

2008 Annual Report

...and Justice For All



Improving Lives, Changing Communities



**Southwest Virginia
Legal Aid Society**



Partners for Justice

In the past two years our Board of Directors has decided to expand our mission. While we will continue to *provide high quality, courteous and effective legal services and advice to low-income families and individuals*, we will also *work with others in the region to identify and respond to problems faced by those in the low-income community*. This means, of course, that we are committed to being good partners with the other agencies in the region that work to improve the lives of low-income families. I am proud to report on our partnerships throughout the region— some that have been newly created and others recently strengthened.

Early in our work with victims of domestic violence it became clear that partnerships with other programs were essential. We have developed contracts with all seven of the region's domestic violence programs and our staff members participate in the local task forces. Our attorneys are working with the Wythe and Smyth

County agencies to establish a safe visitation center. We helped Washington County's Coordinated Community Response Team obtain funding for a coordinator.

To better serve our older citizens, we have established partnerships with all agencies on aging in our service area. These agencies help support our legal services for the elderly and we help them with training needs.

Over the last year, our attorneys have met with the medical staff of three community health care systems – Stone Mountain, Southwest Virginia and Clinch River. These systems operate twenty clinics throughout our service area. With them we developed a partnership that expedites referrals of their patients to our program for legal services that can affect their patients' health.

As housing problems escalate, we are partnering with housing programs in our region to prevent homelessness. While these programs provide resources, such as rental assistance and utility payments, we provide legal services that help families avoid eviction or foreclosure.

Our longest established partnerships are with private attorneys who, through pro-bono or reduced fees, serve the legal needs of our clients. The work of these attorneys make Legal Aid both more efficient and more effective in fulfilling our mission.

In the coming year we will look for more opportunities to be an effective partner in efforts to improve Southwest Virginia for low income families.

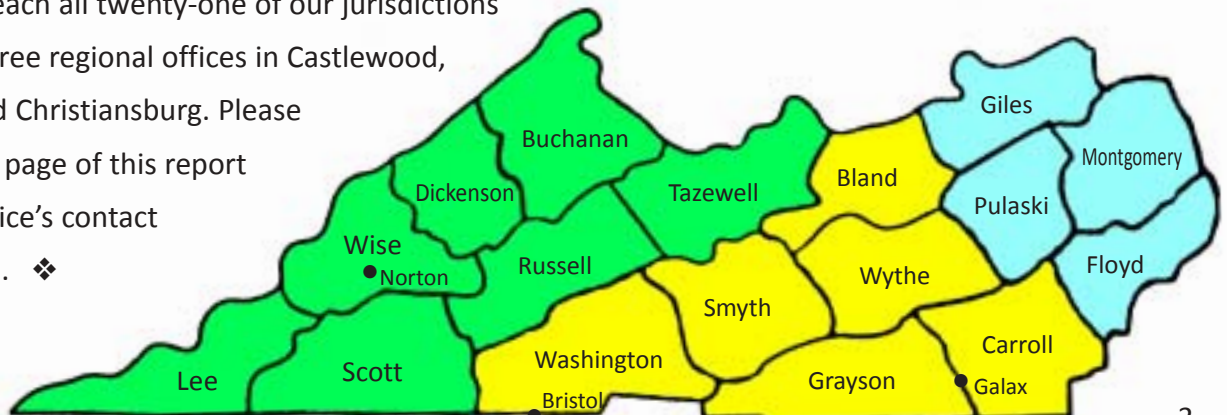
Larry T. Harley
Executive Director

Our Mission:

To champion equal justice for low-income Virginians and to work to remedy the conditions that burden the low-income community. To these ends, we will provide high quality, courteous, and effective legal services and advice to low-income families and individuals facing serious threats to their economic or family stability and we will work with others in the region to identify and respond to problems faced by those in the low-income community.

