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Montana Legal Services Association



A statewide law firm providing,
protecting and enhancing access to
justice

The eMessenger

Our Funders



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A Message from the Executive Director



Welcome to the latest edition of MLSA's eMessenger newsletter! It's been awhile since MLSA last sent out our law firm's missive. We hope to resume a more regular schedule again.

Our goal is to keep you informed about events and activities at MLSA. We'll update you about new MLSA staff, law firm achievements and innovative ventures. And there's so much going on! We hope you'll find the eMessenger worth your while and that you will, once again, make the newsletter a part of your regular reading.

Recently, I was reading a book, entitled *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, by Michael J. Sandel. It's a fascinating book in its own right but even more interesting to those concerned with access to justice issues. Sandel reflects on the Reagan era laissez-faire attitude of "life's not fair so live with it." Sandel goes on to suggest that, just because life's not fair doesn't mean we have to live with it.

Sandel's view of justice strikes a chord with me, and I hope with you as well. MLSA's clients frequently live in situations where they are powerless. Melanie may be a victim in a domestic violence situation. Tammie may be having her wages improperly garnish. Grant may be facing a wrongful eviction. Often, our clients have nowhere to turn without MLSA's help. MLSA isn't always able to save the day. On the other hand, more often than not, our presence makes the difference in the lives of those we serve. And that's why we're here.

Doctors and Lawyers Working Together to End Poverty



Not every illness has a biological remedy. An illness, caused by an individual or family being forced to choose between food and heat during the winter months, will not be prevented or treated with a prescription or vaccination. Similarly, someone with asthma will never breathe symptom free - no matter how much medication is administered - if he or she returns from the doctor's office to mold-infested housing, as thousands do.



Across the United States, healthcare providers who take care of low-income individuals and families are turning to a new type of specialist to help keep patients healthy and safe: lawyers who practice poverty law. Founded by Dr. Barry Zuckerman, medical-legal partnerships (MLPs) integrate lawyers into the healthcare setting to reduce

barriers to healthcare and help patients navigate the complex legal systems that often hold solutions to many social determinants of health - income supports for hungry families, utility shut-off protection during cold winter months, mold removal from the homes of asthmatics, and more.

In 2004, MLSA staff attorney Deborah Anspach recognized the need for such a program in Montana and set out to develop an MLP in Billings, which has come to be known as the Montana Family Advocacy Program (MFAP). MFAP, a medical-legal partnership between MLSA and RiverStone Health in Billings, opened 608 cases between June 1, 2004 and June 30, 2010, providing legal assistance to 1468 low-income adults and children, changing the lives of many people.

Take for example, Bob Jones. Bob, disabled by severe mental health problems, had lost custody of his children in a dissolution action. The judge had, however, ordered the adverse party to return to Bob, all his personal belongs and send periodic, updated pictures of the couple's two children. Time passed and after repeated requests to the adverse party, to no avail, Bob's mental health declined to the point that his therapist referred him to MFAP, as his constant mental agitation was undermining his therapy. Deborah wrote a letter to the adverse party requesting her compliance, and threatening an action for contempt of court, if she did not comply with the court's order. Several weeks later, Bob informed Deborah that he had received a box containing all his personal property and an album of his children's pictures, and he was feeling much better.

Adding an attorney like Deborah to the medical team increases awareness of, and access to, social and legal services. Lawyers and doctors are natural partners to address the health care disparities low-income families confront. MLPs are a relatively new model for addressing these disparities, but have the ability to transform health care from reacting to the effects of poverty on poor people to ensuring that they have adequate food, shelter, and social services and therefore, experience fewer health problems. MFAP has proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that when doctors and lawyers can work together on behalf of clients, everybody wins.

Karla Gray Receives National Distinguished Service Award



Former Montana Supreme Court Chief Justice Karla Gray, a longtime supporter of MLSA and access to justice efforts, received a Distinguished Service Award from the National Center for State Courts (NCSC). Gray received the award on July 28 at the Conference of Chief Justices and Conference of State Court Administrators Annual Meeting in Vail, Colorado.

Among other things during her tenure as Chief Justice, Gray led efforts to establish the Court's Equal Justice Task Force, which conducted a legal needs survey in 2005. She also strongly supported the Court's Commission on Self-Represented Litigants, as well as efforts to expand technological systems to provide legal services throughout the state.

In a press release, NCSC president Mary C. McQueen said "Throughout her nearly 18 years of service to Montana's highest court, and particularly during her eight years at its helm, Chief Justice Gray championed equal

access to justice for all Montanans and spurred the legal community to pro bono service. Her character, commitment to the highest ideals of the justice system, and hands-on approach to effecting change set an example for judges not just in Montana, but throughout the country."

MLSA congratulates former Chief Justice Gray on this well-deserved honor!



Alison Paul Nominated to serve on CAP committee

MLSA Deputy Director Alison Paul has been reappointed to serve as the MLSA representative on the Court Assessment Program (CAP) Advisory Committee of the Montana Supreme Court. Among other things, the committee serves as a resource to the Montana Supreme Court Office of the Court Administrator on matters relating to the

timely, efficient, and effective resolution of child abuse and neglect cases as well as helps identify issues and barriers within the court system that hinder the court system's ability to achieve child-welfare outcomes of safety, permanency, and the well-being of children. The CAP Advisory Committee also plays a key role in promoting collaboration and communications among all stakeholders in the child protective community. Alison will serve a two year term on the Committee.



MLSA is the Montana's statewide law firm providing civil legal services to clients living in poverty in Montana and on Montana's Indian reservations.

MLSA's HelpLine serves as the entry point to information, advice and referral.

MLSA 's specialty units include SelfHelp Law, Domestic Violence Law, Consumer Law, Native American Law, Migrant Farmworker Law, Housing Law, Public Benefits and Employment Law. MLSA is committed to making "justice for all" a reality in Montana.

Want to learn more? See our website at www.montanalawhelp.org.

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