

Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma, Inc.

Rural Summer Legal Corps Application

Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma, Inc. (LASO) is a state-wide, non-profit 501 (c) (3) organization providing free civil legal assistance to eligible low-income individuals, their families, and the elderly. This service is provided through LASO's 18 law offices, strategically located throughout the state to serve clients in all 77 Oklahoma counties. LASO is proposing two (2) options for placement of a Rural Summer Legal Corps Fellow.

1. Mayes & Rogers Counties Domestic Violence Project

A Rural Summer Legal Corps Fellow would assist with LASO's Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Program in Mayes and Rogers Counties, Oklahoma.

Mayes and Rogers counties are rural counties outside the urban center of Tulsa, OK. In Mayes County, 20.6% of residents live in poverty, 29% of children live in poverty, and 27% of residents receive food stamp assistance. Mayes County is 69% white, 18% Native American, 3% Black, 2% Hispanic, and 8% other/more than one race. In Rogers County, 9.3% of residents live in poverty, 13% of children live in poverty, and 20% of residents receive food stamp assistance. Rogers County is 73% white, 13% Native American, 4% Hispanic, 1% Black, and 9% other or more than one race/ethnicity.

In 2015, two staff attorneys from LASO's Tulsa office began traveling to these outlying counties to provide representation for persons seeking protective orders because of domestic abuse. The program is the first time that persons in those counties have had ready access to legal services as a part of the protective order process. Providing these services is difficult: The poorest people in Mayes and Rogers counties live in rural areas, without transportation or reliable telephones. Often they have no supportive family members. The attorneys assisting with protective orders first meet their clients at the initial hearing. Petitioners must appear in court opposite their abusers, and frequently, their abuser's attorney. Legal representation can help equalize the scales of justice. The system is fast-paced and demanding. Attorneys must elicit facts from their clients on the spot, provide quick legal advice, consider alternatives, obtain necessary documentation, and prepare litigants for immediate hearings. As Rogers and Mayes counties are small with a small private bar, pro bono assistance is difficult to obtain.

The Fellow would provide immeasurable assistance, working closely with two legal aid attorneys in providing on-the-spot assistance to victims of domestic violence facing their abusers in court. The Fellow will contact applicants and interview clients to clarify the facts of each case, review pending protective order petitions, obtain background information and witness statements, and summarize the cases for the attorneys to review. The Fellow will then accompany the attorneys to court and relate directly to the clients awaiting hearing, helping reassure the clients. The Fellow will assist the attorneys in presenting their cases in the courtroom, and counsel with the clients

afterwards. Later, the Fellow will have the responsibility of summarizing the results of the day for client files. The Fellow will have the opportunity to put theory learned in school into action, and know their efforts helped protect a client from further violence. The position would be an excellent opportunity to obtain real life experience in dealing with the clients and courts.

The goal of the program is to obtain protection for victims of domestic violence. During the period of the fellowship, the program will serve approximately 70 persons who have experienced domestic violence. Sixty-five of those persons will appear in court with staff representation and sixty will obtain protective orders. Five persons will withdraw or lose their case in court. A small number of participants will be involved in ongoing domestic litigation, such as divorce and custody matters. The Fellow will be an integral part of the program and will be directly involved in providing legal services.

LASO has long maintained a practice of working with law students whenever possible, and hosts law school interns in many of our 18 offices through school programs each year. LASO also hosts AmeriCorps JD students via our Equal Justice Works Fellowships. The Fellow for this project would be supervised by the two attorneys working our VOCA project, and overseen by the Tulsa office Managing Attorney.

2. Payne, Garfield, and Kay Counties Social Security Disability Project

A Rural Summer Legal Corps Fellow would assist with establishing a Social Security Disability Project in Payne, Garfield, and Kay counties.

Payne County contains the university town of Stillwater, but is otherwise rural, with no other population centers of any size. In Payne County, 25.7% of residents live in poverty, 22% of children live in poverty, and 15% of residents receive food stamp assistance. Payne County is 77% white, 5% Native American, 5% Hispanic, 4% Black, and 8% other or more than one race/ethnicity. Garfield County contains the city of Enid, but is otherwise rural, with no other population centers of any size. In Garfield County, 13.9% of residents live in poverty, 21% of children live in poverty, and 24% of residents receive food stamp assistance. Garfield County is 76% white, 11% Hispanic, 3% Black, 2% Native American, and 7% other or more than one race/ethnicity. Kay County is a rural county in north-central Oklahoma. Kay County contains the city of Ponca City, but is otherwise rural, with no other population centers of any size. In Kay County, 18.2% of residents live in poverty, 28% of children live in poverty, and 33% of residents receive food stamp assistance. Kay County is 76% white, 9% Native American, 7% Hispanic, 2% Black, and 6% other or more than one race/ethnicity. The poorest people in Payne, Garfield, and Kay counties live in the rural areas, without transportation or reliable telephones and often have no supportive family members. This is especially true of disabled individuals. Low attorney populations make securing pro bono assistance difficult.

The Fellow will help establish a holistic and cooperative relationship between community medical providers, social agencies, and legal service attorneys in securing services and much-needed Social

Security Administration (SSA) disability benefits for clients. Initially, the Fellow will spend time identifying community medical providers, such as community mental health centers, free medical clinics, and Indian Health Service clinics. The Fellow will coordinate with those providers, identifying services provided, numbers of patients, connections with other agencies, and the level of patients' needs. The Fellow will be familiarized with the SSA disability process, and will modify and create SSA disability information forms which are more easily understood by disability applicants (but still using SSA disability standards). The Fellow will provide services to the patients at those locations by providing information and advice on the SSA disability process and completing SSA disability forms, by assisting low-income disabled persons in obtaining and completing SSA disability forms and related social agency forms, and obtaining medical records and resources for medical evaluations and or treatment.

At least three times a week, the Fellow will spend time interviewing new clients and reviewing the new clients' cases and strategies with the supervising attorney. At least twice a month, the Fellow will be: 1) Reviewing and creating or modifying forms to better gather the information from the medical provider but highlighting the terminology and review standards used by SSA; 2) Providing community outreach to clients, medical providers, and social agencies; and 3) Interviewing the participants, including clients and medical providers, as to the success or suggested modifications to meet the needs of providing legal information, limited representation, obtaining medical records and treatment, referrals, and the filing of SSA forms. The remainder of the Fellow's time will be spent reviewing medical records and research to provide direct legal advice and representation on SSA disability cases and issues. In addition, the Fellow will be drafting briefs and letters and reviewing cases and progress of the cases and the project. The Fellow will meet with the supervisor a minimum of once a week to review client interviews and formulate next steps.

The goal of this project is to make SSA disability services more accessible by taking the services to where the clients are receiving their medical treatment, to simplify the process for the clients, and to establish and encourage the interaction of community medical providers, social agencies, and legal service attorneys in securing these much-needed benefits for the clients.

Brenda Nipp, the Managing Attorney in LASO's Stillwater office, has supervised numerous law students (including students with a limited license to practice), and currently has several university student volunteers. The office has an established supervision protocol and meetings; the Fellow would attend and be a part of the weekly 2-hour staff meetings for more immediate needs, as well as monthly full day staff meetings to review pending cases in more detail and other office needs.