Southwest Virginia Legal Aid Society is committed to provide the highest quality legal services to our clients. To be most efficient and effective, we rely on our Board of Directors' priorities; our attorneys work extensively only on those cases that are considered top priority. More than 90% of our priority extended cases involve the following issues: Family Stability; Protective Orders for Victims of Domestic Violence; Debt and Consumer Problems; Public Benefits; and Housing. Last year, we served a total of 5,005 clients while we provided extensive service to 1,174 of our clients. Our intake workers helped many of our other clients solve their own legal problems with advice over the phone.

Our service area includes all of Southwest Virginia from the New River Valley west to the tip of Lee County. Staff members reach all twenty-one of our jurisdictions from our three regional offices in Castlewood, Marion, and Christiansburg. Please see the last page of this report for each office's contact information. ❖



Southwest Virginia Legal Aid Society Board of Directors

- Michele Brooks, *Weber City*
- Natasha Carpenter, *Pearisburg*
- Tammy Gray, *Castlewood*
- Rick Huffman, *Damascus*
- Edna Justus, *Hurley*
- Martha Ketron, *Lebanon*
- Raquel Alderman Lyons, *Hillsville*
- Blake McKinney, *Abingdon*
- Steve Minor, *Bristol*
- Joseph Rasnic, *Jonesville*
- Gerald Sharp, *Lebanon*
- Steven Shelton-Pullen, *Richlands*
- Stephanie Shortt, *Floyd*
- Carmel Stowers, *Blacksburg*
- Chris Tuck, *Blacksburg*
- Sheila J. Weimer, *Tazewell*
- Avis Wolfe, *Lebanon*

CHAIR:

