

Legal Services Corporation Office of Program Performance

Report from the Program Quality Visit to Iowa Legal Aid
August 24-28, 2015

Highlights of Report (Prepared by Iowa Legal Aid)

Legal Services Corporation (LSC) is an independent nonprofit established by Congress in 1974 to provide financial support for civil legal aid to low-income Americans. It is Iowa Legal Aid's primary source of federal funding. One of LSC's responsibilities is to evaluate and monitor the work of grantees such as Iowa Legal Aid. In August 2015 LSC's Office of Program Performance conducted a "Program Quality Visit" of Iowa Legal Aid. A seven member team visited eight of Iowa Legal Aid's ten regional offices and reviewed the other two through telephone interviews. In addition to interviews with nearly all Iowa Legal Aid staff, interviews were conducted with board members, judges, community partner organizations, other state justice stakeholders and bar representatives. A copy of the final report issued by LSC's Office of Program Performance is attached.

Program Quality Visits are designed to evaluate whether LSC grantees are providing the highest quality legal services to eligible clients. In conducting the evaluation, OPP relies on the LSC Act and regulations, the LSC Performance Criteria, LSC Program Letters, and the ABA Standards for the Provision of Civil Legal Aid. The reviewers concluded that:

Iowa Legal Aid is an effective and efficient program with many forward thinking attributes such as its Advisory Councils, creation of the Iowa Legal Aid Foundation and its distributed intake system. There are few areas that need improvement. The program is very well managed with strong leadership and board support. It is highly productive, providing high quality legal services to a significant number of clients. It is also a program that is constantly engaging in self-analysis as well as trying to improve from learning from others and adopting new ideas. Its continued strategic planning efforts are exemplary and could serve as a model for other programs.

The on-site evaluation was organized to follow the four Performance Areas of the LSC Performance Criteria. The following are some of the report's conclusions related to each area.

PERFORMANCE AREA ONE. Effectiveness in identifying the most pressing civil legal needs of low-income people in the service area and targeting resources to address those needs.

As a result of the needs assessment, Iowa Legal Aid's priorities continue to include preserving safety and stability of individuals and families; maintaining or improving economic stability through consumer representation; preserving the home; and providing representation in income maintenance cases.

Strategic planning is one of the strengths of Iowa Legal Aid.

Iowa Legal Aid also continually evaluates its delivery mechanisms, and makes adjustments accordingly.

PERFORMANCE AREA TWO. Effectiveness in engaging and serving the low-income population throughout the service area.

Iowa Legal Aid has a number of portals for clients to access legal services including telephone, walk-in, outreach and on-line. . . Iowa Legal Aid has a very impressive and comprehensive intake manual to guide the staff through the intake process.

There are also multiple opportunities for cases to be reviewed by supervising attorneys.

Iowa Legal Aid's language access practices and limited English proficiency (LEP) policy are comprehensive and effective.

PERFORMANCE AREA THREE. Effectiveness of legal representation and other program activities intended to benefit the low-income population in the service area.

Over the years, Iowa Legal Aid has expanded the legal rights of low-income Iowans in numerous areas including protecting and preserving exemptions, protective orders, evictions, and foreclosures.

Iowa Legal Aid has a number of special projects that have been highly successful.

The writing samples submitted to the team reflected work in all program priority areas in a variety of forums including local, state, federal, and appellate courts. The program encourages appeals, impactful work, and affirmative litigation and has developed an Intensive Preparation of Appeals and Trials (IPAT) system to support this work. The team was impressed with the high number of appeals from administrative tribunals, state courts, and federal courts.

Iowa Legal Aid has a well-written and comprehensive PAI (private attorney involvement) plan that describes the reason for the program, recent changes, and the process for placing cases. . . The selection and placement of cases, which is incorporated into the distributed intake system, is efficient and well managed.

PERFORMANCE AREA FOUR. Effectiveness of governance, leadership, and administration.

The quality and commitment of the board strengthen the overall program. The board members are very knowledgeable about the program's mission and operations. The team's review of the detailed and comprehensive board and committee meeting minutes, as well as the on-site interviews with board members, demonstrate a highly engaged and dedicated board.

Each office has a regional advisory council which serves as a voice of the local communities and offices, promotes the visibility of the program, raises funds, and provides a leadership opportunity that at times leads to membership on the Iowa Legal Aid board.

Iowa Legal Aid's executive director has been in his position for 23 years and is highly respected and supported by the staff and the board. Outside constituencies hold him in high regard and staff reported that he is easily accessible.

Iowa Legal Aid is a well-run organization. The management team includes the executive director, the deputy directors, the assistant litigation director and the managing attorneys. The team confers regularly on major decisions concerning the program. The deputy directors work closely with the executive director in managing Iowa Legal Aid.

ILA's technology plan for 2015 is well thought out and plans for a reasonable amount of work during the year.

ILA is the primary provider of legal services in the state and a leader in the state justice community. It collaborates with bar associations, the courts, and law schools in the state. The program maintains excellent relations with the private bar and the courts.

RECOMMENDATIONS.

Some of the recommendations identified by the team and included in the full report include:

The program should consider assigning one person to be in charge of intake systems rather than the three-person team currently responsible for the intake system.

Some modifications could be made in the supervision of legal work to ensure consistency with the program's high standards.

Iowa Legal Aid should review its technology to ensure that it meets the baselines for LSC's plan for technology needed by a legal aid office.

Iowa Legal Aid should review and update its website.