

Kansas Legal Services

A non-profit law firm and community education organization helping low and moderate income people in Kansas

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Equal justice for the homeless client

by Rhonda Sullivan, Managing Attorney, Kansas Legal Services - Wichita

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In 2010, Kansas Legal Services entered into a partnership with members of the Bar as well as Advocates to End Chronic Homelessness (AECH) to offer Legal Clinics to the residents of the overflow homeless shelters. These clinics were held each year during the months of November, January and March. For the past two years, the attorneys of Kansas Legal Services and approximately 20 additional volunteer attorneys answered legal questions for approximately 100 residents at the homeless shelters. The questions ranged from simple child support and traffic issues to complex employment issues. In addition to advising clients, some private attorneys who assisted at the clinics took on long-term commitments to assist clients pro bono.

The attorneys who participated in the clinics were able to assist a population who too often feel that they are living on the fringe of society and do not matter. Further, due to their living and employment situations, this population does not have easy access to assistance provided by most attorneys. True justice mandates assistance not only to those who can pay for it, but also to those on the margins of society. Lack of income does not equate to a lack of legal problems, but instead is a barrier to access to the courts and adequate solutions to those problems.

At the homeless clinics over the past two winters, there were a number of dedicated legal professionals who offered their services to those who were afraid or unable to access services in the usual fashion. While the service provided is free to the homeless, the staff of Kansas Legal Services and the volunteers are richly paid with the satisfaction that they are making a difference and are living proof that attorneys do care and can make a difference.

This year, AECH and the homeless community are shifting the model in which they provide services to the homeless. After many years of planning and dreaming, Open Door Ministries has opened the Homeless Resource Center at 402 E. Second, Wichita, Kansas, to provide all the services necessary to prevent homelessness.

The Homeless Resource Center is the only comprehensive day assistance center for homeless in Wichita. The center provides case management, a daily meal, access to showers, laundry facilities, small storage, a telephone with message board, and mail service. In addition, The Safety Net and Transitional Housing programs provide permanent supportive housing and are provided in collaboration with COMCARE of Sedgwick County Homeless Services Division and Mennonite Housing. These programs address the needs of a growing demographic by providing an apartment for single persons who are chronically homeless and disabled with a mental illness.

Finally, The Vision Quest program is a home-based outreach program designed to prevent homelessness and help families break out of the cycle of poverty. Case management is provided to teach budgeting, life skills, and job readiness and training. The two case managers make home visits as often as needed to assist the family to develop a work plan with full-time employment and long-term self-sufficiency as the goals.

Because Open Door Ministries has opened the Homeless Resource Center, Kansas Legal Services has modified its plan for outreach among the homeless population. Kansas Legal Services is provided office space to meet with clients at the Homeless Resource Center. The service has been utilized by many of the clients of Open Door over the past few months. Each week on Tuesday and Thursday from 10 to 11 a.m., attorneys and paralegals provide service and answer questions that range from employment issues to Social Security disability and VA pensions.

Kansas Legal Services cannot provide legal assistance to the growing homeless population alone. We need help. Volunteer attorneys are very much needed. In addition to the homeless outreach, Kansas Legal Services will continue to provide clinics to victims of domestic violence. These occur quarterly during evenings through the year.

If you are an attorney and would like to help or know of an attorney who would be interested in providing assistance in either program, please email sullivanr@klsinc.org or call (316) 290-8208. With your assistance we can show this community that society does care.



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