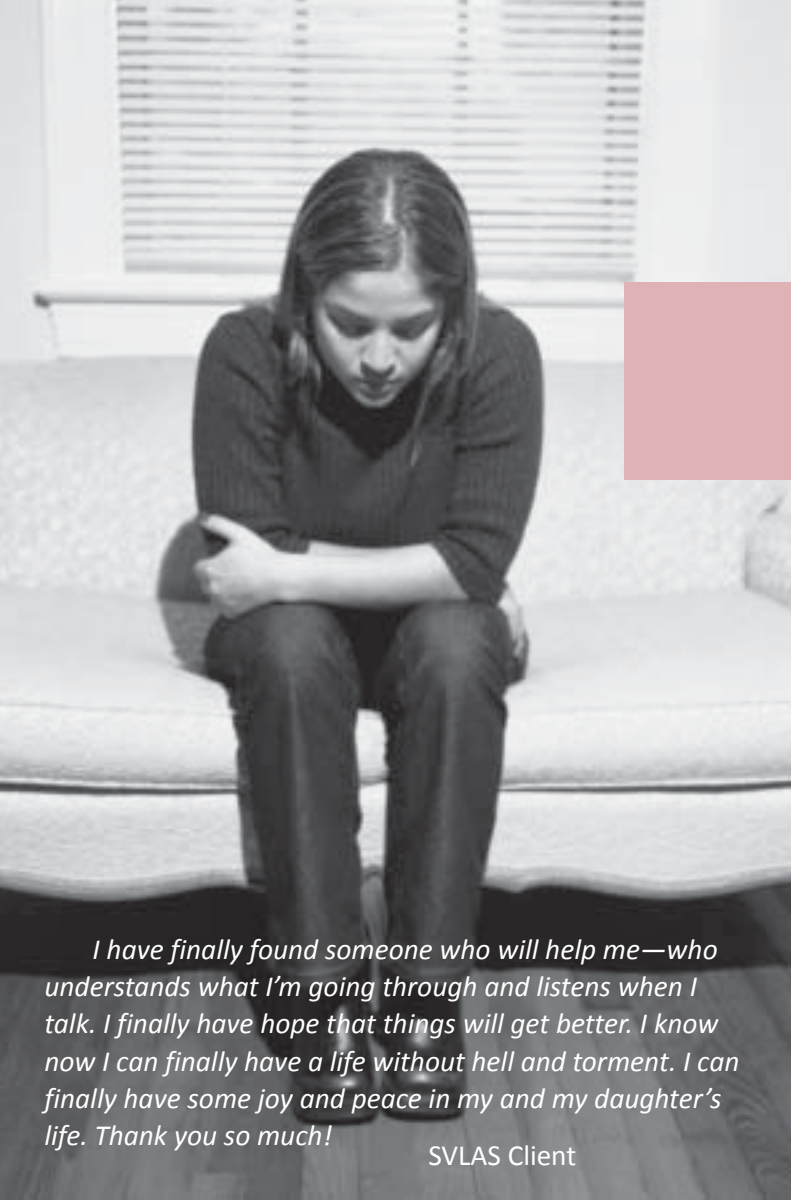
- Douglas Brinckman, *Christiansburg*

REGIONAL VICE-CHAIRS:

- Michael Abbot, *Wise*
- Herb Clay, *Marion*

SECRETARY/TREASURER:

- Susan Blevins, *Rural Retreat*



Protecting Victims of Domestic Violence

I have finally found someone who will help me—who understands what I'm going through and listens when I talk. I finally have hope that things will get better. I know now I can finally have a life without hell and torment. I can finally have some joy and peace in my and my daughter's life. Thank you so much!

SVLAS Client

Violence by an intimate partner is devastating. And it can be paralyzing. Violence that happens behind the closed doors of the home can leave the victim feeling isolated and those in the community feeling at a loss as to how to help. But an attorney can use the law to give the victim some measure of power. As one client said:

"Having someone strong and knowledgeable back me and stand by my side made the difference. If I had to pay for the

services of a lawyer on top of paying for a new apartment and moving costs, I may have backed out of the legal aspects of leaving and then leaving may not have been effective. I have tried to leave before and never succeeded because I never filed protective orders and never filed for custody because I didn't think I could prove my case."

And, working with other agencies, Legal Aid can help reduce a community's level of violence. A major national study showed that the availability of an attorney was the major factor in lowering a community's rate of domestic violence. And our statistics confirm that finding. Over the five years that SVLAS increased its legal services to victims from 2003 to 2007, the number of domestic violence court complaints dropped by 35% in our service area. This is compared to a statewide drop of 16% over the same period. This dramatic difference indicates that legal assistance to victims not only helps one victim at a time but can change the

A Decent Place To Live

Housing is a basic need for each of us. But we've all seen lately how easily our home can be lost. The threat of foreclosure has been in the news; it is apparent that many of us are just one illness away from losing our home. To a renter an unfair landlord, unsafe housing conditions, or loss of utilities can be just as threatening.

To help homeowners keep their home, Legal Aid established a foreclosure counseling program. Our counselors help families facing foreclosure negotiate with their lenders, set up payment plans and develop budgets that will fit those plans. Our attorneys help families save their

home by filing bankruptcy. This allows them the flexibility and space that they need to repair their credit and to continue to live in their homes.

Our attorneys also help renters by defending against unfair evictions or utility cut-offs. They also help clients negotiate with landlords to make sure their homes are safe.

Sharon's story

As a single parent Sharon worked full time to make ends meet and to keep up her

mortgage payments. But a back injury forced her out of work for three months. Even though she drew short term disability benefits, that income was not enough to pay all of her bills. She was not able to keep up with her house payments and the bank began foreclosure proceedings. That's when Sharon called Legal Aid. Right away, our foreclosure counselor began to negotiate a repayment plan with her lender. By this time, Sharon had returned to full time work. Even so, the lender was not willing to work out a reasonable payment plan. Negotiations broke down when the lender set a date for the sale of her property. At that point, our attorney stepped in and helped Sharon file a Chapter 13 bankruptcy petition. This halted the sale of her home. With the help of her attorney Sharon proposed a four year plan whereby all of her debts would be paid in full and her house payments would be brought current. The court accepted her plan. Now, Sharon and her children are able to remain in their home and get on with their lives. ❖



Children and Families

To be healthy, children need a safe and stable family. Legal Aid supports family safety and stability by helping parents deal with complicated and critical issues such as custody, visitation and support. In fact, family law cases comprise the majority of services provided by SVLAS. Since increasing our efforts to serve victims of domestic violence, many of our custody, visitation, and support cases are for survivors of domestic violence. In this work, we work closely with local domestic violence shelters to make sure that our clients receive the full range of support that they need to move on with their lives.

