

Kansas Legal Services

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



www.kansaslegalservices.org

Interview with Marilyn Harp: KLS helps provide ‘justice for all’

Topeka Capital-Journal By [Liz Montano](#) Special to [The Capital-Journal](#)

The organization provides legal advice, representation to thousands of Kansans

Marilyn Harp, executive director of Kansas Legal Services, says the organization provides legal advice and representation to low-income Kansans. KLS has 11 offices statewide and 30 attorneys, with retired attorneys volunteering their time as well.

Every now and then, someone gets entangled wrongfully in the legal system. In criminal cases, the public defender’s office steps in if you can’t afford an attorney. But if you’re the injured party or the case isn’t determined to be criminal, getting legal help if you’re at the lower end of the financial spectrum may feel like you’re hitting one brick wall after another.

That’s where Kansas Legal Services may be able to help. KLS provides legal services for people who would otherwise find it impossible to have access to the legal system based on their income, according to executive director Marilyn Harp, who recently spoke by telephone about the organization.

Q: Why is it important to have an organization such as Kansas Legal Services?

Harp: The U.S. Constitution has been interpreted to include the right to an attorney for someone charged in a criminal case. I’m sure you’re familiar with the Miranda Rights. The right to an attorney does not extend to people who are involved in civil cases — people who may be involved in child custody disputes or for people facing foreclosure of their home.

Of course, we can’t provide services to everyone in Kansas facing those situations because we have limited resources, but we help as many as we can.

Q: You mentioned child custody disputes and foreclosure situations. What are some of the other situations KLS would likely become involved in?

Harp: We do a large amount of family law work, with a huge focus in helping the victims of domestic violence or sexual assault without consideration of their income. We assist in a number of identity theft or Social Security disability cases for people disabled applying for Social Security benefits. Much of that work is with people who only qualify for SSI (Supplemental Security Income) benefits. In addition, we provide advice or guidance to people representing themselves who need access to information — in consumer cases, landlord tenant concerns, those kinds of things. Or, perhaps they need legal forms. They can also find many of those legal documents on our website.

Q: So people who are economically disadvantaged and senior citizens are your primary clients?

Harp: Right. If you're in the state Supreme Court building, there's a quote on the wall that says, "Within these walls, the balance of justice weighs equal." The goal of what we do is to really play out the idea of access to justice, that all people are equal within the justice system.

Q: What's your average annual caseload?

Harp: Annually, we probably talk to and provide legal advice for 10,000 Kansans and provide legal representation in court to another 8,000 or 9,000 people. That being said, the need is probably four times that many. We have 11 offices statewide and 30 attorneys and, again, limited funding.

Q: With that volume, I would imagine you would encourage other lawyers in Kansas to volunteer some time?

Harp: Absolutely, whether they're still practicing law or retired. We do have retired lawyers who volunteer. One notable one is former Kansas Sen. Tim Owens. He volunteers his services two days a week in the Self-Help Center of the Johnson County Courthouse. Even if an attorney is retired and hasn't maintained a license to practice, they can still volunteer under our supervision.

Q: How can someone reach out to you for help?

Harp: They can call our statewide toll-free number (1-800-723-6953), or they can apply online at the **KLS website**.

One thing I want to mention is that the American Bar Association has started a project in many states — I think about 40 states now, including Kansas — where volunteer attorneys provide web-based, free legal answers.

Some people don't require legal representation, they just need an answer to a question. Those people can go to freelegalanswers.org. If you do need more than answers, contact Kansas Legal Services.

Liz Montano is a freelance writer from Topeka. newsbizliz@gmail.com.

KANSAS LEGAL SERVICES

What: An organization that helps low-income Kansans meet their basic needs through legal, mediation and employment training services.

Address: 712 S. Kansas Ave., Suite 200

To apply for legal help: Call (800) 723-6953 or visit www.kansaslegalservices.org **online application.**

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