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## The Need For a Self-Sustaining Mobile Legal Clinic in Widespread Urban Centers

Eshan Zaffar

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# THE NEED FOR A SELF-SUSTAINING MOBILE LEGAL CLINIC IN WIDESPREAD URBAN CENTERS

EHSAN ZAFFAR\*

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*“The legal profession owes it to itself that wrongs do not go without a remedy because the injured has no advocate . . . Does the lawyer ask, who is my neighbor? I answer—the poor man deprived of his just dues.”*

— Charles Evans Hughes,  
Speech to the American Bar Association, August, 1920

## I. INTRODUCTION

On a sleepy Sunday morning, Allison woke up to the sound of an alarm clock which should not have been ringing. Wiping the sleep from her eyes, she plodded towards the bathroom. She had just moved into this new apartment on the third floor after finally landing her first real, regular paying job in months. Things were beginning to look up. She'd finally be able to afford healthcare for her daughter Lisa and have enough money left over to make rent and afford a few healthy meals for the both of them.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This vignette is adapted from an amalgamation of several legal aid case studies. Allison’s story represents a “typical” failed attempt at obtaining legal care. It should be noted that in most cases, indi-

But as she walked past the balcony and towards the bathroom, Allison slipped on some curtains and plummeted straight down, past the balcony, and onto the street three stories below. She landed with a deafening, sickening thud. The cars screeching past on the otherwise busy road ground to a halt and the gaze of the onlookers swept to the balcony above. The balcony, a vestige of the old hotel which now housed the low-income apartments where Allison lived, was not constructed to code. It had no railings and was built too low to the floor. Falling off was almost as easy as walking straight without stopping.

Allison's sudden fall was the precursor for her similarly plummeting financial fortunes, declining mental health and loss of social support. She was immediately rushed to hospital and underwent surgery. Despite the best efforts of her surgeon, Allison suffered permanent damage to her vertebrae. The orthopedic department provided her with a wheelchair and informed her that she might need a titanium cage to support her back.

As she was reeling from her new debilitating condition, Allison was notified by the Department of Human Services ("DHS") that she was being terminated from general assistance program benefits. Despite the vociferous objections of her personal physician, the DHS doctor thought Allison could handle working up to thirty hours per week.

Desperate for help, Allison sought assistance from the legal aid organizations concentrated in downtown Los Angeles, more than fifty miles from her neighborhood on the city's outer edge. Unable to drive, she finally made it to a legal aid clinic using Los Angeles' inadequate mass transportation system. After spending the entire day there, she received a twenty-minute consultation and a referral to another legal organization only to be passed on to yet another legal aid organization thereafter. Depressed, physically immobile, responsible for the welfare of a child, unemployed, unable to afford an attorney and with no family or friends by her side, Allison was near the end of her rope and falling fast.

Stories like these play out across Los Angeles and other similar cities on a daily basis. Very often, individuals like Allison, who can hold down a job and have immediate and pressing responsibilities, are unable to get the legal assistance they need to surmount sudden emergencies. Usually, individuals like Allison end up spending an inordinate amount of time obtaining legal services from aid organizations often concentrated in city centers and downtowns. Sometimes, they never get the help they need and drop into further troubles or even homelessness. Often, their problems could have been resolved by the pre-emptive provision of legal services, such as seminars on workplace rights, domestic violence prevention lectures, or social services information sessions.

Even if individuals like Allison are able to meet with attorneys in legal aid offices, they are often referred either to private lawyers they cannot afford or to other over-burdened legal aid organizations. These legal aid organizations sometimes refer them again, resulting in a long cycle of referrals and delayed access to legal assistance. Legal aid organizations that are federally funded or limited in

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viduals like Allison eventually do receive some form of representation or legal advice, but by then their situation has either worsened or the legal advice is too little too late.

other ways cannot represent individuals with certain characteristics, such as those who are undocumented, further limiting legal aid to those who need it most.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, individuals such as Allison are often left trapped, in a “black hole” where neither legal aid nor private attorneys are able to offer them meaningful guidance or assistance. They are at the mercy of the complicated, overburdened and underfunded U.S. legal system.

