

Legal Aid Liaison Report

Craig Ogilvie, Nov 2017

Need:

- The Legal Aid Society of Story County is led by the executive director Carin Forbes; three attorneys (including Ms Forbes) serve clients who are at under 125% of poverty level within Story County. The number of lawyers has increased from two in the past year.
- Most of the cases are family law cases, but some in disability appeals.
- With the addition of a 3rd lawyer, the waitlist is now down on the order of 14-16 cases which corresponds to ~3 weeks, although time sensitive cases don't get put on the waiting list.

Strength of Program

The program is well managed, and effectively serves a critical need for clients in Story County. The office is staffed with an office manager: a role that helps the lawyers focus their time on legal issues. The director has started several initiatives, including a Volunteer Lawyer Project (VLP) where prospective clients who are between 125 and 150% of poverty level are referred to county lawyers for them to possibly take the case pro bono. The board is very active and engaged and some fundraising is taking place.

A significant positive step is that the CIC removed restrictions they had placed on the type of services that Legal Aid can provide to clients. This meant that Legal Aid can now provide these services, but since this change occurred mid-year and it took some time to hire a new lawyer, the number of clients served last year might be low. The rate of serving clients has picked up with the addition of the 3rd lawyer.

A new aspect is that a volunteer offers translation and interpretation services in Spanish, typically once a month. It is possible that this could be expanded to other languages; potential speakers could be recruited from the International Students and Scholars office at ISU.

Weakness of Program

- The VLP program is now established with 31 VLP cases. Seventeen of these has no conflict of interest and 14 were worked on by VLP lawyers. The three remaining clients decided not to work with a VLP lawyer.
- This meant that 14 cases came into the Legal Aid office that had a conflict of interest. Typically that the client had been involved in a previous case (on any side of a dispute). These 14 cases were referred to Polk County VLP but only one case was taken up a VLP lawyer. This is a structural problem. Perhaps the Polk County VLP can send these cases to Ames lawyers?

General Assessment

- The agency is in a good fiscal position with low rent and a healthy financial reserve.

Future Outlook

- Legal aid is thinking about where to be located. There are benefits to being in Nevada, next to courts, affordable rent, but the director is concerned about ease of access for clients from Ames.
- Transportation for clients is concern, the agency can provide some gas cards.
- Is it possible for RSVP to help? The director had an initial communication with RSVP and they said no as it was perceived an expansion. This liaison would like to encourage RSVP to reconsider this service as getting legal help is a vital and important step.