

# **Tennessee Alliance for Legal Services**



Strengthening the Delivery of Civil Legal Help to Vulnerable Tennesseans

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## **Housepian Stepping Down as Executive Director of LAS**

NASHVILLE, Tenn., Oct. 5, 2017 – Gary Housepian announced today he is stepping down as executive director of Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee and the Cumberlands, Tennessee’s largest non-profit law firm.

Housepian has served as executive director of Legal Aid Society for the past decade, since July 2007. He will continue to head the organization until a new director is hired through a national search to find a qualified candidate to carry on his work.

Ashley Wiltshire, who served as executive director with Legal Aid Society from 1976 and from whom Housepian took the reins of leadership upon Wiltshire’s retirement in 2007, praised his successor’s work.

“It has been gratifying to me over the last 10 years to see the great work Gary has done to improve the services of Legal Aid,” he said. “His previous experience as managing attorney of our Murfreesboro office gave him insights that helped him knit the organization into a stronger, more efficient unit. His deep commitment to this work has brought benefits to thousands of our clients. I wish him the best in his next challenge.”

“It has been an honor to be part of this work for these past 10 years and to see our work expand to meet challenging situations – for youth, the elderly and persons who were formerly incarcerated – to fight barriers and shine the light of justice for all,” Housepian said. “It has been inspiring to see our staff join together in examining how we can be the very best in our work and in embracing change. The opportunity is ripe for new leadership to join with them and contribute as we go forward. My heart and mind remain devoted to the important work that needs to be done for these clients who have inspired me with their character and strengths. I look forward to the next chapter of my life to advance the cause for equal justice for all.”

“The organization has been blessed to have had two extraordinary directors in Gary Housepian and his predecessor Ashley Wiltshire,” said Bob Martineau, president of Legal Aid Society’s Board of Directors and commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation. “We will conduct a national search to find another leader of the caliber of those two.

“Gary has been a dedicated servant for those less fortunate in our society. No one is more committed to the mission of the organization, the clients it serves, or the dedicated attorneys and staff he leads. I have seen firsthand how he has impacted so many lives and the tremendous job

he has done in his role; he will be sorely missed. Beyond his passion for “equal justice for all,” he has helped modernize the organization and bring professional best practices in the delivery of legal services to the organization, recruit talented lawyers and staff and position the organization for continued success,” Martineau added.

Housepian joined Legal Aid Society after it merged with Legal Services of South Central Tennessee and Rural Legal Services. He integrated the satellite offices across Middle Tennessee and the Cumberland Plateau, encouraging them to operate cohesively as one law firm – a place for low-income families and individuals to be strengthened with assistance in pressing legal issues.

“There is nothing more important than Legal Aid’s persistent work to make ‘Equal Justice under Law’ a reality for the most vulnerable members of our community,” said Michele Johnson, executive director of the Tennessee Justice Center. “No one has pursued justice with more dedication or compassion than Gary Housepian. We all are indebted to Gary for his leadership of Legal Aid and his tireless work to make real the values of equality and justice for which America stands.”

Under Housepian’s direction, Legal Aid Society has truly embraced the promise of “equal justice for all,” making the justice system fair and accessible to thousands of Tennesseans who otherwise could not afford it. Housepian specifically focused on reaching the rural communities that lacked adequate legal resources for low-income individuals. In February 2017, he traveled to each of the 48 counties Legal Aid Society serves and met with judges, lawyers, agencies and low-income Tennesseans about legal aid’s place in the fabric and tapestry of their communities and to better understand their needs.

“You can judge a culture by how well it takes care of the least among us. Gary has made it his life’s mission to do just that,” said Gif Thornton, managing partner at Adams & Reese. “Gary has steered Legal Aid Society through choppy waters, especially in this era of threatened budget cuts, and Tennesseans are better for it.”

Housepian recently spearheaded the organization’s effort to establish practice groups across the firm, expanding the staff’s expertise across all offices. The new practice groups focus on specific needs within the community, such as domestic violence issues, allowing Legal Aid Society to better serve those in need.

He also recognized important issues to be faced when providing services to persons with mental illness by arranging an eight-hour training and certification for 28 staff members on “Mental Health First Aid” to better understand mental illness and how staff can help. And at an all-staff meeting in January, he brought in a national expert for training on “implicit bias” to raise awareness of how bias can impact their clients and interactions with them.

“For nearly 50 years, the Legal Aid Society has supported low-income Tennesseans in their efforts for equal justice, fairness and better lives,” Housepian said. “Despite people needing our services more than ever, our core mission remains the same in joining with them in their courageous efforts to rise out of poverty and overcome obstacles. We have been and will always be about finding solutions for them – strengthening families, strengthening communities.”

“It has been inspiring to watch Gary build on Legal Aid’s solid record and enable it to meet ever greater challenges,” said Gordon Bonnyman, a staff attorney with the Tennessee Justice Center.

Housepian has dedicated his career to serving those in need. He began his legal career working with the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program providing assistance to migrant farmworkers in Arizona and joined Knoxville Legal Aid Society as a staff attorney in 1978. He then spent a year in the State Attorney General’s office as an assistant attorney general before joining the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation as general counsel. From 1990 to 1991, he served as general counsel for the Tennessee Department of Human Services, after which he worked in private practice for five years. Housepian became the managing attorney of the Murfreesboro office of Legal Aid Society in 1997 and staff attorney for the Tennessee Justice Center in 2001. From 2002 to 2007, he served as managing attorney of the Disability Law and Advocacy Center of Tennessee (the state’s protection and advocacy program now known as Disability Rights of Tennessee). There, he was lead counsel responsible for achieving settlement of a class action case, better known as the “waiting list” case, involving home- and community-based services for persons with intellectual disabilities and their families that resulted in more than 3,000 people on the waiting list being enrolled into a Medicaid waiver program to receive in-home services.

## **About Legal Aid Society**

Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee and the Cumberland Mountains advocates for fairness and justice under the law. The non-profit law firm offers free civil legal representation and educational programs to help people in its region receive justice, protect their well-being and support opportunities to overcome poverty. It serves 48 counties from offices in Clarksville, Columbia, Cookeville, Gallatin, Murfreesboro, Nashville, Oak Ridge and Tullahoma. Legal Aid Society is funded in part by United Way. Learn more at [www.las.org](http://www.las.org), or by following the firm on [Facebook](#).

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