This article analyzes some of the problems plaguing the legal aid system in the United States, particularly in large, modern urban centers such as Southern California, and then discusses a workable solution to these problems. The first part of the article looks at the challenges facing the legal aid system in the United States, namely access to care, lack of funding, and inefficient provision of legal services. The second part of the article analyzes why current legal aid models are ineffective at overcoming these challenges. The third and final part offers a potential solution to these problems in the form of the recently-launched Los Angeles Mobile Legal Aid Clinic (“LAMLAC”), a mobile, self-sustaining, legal aid clinic focused on providing preventative legal care to individuals in Southern California.

## II. PART I

### A. *A Growing Justice Gap*

In September 2005, the Legal Services Corporation (“LSC”)<sup>3</sup> issued a comprehensive report (“LSC Report”) which used a variety of methodologies to document the civil legal needs of low-income individuals and families and to quantify necessary access to civil legal assistance - that is, the level of assistance that would be required across the nation to respond appropriately to those needs.<sup>4</sup>

The civil legal problems of low-income people involve essential human needs, such as protection from abusive relationships, safe and habitable housing, access to necessary health care, disability payments to help lead independent lives, family law issues including child support and custody actions, and relief from financial exploitation.<sup>5</sup> The difference between the level of legal assistance available and the level that is necessary to meet the needs of low-income Americans is the “justice gap.”

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<sup>2</sup> This restriction on state, local and private funds extends the federal funding restrictions to limit all the activities conducted on behalf of clients of federally-funded programs, even when those activities are financed with the programs’ non-federal funds. See Omnibus Consolidated Rescissions & Appropriations Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-134, § 504(a), 110 Stat. 1321, 1321-53-1321-56 (1996) (prohibiting any “entity” that engages in enumerated restricted activities from receiving Legal Services Corporation funds).

<sup>3</sup> The LSC is an institution charged by Congress with the administration of the federally-funded civil legal assistance program for those who would otherwise be unable to afford adequate legal counsel.

<sup>4</sup> *Documenting the Justice Gap in America: The Current Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-Income Americans*, LEGAL SERVS. CORP., Sept. 2009, at 1, available at [http://www.lsc.gov/pdfs/documenting\\_the\\_justice\\_gap\\_in\\_america\\_2009.pdf](http://www.lsc.gov/pdfs/documenting_the_justice_gap_in_america_2009.pdf). The LSC Report collected and analyzed data only from LSC funded programs. Although these programs comprise a large, comprehensive sample of the legal aid organizations in the nation, they are by no means exhaustive.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

The findings of the LSC Report are startling and are consistent with a body of social scientific literature that has been growing for two decades: of those people who seek assistance from legal aid programs, one is turned away because of limited resources for every one helped. Only a small fraction of the legal needs of low-income people are addressed with the assistance of an attorney. There are more than ten times as many private lawyers providing personal legal services to persons in the general population above the LSC poverty level.<sup>6</sup>

Law is a \$100 billion per year industry.<sup>7</sup> However, of that \$100 billion, less than \$1 billion is dedicated to delivering legal services to low-income Americans.<sup>8</sup> Put in terms of people rather than dollars, there is about one lawyer for every 240 non-poor Americans, but only one lawyer for every 9,000 Americans whose low income would qualify them for legal aid.<sup>9</sup> To put in perspective what those numbers mean, the American Bar Association's Comprehensive Legal Needs Study found that every year about half of low-income people face legal needs—that is, "situations, events, or difficulties any member of the household faced . . . that raised legal issues."<sup>10</sup>

Since the LSC Report was issued, other major developments have occurred which affect levels of need for civil legal assistance and the ability of legal aid providers to meet it:

1. The current economic crisis, high unemployment, increasing rates of foreclosure and family stress has resulted in increasing legal problems related to bankruptcy, consumer credit, domestic violence, divorce, and other issues related to families being pushed into poverty for the first time.
2. This crisis has simultaneously hit legal aid organizations throughout the country as well as their donors, including the federal government. Although revenues from state Interest on Lawyers' Trust Ac-

