in finding their way into our system. Self reflection suggests that we are not “open for business” during some of the times that working low-income people might be most likely to contact us.

Finally, outcome measurements suggest that we are doing a good job achieving results for individual clients. We are not doing much, however, to address the challenges and problems that affect large numbers of low-income people.

It is clear, if we are to be effective and efficient in our delivery of legal services, that those with critical legal problems must know that we are available to them and must be able to access our services with relative ease. If we are to effectively and efficiently utilize our limited resources (i.e. 1 legal aid lawyer for every 8,000 low income people compared to 1 private attorney for every 300 Virginians as a whole) then we must increase the impact of our representation so that it benefits more people in the low-income community.

Accordingly, our objectives must include improving outreach, client access, and increasing the effectiveness of our work so that it brings greater benefits to the low-income community. Strategies might include:

- **Improve outreach to the low-income community**
 - ❖ Educate potential referral sources about the availability of our services
 - ❖ Expand opportunities for community education presentations
 - ❖ Target client populations living in isolation, including minorities and seniors
 - ❖ Utilize opportunities in churches and community gathering places
 - ❖ Improve placement and distribution of posters and brochures
 - ❖ Consider part-time satellite offices
 - ❖ Explore effective use of mass media
 - ❖ Explore creation of conflict panel

- **Improve access to our services**
 - ❖ Expansion of Intake Unit hours
 - ❖ Expansion of normal field office hours of operation
 - ❖ Monitor and evaluate efficiency of phone systems (including auto attend and voice-mail) and high speed Internet services, updating and/or improving as necessary
 - ❖ Assess potential use of emerging technologies such as on-line applications and use of email communication with clients
 - ❖ Evaluate feasibility of part-time satellite offices
 - ❖ Evaluate feasibility of “circuit riding” or “mobile offices” by intake staff and/or attorneys
 - ❖ Explore expanded use of Appalachian School of Law students through third-year practice clinic and/or as “virtual office” intake staff

- **Improve the effectiveness of our use of limited resources by increasing the impact of our work to benefit the low-income community**
 - ❖ Identify challenges that adversely affect the low-income community and assess their amenability to a legal solution
 - ❖ Engage partner agencies and groups of low-income people in dialogue to assist SVLAS in identifying problems that impact large numbers of low-income people
 - ❖ Challenge practices and laws to make them more responsive to the poor
 - ❖ Collaborate with other legal services providers to secure statewide solutions

- to problems faced by low-income people across the Commonwealth
- ❖ Through both community education and advocacy within the legal system for *pro se* reform, work to improve the ability of clients to effectively represent themselves

The objectives stated above will guide our work as we seek to improve the services provided to those in the low-income community. Achieving these objectives will require not only careful planning and hard work; it will also require that SVLAS commit a sufficient level of resources to each undertaking so as to ensure that success is a possibility.

During recent years SVLAS has had extraordinary success in obtaining special grants to fund domestic violence work, but these have produced a “feast or famine” income stream. Government funding for legal services has been steady, but is still subject to political winds and economic fluctuations. IOLTA revenues have been high but are declining. By legal aid standards we have prospered, but the factors above and our funding history suggest that it must also be our objective to have a long-term development strategy that encourages expansion and diversification of program resources if we are to have a secure financial future.

- **Expand and diversify sources of program resources**
 - ❖ Determine feasibility of annual major donor campaign
 - ❖ Explore purchase of office buildings through capital campaigns
 - ❖ Seek funding for specific community impact projects
 - ❖ Cooperate with statewide efforts to increase state funding

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