Carol's Story

For ten years, Carol had been enduring physical and emotional abuse from her husband. Many times she had considered leaving her husband but failed to do so because she was afraid of losing her children and she just didn't know how she could support herself and her children. For years her husband had berated and degraded her, telling her that she was not good enough. Even though Carol is bright and attractive, over the years she had begun to believe that she didn't deserve anything better. But when her nine year old became distraught and began screaming when she witnessed Carol being beaten by her own father, Carol realized that she must act so she contacted Legal Aid. Our attorney went to work on her behalf. She went to court with her and obtained a two year protective order that applied to her and her children. She told Carol how she could obtain housing assistance from the local department of social services as well as help with child care costs and other necessities. She encouraged her to go to the Women's Resource Center where she could get counseling for both herself and her children. She also went back to court with Carol to help her obtain sole custody of her children as well as child support. Our attorney even went with Carol to the criminal hearings where her husband was convicted of assault and battery as well as destruction of property and ordered to pay Carol for the damages he did to her property.

Life is still a struggle for Carol. But now it's a struggle for success. She has begun a part time job and has returned to school to work on a college degree. With the support of many community agencies – including Legal Aid – Carol and her children are on their way to a new life. ❖



Partnerships for the Elderly



Southwest Virginia Legal Aid Society has partnered with all of the area agencies on aging in order to address the special legal needs of older persons living in our community. The agencies on aging make sure their clients know about our services and assist them, when appropriate, to apply for our services. Often our programs work together to make sure the client receives all of the services they need. In addition, our attorneys provide training to the agency staff members so that they better know the legal issues for the elderly.

Ms. Smith's Story

The elderly are not the only ones at risk of being taken advantage of by unscrupulous lenders but they can be very vulnerable and the loss of a home can leave an older person devastated. Ms. Smith, a 78 year old widow, was very confused when, in 2007, a loan company encouraged her to refinance her house...twice within four months. But she did what they suggested, paying them \$15,000 in upfront fees. After the loan company had finished *helping* her she had a \$135,000 mortgage on a \$75,000 house. Her monthly payments increased to \$1,100 while her income was only \$1,500 a month. Soon she fell behind on her mortgage. This past year, just a week before her foreclosure, she contacted us for help. To stave off the foreclosure our attorney filed an emergency Chapter 13 just one day before the foreclosure was scheduled to take place.

Ms. Smith's situation became even more complex when her loan was bundled with other loans and placed in a securitized trust by the originator and then that originator went bankrupt. Our attorney was forced to file an adversary proceeding that asked the bankruptcy court to remove Ms. Smith's mortgage, pointing out violations of a number of lending and consumer statutes. At this point, the loan servicer asked to settle the claims out of court. Our attorney was able to get the mortgage reduced to \$100,000 and the monthly payments to \$700 a month, an amount that Ms. Smith could (barely) afford. After the new loan agreement was executed, our attorney was able to change the bankruptcy to a Chapter 7 which allowed Ms. Smith to deal with all of her debts. Ms. Smith has been able to stay in her house and now is capable of paying her bills on time. ❖

Partnerships for Better Health

In 2008, Legal Aid began partnerships with three community health care systems—Stone Mountain Health Services, Clinch River Health Services, and Southwest Virginia Community Health Care Systems. The idea of the partnership is that legal service may be one important tool needed to improve a person’s health. While a doctor may prescribe the best medicine for a child’s asthma, if that child’s family is evicted and becomes homeless, the child’s health may not improve. If Legal Aid can keep a family in their home, the medical intervention may be more effective.

