

LEGAL AID SOCIETY OF MIDDLE TENNESSEE AND THE CUMBERLANDS

INFORMATION FOR RELEASE

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LEGAL AID SOCIETY EXTENDS REACH BY PARTNERING WITH MORE THAN 100 ORGANIZATIONS

NASHVILLE, Tenn. Jan. 17, 2007 – It takes focus, energy and passion to dedicate your career to helping low-income families in need. These attributes are never in short supply at Legal Aid Society, but neither is the demand for client services. To help expand its reach, Legal Aid Society has partnered with more than 100 organizations that serve Middle Tennessee’s most vulnerable citizens.

“We encourage our staff to reach out to these organizations,” said Gary Housepian, Legal Aid Society executive director. “Our attorneys and staff serve on boards, volunteer their time and work with these groups in ways that strengthens us all. But it is our clients who receive the benefits.”

The collaborations range from formalized agreements to provide legal services and share resources, to client referrals and simple cost-saving measures that benefit both partners.

“I started a program in some of our counties with a person at the Tennessee Nutrition and Consumer Education Program who hands out bags of commodities to low-income families,” said Alicia Stewart, who heads up a food stamp education program with the Legal Aid Society office in Oak Ridge. “Both organizations distribute literature at these events and both programs are funded by the USDA. So we put information about the food stamp program on one side of the flyer and the TNCEP information on the other. If we need 900 flyers for an event, I give the TNCEP representative 450 of my flyers and she gives me 450 of hers. I copy Legal Aid Society’s information on the back of hers and she does likewise.”

Stewart said this approach has several advantages. In addition to saving money, it reduces the amount of paper clients have to carry, increases the likelihood that information about both programs will be read and strengthens the relationship between Legal Aid Society and TNCEP.

“It’s a simple idea, of course, but it enables both organizations to double our outreach with no additional expense. Imagine if all non-profit organizations worked together like

this,” she added. “The cumulative effect would be enormous in terms of people served and benefits provided.”

Another positive effect of the collaborations is the extension of services to clients who may need help from multiple agencies. If a client has specific civil legal needs, contacting Legal Aid Society can not only help, but can also result in referrals to a network of other helpful groups. A good example is a recent case involving collaboration between Adult Protective Services, the Department of Human Services, the Public Guardianship Program and Legal Aid Society.

“We had a client I call Ms. Sweet,” said Connie Beal, a paralegal in the Tullahoma office of Legal Aid Society. “She was removed from her nursing home against her will by her daughter who had verbally abused her in front of the staff.”

The nursing home called Adult Protective Services. APS opened an investigation and discovered that Ms. Sweet had signed a form giving her daughter Power of Attorney, but didn’t understand what it meant. APS contacted Legal Aid Society.

“We brought Ms. Sweet a form revoking the Power of Attorney and retaining Legal Aid Society,” Beal said. “We asked her where she wanted to be and she said she was happiest in the nursing home with her friends.”

The nursing home was reluctant to welcome Ms. Sweet back due to the abusive nature of her daughter, but waived all restrictions when they learned that representatives from Legal Aid Society would be transporting her.

Legal Aid Society worked to secure Ms. Sweet a public guardian to make medical decisions for her and take over her finances. This allowed Legal Aid Society to negotiate with the Department of Human Services for Medicaid dollars to pay for her nursing home care. At the request of the public guardian, Legal Aid Society also drew up a simple will for Ms. Sweet and found someone to act as executor.

“The facility was thrilled to know that her burial would be taken care of and they now had people they could call if Ms. Sweet needed anything more than they could provide,” Beal said.

“We have to be innovative in our approach to client services, because we have 30 attorneys serving 48 counties” said Housepian. “Every new collaboration extends our reach and builds the community of people passionate about helping those who need it most. To work any other way would be inefficient and waste precious resources.”

The Legal Aid Society gives free legal services to people who have nowhere else to turn. It has offices in Nashville, Gallatin, Clarksville, Murfreesboro, Columbia, Tullahoma, Cookeville and Oak Ridge.