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<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 6.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, NO. 1273, NO. 1273. GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT IN DOMESTIC TRADE AND SERVICE INDUSTRIES IN CURRENT AND REAL (1992) DOLLARS:1990 TO 1996 (2000), available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/99pubs/99statab/sec27.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> According to the American Bar Association's Project to Expand Resources for Legal Services ("PERLS"), state IOLTA programs provided an additional \$125 million in 2001. PERLS: A Chart of Significant Fundraising Activities for Legal Services, available at [http://www.abanet.org/legalservices/sclaid\\_chart.html](http://www.abanet.org/legalservices/sclaid_chart.html). PERLS reports that in 2001, legal services obtained \$363,979,400 from the following sources: court fees and fines (\$36,799,000); state appropriations (\$66,436,000); other non-LSC public funds (\$135,175,500); lawyer fund drives (\$22,225,000); attorney-registration fees (\$1,441,000); bar funds (\$9,401,700); bar dues add-ons and check-offs (\$772,000); Cy Pres funds (\$1,297,500); foundation and corporate grants (\$39,314,200); and miscellaneous contributions (mostly United Way, Skadden, and NAPIL fellowships) (\$51,118,000). *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> In 1999, 33,899,812 out of a total population of 281,421,906 Americans lived beneath the poverty line. See U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, TABLE DP-3. PROFILE OF SELECTED ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS: 2000 (1999), available at <http://censtats.census.gov/data/US/01000.pdf>. However, the cutoff for representation by a legal-services lawyer is set at 125% of the poverty line, and this brings the eligible-client pool to an estimated 44.5 million. Documenting the Justice Gap in America (2009), available at [http://www.lsc.gov/pdfs/documenting\\_the\\_justice\\_gap\\_in\\_america\\_2009.pdf](http://www.lsc.gov/pdfs/documenting_the_justice_gap_in_america_2009.pdf) at p. 7 n.4. Accordingly, the number of people that can be served by the LSC is closer to fifty-three million. See *Id.* at 6 n.2. The current economic downturn is very likely to have boosted this number.

<sup>10</sup> AM. BAR ASSOC., LEGAL NEEDS AND CIVIL JUSTICE 2 (1994), available at <http://www.abanet.org/legalservices/downloads/sclaid/legalneedstudy.pdf>.

counts (“IOLTA”) programs rose in some states with new revenue enhancement techniques, they have recently fallen precipitously in many states as a result of low interest rates and the declining economy, reducing trust account deposits.

3. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of individuals living below 125% of the federal poverty level in the United States increased from 49.6 million in 2005 to 53.8 million in 2008.<sup>11</sup>

As comprehensive as the LSC Report is, the methodologies employed by the LSC Report and other similar endeavors do not capture people with serious legal needs who did not contact any legal aid provider. In addition to poor economic conditions, individuals like Allison face many factors that keep them from seeking legal assistance:

- People with legal problems frequently do not understand that they need legal help.<sup>12</sup>
- People who meet the eligibility requirements for free legal services may not seek help from these programs because they do not believe that the program will be able to assist them. Legal aid providers observe that calls for assistance involving particular problem types tend to rise and fall based on the availability of relevant services.<sup>13</sup>
- Barriers such as geographical distance and isolation, low literacy, physical or mental disability, limited English proficiency, culture and ethnic background, and apprehension about the courts and the legal system.<sup>14</sup>

### III. PART II

The United States legal aid system provides innumerable and often immeasurable benefits to millions of Americans who would otherwise be unable to afford legal care on their own. Individuals who cannot afford private representation often seek the help of private attorneys who take on their case for free through “pro-bono” representation. Others approach legal aid organizations such as Legal Aid or Public Counsel, which have offices in large metropolitan areas. Still others rely on a patchwork of self-help legal aid clinics operating on shoestring budgets and overburdened municipal “in pro per” or self-representation programs. However, despite these options, lack of funding, inadequate access to legal care and ineffective legal assistance have plagued the legal aid community since its inception.

The majority of these problems result from the manner in which legal aid organizations and private firms conduct their pro-bono operations. Many legal aid

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<sup>11</sup> U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, P60-236(RV), INCOME, POVERTY, AND HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE IN THE UNITED STATES: 2008 (2009), available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2009pubs/p60-236.pdf>. The 2008 data reflect the initial effects of the recession and signal even larger increases for 2009 because of high unemployment rates.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at app. C tbl. C-1.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 11. United States legal aid infrastructure is now beset by ineffective legal assistance, lack of funding, and inadequate access to legal care providers, preventing individuals such as Allison from obtaining the legal assistance they need.

organizations are structured like private legal firms, where an executive officer fulfills the role of the “managing partner” at a law firm, and public interest lawyers act as “associates.” Although the system is very good at providing effective legal care, it lacks adequate extensibility and flexibility in the provision of legal care. Professor Scott Cummings notes,