The partnership is designed to make sure that patients who need legal help reach Legal Aid as soon as possible. Medical professionals at these three health care systems send faxed referrals to Legal Aid. When these special referrals come in, intake workers begin the application process right away. Our attorneys make every effort to serve these clients so that their legal problems do not overwhelm the good health care that they receive from the community health care center. ❖



Partnerships with Private Attorneys

Southwest Virginia Legal Aid is fortunate to have partners among the private bar, individual attorneys who are willing to handle cases for our low income clients, either at a reduced fee or pro-bono. Because of the generosity of these attorneys, our program is able to serve a much larger number of low income families in Southwest Virginia. We all owe a huge thanks to these attorneys:

- | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Ackerman, Bettye | Mullins, David |
| Adams, Roger | Nagel, Dennis |
| Alderman-Mitchell, Renae | Needham, Anthony |
| Anderson, Barry | Neyhart, Tracy |
| Anderson, Mark | Nimmo, Penny |
| Baker, Susie | Proctor, Barry |
| Bedsaul, Mike | Profitt, Dale |
| Bowen, Suzanne | Robertson, John |
| Bowles, Terri | Rogers, Jonathan |
| Brinckman, Anne | Schroeder, Harrison |
| Broughton, N. Reid | Shankman, Byron |
| Campbell, Greg | Shockley, Everett |
| Carmody, James | Sifford, Debbie |
| Chidester, Richard | Stone, Meg |
| Cook DeVilbiss, Gail | Tuck, Chris |
| Copeland, Bob | Tuckwiller, Janet |
| Cox, Stephanie | Warburton, David |
| deCourcy, Felicia | Wilson, Sherry |
| Desimone, Chris | |
| DeVries, Adam | |
| Fast, Dan | |
| Forester, Richard | |
| Groseclose, Alan | |
| Harrison, Cliff | |
| Hartley, James | |
| Huntington, John | |
| Jenkins, Max | |
| Kegley, Robin | |
| Kincade, Gary | |
| Layman, Rod | |
| McConnell, Lisa Ann | |
| McNichols, Wade | |
| Montgomery, James | |



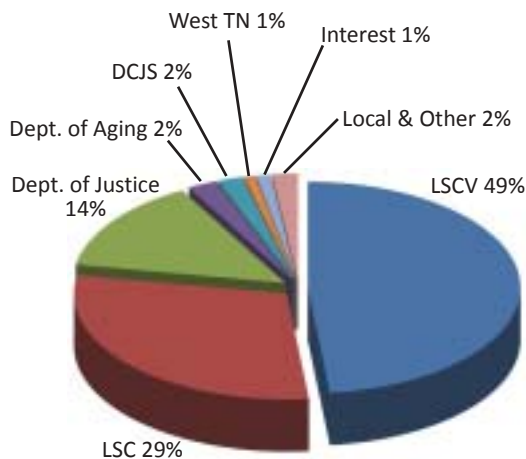
Managing Attorney Mark Lewis leads a staff meeting in Christiansburg



Attorneys Maria Timoney and Elizabeth Bruzzo confer on a case

2008 Financials

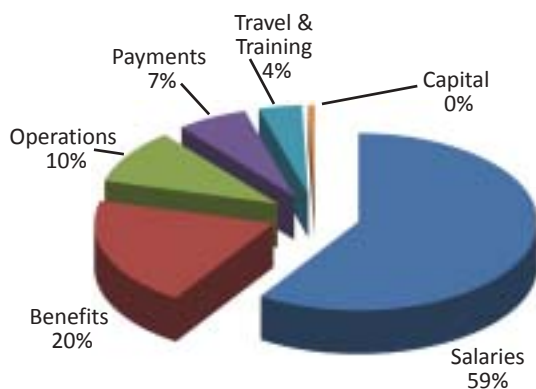
2008 Revenue Sources



Revenue:

