

Civil Legal Services and Public Library Partnerships Flourish Across Tennessee



Jane's husband left her and their children two years ago due to drug problems. She has waited, but wants to move on with their lives and get some sense of stability for the children. This presents legal issues, but Jane has no extra money for a lawyer with her minimum wage job. Where can she turn?

There are many people in Tennessee just like Jane. An estimated 68 percent of Tennesseans living in poverty have had a legal need in the past year (Statewide Comprehensive Legal Needs Survey for 2003). In the current economic crisis, the numbers of people who need legal services continues to rise. While civil legal service programs can help, they are not able to reach every citizen in need. The Survey, commissioned by the Tennessee Alliance for Legal Services, reported that as many as 80 percent of low-income Tennesseans with civil legal problems are currently unable to receive assistance. In tough economic times such as these, communities are developing new ways to meet the needs of vulnerable Tennesseans. The civil legal service community is doing this by initiating and expanding partnerships with public libraries across the state of Tennessee.

Public libraries and civil legal service providers are ideal partners, bringing together differing skills and a shared vision of assisting the public. Civil legal service providers

are both legal professionals and experts at serving low-income and elderly populations. Libraries offer the necessary infrastructure, contacts, and setting in which the legal community can disseminate legal information, services, and advice to the public. "The public is drawn to libraries," said Jane Pinkston (Retired Assistant State Librarian for Planning and Development). "Libraries are familiar, accessible, and neutral environments with free internet access. They are a space where people feel comfortable asking for legal assistance," she added.

For the past three years, Southeast Tennessee Legal Services (SETNLS) has held monthly sessions in the Meigs County Public Library where community members who are low-income self-represented litigants in family law cases accessed legal forms and met with lawyers to discuss their legal issues. The guidance does not end there though. Following the initial meeting, further support is provided via in-person meetings or telephone assistance, so self-represented litigants have guidance through the entire court process. This library/legal partnership has recently expanded its services across the entire 10th Judicial District in the Local Public Libraries 'Pro Se' Project in Southeastern Tennessee.

This project is filling a gap in legal services to this community and the benefits are already being seen. Not only are community members accessing the court system and having more positive experiences, local Judges and Court Clerks are pleased as well. "I am happy to have this support for the court system and to have this program available to the general public," said Circuit Court Judge Lawrence Puckett of his experience with this partnership. Chancellor Jerri S. Bryant echoed these sentiments saying, "Our role on the bench is enhanced by allowing the litigants to have their questions answered in a non-threatening atmosphere. It gives them access to legal advice, which the Chancellors and Judges cannot give from the bench." "Especially in rural communities where there is no legal services' office, this [project] allows community members access to services and forms on their own schedule," stated SETNLS Attorney Cathy Allshouse. "We have seen greater access to the courts by the low income parents, and the Judges and clerks are happier that these individuals are not trying to blindly work their way through the system," she added.

The contracted legal services provider for this innovative project is SETNLS, a nonprofit public interest law firm serving vulnerable Tennesseans in ten southeastern Tennessee counties. The 10th Judicial District and the Local Public Libraries 'Pro Se' Project offered SETNLS an opportunity to expand on their existing work with pro se litigants from the library setting, while being respectful of the role

of the courts. Allshouse, also an attorney for the project said, "The goal is to allow low-income families with children to have greater and faster access to the courts ... and increase quality time for children with their parents."

Allshouse and the Courts encourage other civil legal service providers, Court systems, and public libraries to initiate partnerships such as these to help streamline pro se cases in their Judicial Districts. Tennessee Supreme Court Chief Justice Cornelia A. Clark said, "This partnership with courts, Southeast Tennessee Legal Services, and the public libraries is a positive example of how groups can work together to improve access to justice in our state. I commend each of these groups for contributing their time, talents and efforts to champion this effort and fulfill the unmet legal needs in the 10th Judicial District."

By: Linnet Overton, TALS Outreach and Development Director

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