Whereas for most of American legal history, pro bono was ad hoc and individualized, dispensed informally as professional charity, within the last twenty-five years it has become centralized and streamlined, distributed through an elaborate institutional structure by private lawyers acting out of professional duty. Pro bono has thus emerged as the dominant means of dispensing free representation to poor and underserved clients, eclipsing state-sponsored legal services and other nongovernmental mechanisms in importance.<sup>15</sup>

Cummings argues that this results in the problems highlighted above: namely that “[p]ro-bono [or legal aid] lawyers do not invest heavily in gaining substantive expertise, getting to know the . . . public interest field, or [taking the time to] understand[] the long-range goals of client groups.”<sup>16</sup> He also highlights the vast budget gaps which inhibit legal aid in all its forms:

The disparity of the resources devoted to billable versus pro bono work—which, even at the most generous firm, rarely constitutes more than [five] percent of total hours—underscores the vast inequality in legal services that persists. Indeed, there are no parallel resources available to press the interests of marginalized social groups. Legal services are too restricted and nonprofit groups are too financially constrained.<sup>17</sup>

Nor is it easy to change the current legal aid system since it costs a lot to change an already costly system. For instance, Professor Van Alstine’s research on “legal transition costs” indicates that the legal system in the United States will incur costs simply in adjusting to the existence of new legal norms.<sup>18</sup> Compared to other court systems, particularly European systems, the United States court system is a behemoth and often the victim of its own momentum when attempting any significant legal policy shift. For instance, established exclusively to interpret and apply legislative law, European court systems quickly adopted specialized courts (i.e. administrative courts for the adjudication for administrative matters), each with its associated courts of redress.<sup>19</sup> The United States has followed this model

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<sup>15</sup> Scott L. Cummings, *The Politics of Pro Bono*, 52 UCLA L. REV. 1 (2004).

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 148.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> Michael P. Van Alstine, *The Costs of Legal Change*, 49 UCLA L. REV. 789, 789 (2002).

Included among these are the costs of learning the content of new law; the uncertainty costs that flow from the loss of accumulated knowledge about the old law and from contending with the new; private adjustment costs, such as intraparty drafting and administrative costs, as well as the effect on interparty contractual networks; and the costs of formulation and interpretive error.

*Id.*

<sup>19</sup> Erhard Blankenburg, *Patterns of Legal Culture: The Netherlands Compared to Neighboring Germany*, 46 AM. J. COMP. L. 1, 37-40 (1998) (discussing the court system in France); Nicolas Marie Kublicki, *An Overview of the French Legal System from an American Perspective*, 12 B.U. INT’L L.J. 57 (1994) (discussing the court system in Germany).

only in limited circumstances—most notably with the creation of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, the growing conservatism of the country and the courts is preventing significant change within the system so that the issues outlined in Part I are not easily tackled and resolved by pre-existing legal aid institutions. As research on social movements has emphasized, a critical factor in promoting reform is the “political opportunity structure”<sup>21</sup> And over the last twenty-five years, the climate for progressive legal changes has grown less favorable.<sup>22</sup> Though this impact varies among groups, the general atmosphere limits change and fosters status quo. The problems have been compounded by restrictive interpretations of attorneys’ fee statutes. Over the past fifteen years, court rulings have allowed denials on fees based on the monetary damages obtained, rather than the work performed, and have disallowed fees entirely when defendants settle before securing a final judgment.<sup>23</sup>

Poverty, immigration, housing, and prisoners’ rights organizations have been particularly affected by legislative retrenchment. Congressional restrictions now prevent federally funded legal services programs from engaging in activities that are most likely to yield systemic changes, such as class actions, lobbying, community organizing, or participation in legislative and administrative rule-making proceedings.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, these organizations have been forced either to forgo federal assistance or to accept conditions that undermine their effectiveness and leave poor individuals, who are politically most vulnerable, legally vulnerable as well.<sup>25</sup> For most public interest legal institutions, the climate has grown more challenging over the last twenty-five years. And, though that in and of itself is a measure of partial progress, since the legal aid movements, many achievements have softened its initial sense of urgency; they are, nonetheless, troubling signs for individuals like Alison seeking to obtain immediate legal care.

The last major expansion of legal aid services occurred during the 1960s. This, of course, is unsurprising given the broader movements towards social egalitarianism and civil rights, which were simultaneously occurring in that decade. Since then, legal aid has grown slowly and attempted no dramatic shifts in focus. Long known for its conservatism as a profession, the juggernaut that is the U.S.

