



PRAIRIE STATE LEGAL SERVICES

Equal Access to Justice

ANNUAL REPORT
2007

1977–2007 *30 years of equal access to justice*

30 YEARS OF EQUAL ACCESS TO JUSTICE

WELCOME! 2007 was a milestone for Prairie State Legal Services: 30 years of making high-quality civil legal assistance available to low-income residents of Northern and Central Illinois.

Looking back over the last few decades much has changed. Computer technology, of course, has radically altered the way law is practiced and has assisted us in becoming more efficient, effective advocates. Funding for legal services has experienced a dramatic shift, from nearly 100% federal funding from the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) in 1977...to 2007, when LSC funds made up little more than 30% of our budget. In the midst of these changes, both challenging and triumphant, our core mission has remained constant—to seek equal access to justice for the poor and disadvantaged.

Recently, we decided it was time that PSLS undertake a detailed and critical assessment to affirm that we remain strong, relevant and effective advocates. We solicited input from judges, the private bar, numerous like-minded organizations that serve the poor and elderly, and—most importantly—from our clients. Armed with fresh insights, our entire organization gathered for a three-day retreat that culminated in the development of a number of exciting strategic initiatives to strengthen the quality of our services, as well as access to them.

Mingled with the facts and figures in this report, you'll find real brief accounts of our clients' experiences. Real stories of critical cases that changed lives, improved communities and reinforced the ongoing need for our services. I'm proud of the accomplishments of our staff and volunteers and the perseverance of our clients to pursue what is right and just.

However, without the continued support of our partners, funding sources and many donors, none of these accomplishments would have been possible. And there remains much to be done to make equal access to justice a reality for all Illinoisans. Throughout 2007, it became increasingly clear that America's economy was faltering, and it is the poorest, most disadvantaged members of society who first felt the effects of this crisis. Locally, hundreds more of our neighbors are losing their jobs and homes and are desperately in need of our services.

Together, we will pull through. After all, it's the law of human nature to help those in need. On behalf of PSLS's board of directors and staff, we thank you for your continued interest and support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M O'Connor", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

MICHAEL O'CONNOR, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

EQUAL ACCESS...FOR VICTIMS

Sometimes we need protection from the ones we love. Such was the case with “Anne,” who lived with her angry and abusive son, “Kevin.” Kevin, 40, was receiving Social Security disability benefits for which Anne was the representative payee. Since June 2007, Anne felt that Kevin was becoming increasingly violent; he chased her, slapped her and destroyed items in his room when angry.

Anne had no choice but to obtain an emergency civil order of protection to prevent Kevin from contact with her or her home. She was then referred to Prairie State for assistance with a hearing on the plenary order, which would protect her for up to two years.

We negotiated with Kevin’s attorney and entered into agreement for a two-year order of protection. Because Anne was her son’s Social Security representative payee, arrangements were made for his money to be utilized toward his own apartment.

Seventy-seven-year-old Anne can breathe easier now that she has an order which provides her with very necessary protections, while at the same time allows her to continue to assist her troubled son with financial matters.



EQUAL ACCESS...FOR SENIORS

In rural Kankakee County, 12 seniors had peacefully resided in two subsidized apartment buildings for almost 10 years. In 2000, the landlord prepaid the FmHA loan and sold the property to his son. The new landlord was required to allow the seniors to reside in the buildings under the terms of the subsidized housing program; their rents could not exceed 30% of their adjusted net income based on an annual re-certification process.

In 2006, the landlord re-certified all the senior tenants appropriately. Two days later, he sent each a letter stating that he was no longer going to honor the agreement for reduced rents and offering them new leases for market values at least three times the amount that they had been paying.

None of the shocked seniors had the financial resources—and quite understandably, none were interested in moving! Smartly, they contacted Prairie State.

PSLS attorneys advised the seniors to pay the amount of rent assessed in their re-certification, not sign the new leases with the increased rents, and to expect eviction notices. We reviewed the eviction procedure with the seniors and assured them of our commitment to represent them. Then we got to work contacting the U.S.D.A. about the violation of the restrictive use agreement and providing the documents needed to request prosecution by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Meanwhile, the landlord refused the seniors' rent payments and proceeded with the eviction process as anticipated—so PSLS set up client trust accounts to protect the seniors' rent money and prevent them from having asset problems in other state benefit programs while the case was pending in state court.

After months of PSLS research, paperwork and persistent follow up, the Department of Justice announced their intention to proceed in federal court if any action adverse to the seniors occurred in the state court case. The court case continued for the next 16 months until finally, the landlord agreed to dismiss the case with prejudice. The seniors could remain in their homes under the terms and conditions of the FmHA agreement.

