

SOUTH CENTRAL LEGAL SERVICES PROGRAM

Throughout history the American legal system has been inaccessible to the poor. Entitlement to legal representation at criminal trials has been recognized only recently and this right has not been extended to civil matters. Since blacks and other minorities comprise a large proportion of the nation's poor, the indifference of the system disproportionately affects these groups. Past experience has shown that we cannot depend on others to accomplish the task of making the system responsive to our needs—the needs of low-income blacks. The Legal Service Corporation which funds local legal-aid offices has been under fire for several years and may be facing its imminent demise. This is true even though the local legal-aid offices have only been able to assist some of the most destitute people. The efforts of the private bar to provide legal services to the poor are severely limited by the lack of time to devote to *pro bono publico* work, the lack of adequate resources, and the lack of expertise in solving legal problems most often faced by the poor. The private bar has not been able to fill the gaps which resulted from cuts in legal aid programs. The magnitude of the problem becomes greater as the unmet legal needs of the poor continue to grow. No significant improvement in the quality of black life can be made unless there is a large scale vindication of the claims and rights of the poor. It is against this backdrop that the South Central Legal Services Program (SCLSP) was formed.

SCLSP was formed as a result of the combined efforts of the National Conference of Black Lawyers (NCBL) and the Black American Law Students Association (BALSA) of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The program was designed to serve the primary legal needs of the underrepresented poor in the community of South Central Los Angeles as well as to provide a vehicle through which law students and paralegals can gain practical experience while providing vital legal services. SCLSP is distinguishable from other programs in that it contains an educative component; the program seeks to educate community members via seminars and individual counseling on legal self-help and preventative legal measures. An awareness of legal rights combined with the knowledge of how to protect those rights provide an increased sense of political effectiveness. Such information may also free time and resources so that issues of broader importance may be addressed. As long as most community members are kept on the legal defensive and bogged down in the rat race of day to day survival, very few matters of wider social significance will be addressed.

SCLSP has sought to identify the problems that most heavily impact upon members of the targeted community and thus presently provides service in the following areas: housing, government benefits, police misconduct, and community organizations. Clients with housing related problems are assisted in preparing and filing *in propria persona* (without actual legal representation) answers and defenses in unlawful detainer actions. In selected housing cases, where the matter involves a problem such as landlord/tenant lockout, a landlord/tenant dispute, housing discrimination, or homeowner-ship foreclosure the client may be counseled, referred, or represented. Similar service is provided in the area of government entitlements including

representation at administrative hearings. Clients are given assistance in handling disputes with the General Relief program, the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, and the Unemployment Insurance Benefits program. Police abuse is another problem which has impacted negatively upon the South Central community as well as other communities throughout the nation. In this area, clients are given assistance in preparing and filing administrative complaints and claims against abusive law enforcement personnel. An information and resource file is continuously updated for possible use in remedial litigation. Clients are then referred to expert sources that can provide legal representation. Finally, clients are assisted in forming public and mutual benefit corporations and cooperations. Legal advice on managing these organizations and gaining federal tax exempt status is also provided.

Law students, law graduates and non-legal volunteers are trained in-house to deliver legal services in the above mentioned categories. Their work is supervised by volunteer attorneys who actively take part in the program and who specialize in the various areas served. Though the program has only been operational a short time, many community members are taking advantage of the services offered. SCLSP is taking steps to insure that at the minimum, the number of volunteer staff and donations of financial resources and in-kind goods and services increase in proportion to the increase in clientele. Ideally, the program will be able to procure enough resources so that it can expand its services to include other legal matters that affect the community. Social security problems and debtor-creditor problems are just two of the topics which SCLSP hopes to address in the future.

Various factors combine to make the problems faced by the poor unique. Their income levels prevent members of the community from hiring attorneys. The problem is compounded by the fact that the type of legal matters affecting the poor often do not produce fees and are therefore unattractive to attorneys who would otherwise take cases on a contingent fee basis. It is only through the development of programs similar to SCLSP that we can hope to make progress in greatly diminishing the problems of the poor. Law school organizations are in a particularly favorable position to develop similar programs and obtain sponsorship through their schools. SCLSP received initial funding from UCLA in the amount of a \$5,000 grant in goods and services. The funding was obtained by submitting a proposal to the school. The proposal identified the needs of the community, demonstrated the ability of law students to address these needs and pointed out the practical benefits to the school and to the students. Detailed information regarding the amount of money needed for advertising, equipment, and housing, as well as a request for work-study funds was included in the budget proposal. Had UCLA not been amenable to the idea of a legal clinic in the community, other avenues of initial funding would have to have been explored.

The willingness of majority institutions to aid programs such as SCLSP cannot be the determining factor in dictating whether or not such programs exist. The ultimate responsibility must be borne by those of us who will be directly affected. The experience of the black community is our experience. Personal gain can be but fleeting and inconsequential where it is obtained

separate from, or at the expense of, our community. The fate of each individual black person is inextricably bound to the fate of black people in general. Until the quality of life of the poor is improved, progress will only be illusory.

Anyone wishing to volunteer time or resources or to obtain more information or assistance in setting up a similar program may contact us at:

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