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<sup>20</sup> See 28 U.S.C. §1295 (2000).

<sup>21</sup> SIDNEY TARROW, *POWER IN MOVEMENT: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND CONTENTIOUS POLITICS* (2d ed. 1998) at p. 20 and 200; Hanspeter Kriesi, *Political Context and Opportunity*, in *THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS* 67 (David A. Snow et al. eds. 2004).

<sup>22</sup> Michael McCann & Jeffrey Dudas, *Retrenchment . . . and Resurgence? Mapping the Changing Context of Movement Lawyering in the United States*, in *CAUSE LAWYERS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS* 37 n.31 (Austin Sarat & Stuart A. Scheingold eds., 2006).

<sup>23</sup> David S. Udell & Rebekah Diller, *Access to the Courts: An Essay for the Georgetown University Law Center Conference on the Independence of the Courts*, 95 *GEO. L.J.* 1127, 1134–35 (2007).

<sup>24</sup> Omnibus Consolidated Rescissions and Appropriations Act of 1996, 16 U.S.C. § 4601-6a (2000).

<sup>25</sup> Brian J. Ostrom et al., *Congress, Courts and Corrections: An Empirical Perspective on the Prison Litigation Reform Act*, 78 *NOTRE DAME L. REV.* 1525, 1525–26 (2003).



justice system adopts change slowly. What this means is that the situation for individuals like Allison is unlikely to change anytime soon, and the problems plaguing legal aid organizations, pro-bono attorneys, and government funded legal aid programs are likely to remain entrenched. It is the opinion of this author that the cure for Allison's legal troubles and the legal issues affecting others like her lies in the effectuation of smaller, community-oriented, legal aid clinics.

#### IV. PART III

The Los Angeles Mobile Legal Aid Clinic ("LAMLAC") began as an answer to the endemic issues facing the legal aid community, particularly in Los Angeles. The clinic was inspired in part by a comparison to the medical care system. Physicians and medical clinics in the United States and abroad often tout the advantages of preventative care.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, vans outfitted with medical equipment and staffed by health professionals often visit patients in outlying communities or in areas where patients lack the means to travel to hospitals. In fact, doctors have had a long history of making "house calls" and making the time and taking the effort to bring medical care to the needy. Of course, this arises partially because those who need this care are often unable to reach the doctor due to some debilitating condition. However, in modern times, two full time jobs and traffic can be as debilitating as a broken leg and, in most cases, a longer-lasting hurdle to receiving prompt legal advice. As broken as the health care system may arguably be, a patchwork of insurance companies, government subsidies, and community health clinics also serve to lower the costs of medical care for patients. Very few organizations, businesses, or government programs exist to lower the costs of legal care in the same manner. Hospitals, clinics and physicians can often find financing from these same organizations whereas lawyers and legal aid organizations lack similar sources of funding.

LAMLAC exists to alleviate these problems by implementing some of the techniques used by the medical profession to deliver care to their patients. Although the model has not been implemented fully, what follows below is an explanation of the LAMLAC model and how it addresses the problems of ineffective legal aid, lack of funding and/or high costs, and poor access to legal aid.

##### *A. Mobile*

LAMLAC clinics are held at several sites, such as community health clinics, family source centers, and food banks, on a regular basis. All these sites are in Southern California. LAMLAC clients therefore can receive legal assistance on a regular basis without the need to travel long distances. Since LAMLAC partners with local organizations, an individual like Allison would be able to obtain legal services by visiting the local community health clinic or house of worship rather than spending an entire day driving to the city center. Furthermore, a mobile clinic

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<sup>26</sup> See generally Nicole Lurie et al., *Preventive Care: Do We Practice What We Preach?*, 77 AM. J. OF PUB. HEALTH, 801, 801-04 (1987), available at <http://ajph.aphapublications.org/cgi/reprint/77/7/801>.

attacks the root of the inaccessibility problem: distance and traffic congestion. One mobile clinic van traveling to a location on the city outskirts is better than forty individuals traveling to the city center in order to seek legal assistance.<sup>27</sup>

### *B. Self-sustaining*

LAMLAC addresses the funding problems plaguing many legal aid organizations by 1) declining to have several offices or hubs and 2) sustaining its operations through the provision of limited, “fee-only” legal services. LAMLAC is able to function in this manner since it is not federally funded and is also free of the restrictions imposed by grant-making organizations. LAMLAC also provides limited, fee-only legal services such as seminars on how to draft a will or how to start your own corporation. These seminars are provided to individuals on a “sliding scale.” In other words, LAMLAC assesses the income of each individual who seeks these fee-only legal services and then charges them for the service accordingly. The funds obtained as part of the fee-only program are then used to finance the legal clinic.