In the end, seven satisfied seniors remained in their apartments; two moved to other housing (one was paid \$1,000 by the landlord to relocate); two entered nursing homes after their health deteriorated; and sadly, one resident passed away while the case was pending. We think she would have been proud of the outcome.



EQUAL ACCESS...FOR SURVIVORS

The family had nowhere else to turn. Their son “Jacob” had developed brain cancer when he was only 12 and the chemotherapy, radiation and strokes that followed caused lasting injuries.

At first, Jacob’s mother was able to pay for the costly at-home nursing service and medical treatment Jacob needed through her employer’s medical insurance policy—but that only lasted a couple of years. The family was then able to obtain coverage through a special program from the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services.

But there was a catch: Children were only covered until the age of 21, at which point a different program kicked in that would reduce his nursing coverage by two thirds. He faced a bleak future in an institution, exiled from his home. His family faced despair and loss of a son.

Despite Jacob’s doctor’s warning that such a reduction in services would be life threatening, the state of Illinois refused to budge. A marathon legal battle began, lasting nearly a decade in both state and federal courts. But with perseverance, kindness and expertise, his Prairie State advocates won his life back—

and was able to retain the 16-hour days of private-duty nursing Jacob required.

“I am, first and foremost, thrilled that I and my colleagues were able to help this client overcome and ultimately prevail against the state’s decision to reduce his nursing coverage by two thirds,” states Jacob’s lead lawyer. “We did create legal precedent which other lawyers and disabled clients will be able to use to obtain appropriate services allowing them to reside in the community rather than in an institution.”



EQUAL ACCESS...FOR VETERANS

It can be tough to find a job even in the best of times. Now consider “Paul,” a 52-year-old veteran suffering from a host of medical problems—epilepsy, depression, blindness in one eye, arthritis in his hands—that prevented him from obtaining gainful employment.

With no income, Paul relied on a small amount of food stamps and the kindness of his sister for shelter and basic care. To receive medical services from the Veteran’s Administration, he had to travel to Iowa City by bus.

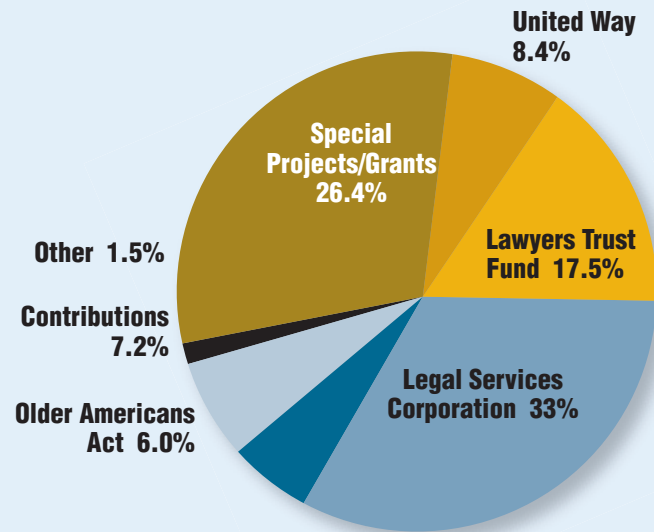
When Paul appealed a denial of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits in 2005, Prairie State represented him at his hearing before the Administrative Law Judge. Paul was found to be disabled and thus eligible to receive monthly SSI and Medicaid benefits. He also received a back lump sum award of approximately \$14,000.

Today, we’re pleased to report that Paul has a steady income and medical benefits. Not only is he able to provide for himself, he even repaid his sister for her generosity.

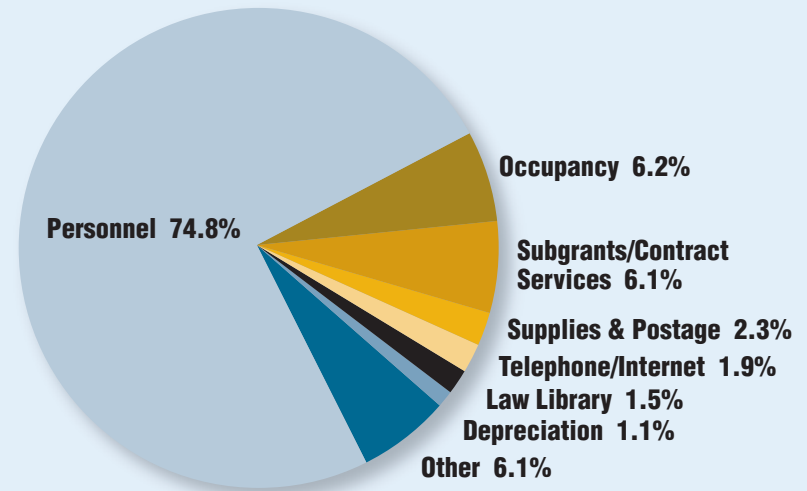


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