

Franklin County Bar Association Supports Creation of Local Legal Services Program

With financial support from the Franklin County Bar Association, Franklin County Legal Services Inc. (FCLS) opened its doors in downtown Chambersburg on March 1, 2002, offering civil legal representation to low-income residents of the county.

FCLS provides a third source of civil legal aid to county residents, along with MidPenn Legal Services and the Law Offices of WIN Victim Services, which assists victims of abuse.

Members of the bar association endorsed the creation of the new organization at their annual meeting in Dec. 2001. They earmarked \$12,000 in their 2002 budget for FCLS to cover startup and operational costs.

The bar association has demonstrated its commitment to representation of low-income residents consistently since the 1970s, when a group of attorneys spearheaded coordination of pro bono cases. That group then built a local program and hired staff to meet civil legal aid needs in the county. They then formed the Franklin County Legal Services Society to oversee the program.

That program eventually became Legal Services Inc., which grew to serve Fulton, Adams and Cumberland counties, but remained a locally administered and funded organization. The Legal Services Society also maintained its involvement.

After consulting with MidPenn staff and past staff of Legal Services Inc., the bar association's executive committee approved the proposal for the new organization and took the plan to the general membership, which voiced unanimous support. Legal Services Inc. then was merged into MidPenn Legal Services in January 2001, creating an 18-county program.

The addition of FCLS increased the number of full-time legal services attorneys in the county to four — Mahesh Rao at FCLS, Rebecca Dempsey at WIN Victim Services, and Anne MacDonald-Fox and Aaron Neuharth at MidPenn. And in September 2002, that number grew to five with the addition of Carrie Bowmaster to FCLS.

The three agencies coordinate their efforts to provide a broader array of services to residents than previously was available. For example, under current federal regulations, MidPenn is prohibited from representing some victims of physical abuse. WIN Victim Services is able to handle the legal needs of all such victims, including representation in protection from abuse order requests. MidPenn is also prohibited from representing residents whose income exceeds 125 percent of the current poverty guideline, except in limited circumstances. FCLS has established more liberal income guidelines for accepting cases.

Financial support for FCLS has come from other local sources besides the bar association, including Friends of Legal Services, whose board of directors endorsed the new program in the fall of 2001. The bulk of the proceeds from the Friends' annual book sale at Wilson College will go to FCLS. The 2002 sale raised a record \$32,000.

FCLS also received a \$10,000 Community Development Block Grant in the Spring 2002 from the Chambersburg Borough and a \$7,500 grant from the Stewart Foundation in the Summer 2002.

In addition, an anonymous attorney donated half of the rent for the two-room FCLS office, and a number of other bar members donated office furniture and supplies.

Five of the nine FCLS board members are bar association members.