The fee-only programs also allow lawyers in the community to share their expertise with the community in a meaningful way. Moreover, by conducting these seminars, solo practitioners and small firms benefit from the exposure to potential clients. LAMLAC is planning on providing continuing legal education credits to attorneys who assist in conducting “fee-only” seminars.

With self-financing comes freedom to provide the legal services LAMLAC determines are in highest demand in its participant communities. For instance, if Allison and others like her are undocumented immigrants, who are nonetheless contributing members of society, larger legal aid organizations throughout Southern California funded by federal dollars would be barred from assisting her. Not only would a disabled and cash-strapped individual like Allison spend a considerable amount of time and exhaust limited resources to reach legal aid organizations, but she would most likely be denied legal care upon arriving at the offices of many of these organizations. By financing itself, LAMLAC and a handful of other legal aid organizations nationwide are able to shift their focus to meet the needs of their constituents irrespective of the requirements of grantees and government agencies. In this way, LAMLAC “fills the gaps,” and provides legal aid to individuals who would be unable to find assistance elsewhere.

### *C. Preventative*

LAMLAC personnel and community partners encourage their constituents to attend the clinic even if they do not have a traditional legal problem. Since the clinic is free, there is no cost to the client—aside from time—to do so. The cost in time is minimized because the clinic is mobile. In this way, LAMLAC attorney volunteers are able to capture legal issues before they become too large for a clinic

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<sup>27</sup> Additionally, being “mobile” does not just mean physically traveling to different locations. LAMLAC is working to implement a “phone-in” and Internet-based legal assistance program so that individuals can get quick solutions to legal problems at any time.

like LAMLAC to manage. For instance, LAMLAC was recently approached by a Korean immigrant to the United States who lives on the outskirts of Los Angeles. Unfamiliar with the English language and dependent largely on her naturalized citizen husband for her connection to the city, just like Allison when her husband divorced her this client was left largely without hope. The victim of bad economic times, the client's husband shuttered his once prospering garment export business and moved back to Korea, unable to afford his lifestyle in the United States. He also divorced his wife and refused to take her back with him. Since she lacked English skills, she was unable to obtain effective counsel to manage her divorce action. Jobless and now overseas, her former husband refused to pay alimony. Had she not approached LAMLAC, this woman would have soon lost her home to foreclosure and dropped into homelessness. LAMLAC was able to intervene on her behalf and help save her home from immediate foreclosure.

Similarly, Allison was living in low-income housing that was not constructed to code. Had she been given access to a lawyer who could have assisted her in obtaining low-income housing *prior* to her fall, the attorney may have discovered and challenged the defects in the building's construction and assisted Allison in obtaining alternative housing.

#### *D. Immediate*

Though this part of LAMLAC's model has yet to be implemented, LAMLAC will eventually establish attorney-client relationships with each of its clients. LAMLAC attorneys will then represent clients in administrative hearings and in court if necessary. This is a unique model for legal clinics, which usually function on a self-help referral basis. As the case of Allison illustrates, endless referrals can be problematic and frustrating. Often, the legal aid organization which is the recipient of a referral, is unaware of how many times the client has been previously referred. Large legal aid organizations often represent clients, but most are hard to reach (i.e., not mobile). LAMLAC combines a large legal aid organization's commitment to represent clients with the flexibility of a mobile clinic.

### V. CONCLUSION

The legal aid community in the United States consists of a patchwork of private practice attorneys doing pro-bono work, legal aid organizations, legal clinics, and local and federal legal assistance programs. This community provides meaningful, high quality and irreplaceable legal assistance to millions of individuals nationwide. But times have changed. Contemporary transportation problems, modern economic downturns, and increasingly complex lives require a sophisticated and flexible approach to legal assistance.

A model that is self-sustaining, physically mobile, and preventative rather than reactive provides the flexibility to meet the challenges facing the legal aid community. LAMLAC and other similar legal aid clinics are implementing this model to lessen the hurdles individuals like Allison face in receiving immediate, meaningful, and effective legal assistance.