

Legal Aid Liaison Report

Kimberly Stephens and Max Ruehle, Nov 2020

Need: The Legal Aid Society of Story County provides legal representation in civil matters for low-income residents of Story County for those who have an income at or below 150% of the poverty line. They worked 228 cases this year with a two to three week wait period, except for time sensitive cases. When COVID-19 hit, they had to close their wait list.

Most of their cases are regarding family law, but some are evictions and social security cases. 80% of the clients are female and 52% of clients have mental health disabilities. Their overall goal is giving their clients a more stable home and family life.

Strengths of the Program: The program is well managed and serves a critical need for clients in Story County. The office is staffed with three attorneys, a receptionist, and an office manager; a role that helps the lawyers focus their time on legal issues. This is their second year of continuing their aid to those with incomes at or below 150% of the poverty line based on the ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) report, which made clear they were not meeting needs of this group.

Their lawyers serve for long term and have a lot of community knowledge. The whole staff is compassionate and go the extra mile for their clients. They hand out resources for other agencies, many of whom have other needs like mental health issues and help schedule appointments for clients. The creation of the Volunteer Lawyer Project has helped to place clients who would have a conflict of interest and cannot be represented by the lawyers on staff. This is very successful in Story County, but they do run into some issues placing clients with needs in Polk County.

Last year they secured a satellite office in Ames by sharing space with Good Neighbor on the 1st and 3rd Thursday of the month. This arrangement is rent free and will have office supplies available. However, due to COVID-19, they quit meeting in Ames. However, with the greater access to online meetings by the community as a whole, most appointments are online or over the phone. This solved one of Legal Aid's longest struggle, transportation issues. In person appointments are still available for those who do not have access to internet or phones.

Last year they began working on a new marketing strategy. Ripke designed a new logo for Story County Legal Aid and they are working on the website. This helps distinguish them from the Legal Aid Society.

Weakness of the Program: The biggest issue facing Legal Aid this year is funding. Prior to COVID-19, CICS cut their funding for next year for the family law budget. They will only cover guardianship and social security cases. After COVID-19 hit, they had to cancel all of their fundraising events. This year they pulled \$40,000 out of cash reserves to cover what they lost from self-generated revenue. Further, they took a PPP loan of \$54,000 but will not know until February if it will be forgiven. Overall, they may be looking at salary freezes, and staff cuts in the coming year which impacts the number of cases they can handle and how many people they can help.

General Assessment: Legal Aid of Story County is an asset to the community that uses its funds wisely and fills a critical need of providing legal assistance to people who cannot afford an

attorney. Lawyers can make the difference between having a house over your head or not by helping keep an eviction off your record. They can mediate in divorce disputes and help people get access to their social security. Having the right representation can make a huge difference in the lives of their clients.

Future Outlook: The program has always been well run financially but due to the pulling of funding from CICS, their budget does not look as stable over the next couple of years.