Legal Services Corporation of Virginia	\$1,312,670
Legal Services Corporation (Federal)	\$795,045
US Department of Justice	\$383,707
VA Department of Aging	\$59,695
VA Dept. of Criminal Justice Services	
Domestic Violence Victim Fund	\$49,312
V-STOP	\$8,897
West Tennessee Legal Aid Society	\$20,850
Interest Income	\$25,986
Local and Other Donations	
United Ways*	\$16,693
Area Agencies on Aging*	\$12,295
Virginia Law Foundation	\$3,000
Community Foundation of the	
New River Valley	\$1,101
Other Local Donations and Support	\$21,959
TOTAL REVENUE	\$2,711,210**

2008 Expense Categories



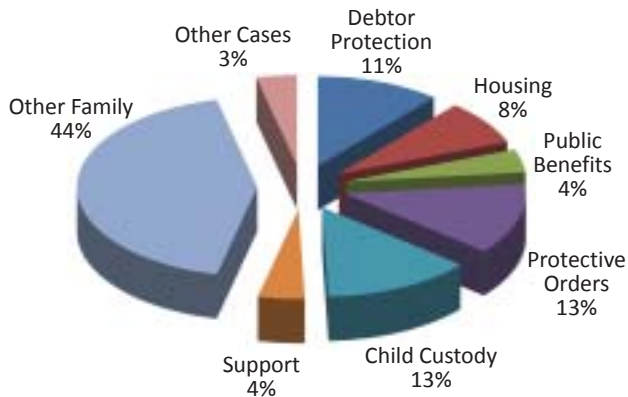
Expenses:

Employee Salaries	\$1,553,158
Employee Benefits	\$522,671
Office Operations	\$258,600
Judicare (private attorneys)	\$81,707
Domestic Violence Partners	\$92,388
Travel	\$52,613
Training	\$48,634
Capital Expenses	\$12,180
TOTAL EXPENSES	\$2,638,871**

*We are proud to receive funding from six local United Ways: Bristol United Way, Twin County United Way, United Way of Smyth County, United Way of Southwest Virginia, United Way of Washington County, and United Way of Wythe County. We also receive support from all local Area Agencies on Aging: Mountain Empire Older Citizens, Appalachian Agency on Aging, District III Governmental Cooperative, and New River Agency on Aging.

**The difference between expenses and income was carried over to the next year.

2008 Extended Cases by Type



Christiansburg Staff Members

Justice Matters

We often speak of the political and moral importance of providing equal access to our justice system to poor people. It is the right thing to do. And we often hear from our clients that knowing that they received a fair hearing is important regardless of the outcome. We are proud that 98% of our surveyed clients said that our representation was excellent. And 97% reported that they got what they wanted from their case. We also know that justice matters in concrete ways that improve people's lives. Here are some examples of how our legal services helped in 2008:

- 137 victims of domestic abuse obtained court protection;
- 145 parents obtained custody of their children;
- 43 parents obtained financial support for their children;
- 49 families stayed in their homes avoiding an eviction;
- 74 families stayed in their homes by reorganizing their debts through bankruptcy;
- 92 people completed a will or living will; and
- 46 families obtained Social Security or other benefits.

Employees at Legal Aid work for justice but they also change lives. ❖



Marion Staff Members



Castlewood Staff Members

SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA LEGAL AID SOCIETY, INC.

227 West Cherry Street Voice: (276) 783-8300
MARION, VA 24354 Fax: (276) 783-7411
Toll Free: 1-800-277-6754

16932 West Hills Drive Voice: (276) 762-9354
P.O. Box 670 Fax: (276) 762-9356
CASTLEWOOD, VA 24224 Toll Free: 1-888-201-2772

155 Arrowhead Trail Voice: (540) 382-6157
CHRISTIANSBURG, VA 24073 Fax: (540) 382-5981
Toll Free: 1-800-468-1366

SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA LEGAL AID SOCIETY, INC.

227 West Cherry Street
MARION, VA 24354

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Marion, VA
Permit No. 21

To Apply For Legal Services

Call **1-866-534-5243** (Landline)
or **1-888-201-2772** (Cellular)

*If we are to keep our democracy,
there must be one commandment:*

“Thou shalt not ration justice.”

— The Honorable Learned Hand

