

## Legal Aid

by Raymond A. Hartz



# To Right Wrong, to Do Justice, to Serve Humanity

IT IS A COLD DECEMBER Saturday morning, the sun just rising over a mostly empty Walmart parking lot with about twenty cars scattered in a section far from the store's entrance. A dozen members of a local church gather behind a van, organizing donated food and water to give to the homeless people living in those cars. Two attorneys from Legal Aid Society of Eastern Virginia (LASEV) are also there. Our firm provides help to those too poor to afford an attorney. The church members are there to offer food and compassion to those in need; the attorneys are there to offer a chance for fairness and justice to those from whom it has been denied.

John was in his fifties and had been living in his truck since May. With an infectious smile, he talked about how the cold, late fall nights were making it especially hard for him to sleep — despite being wrapped in sleeping bags and blankets — and how stiff his back and legs were by morning. John had once been considered successful. He had a family, owned his home and worked as an engineer. But he suffered from depression for which he never got help. He lost first one family, and then another. Multiple jobs did not work out. Finally, a series of strokes left him unable to work at all. He was getting by on the little over \$1,200 per month he received in Social Security disability benefits, until his disability check was suddenly reduced to little more than \$400. It didn't take

long for John, and all his worldly possessions, to make it to that Walmart parking lot.

Our attorney put John in touch with the emergency winter shelter so John could sleep inside. She represented him before the Division of Child Support Enforcement while she also worked with John to help him apply for permanent housing through the Community Services Board. By March, John was in his own apartment, receiving mental health counseling, and volunteering with a local agency assisting the homeless.

John's disability check had been reduced because he owed past-due child support. His youngest son was now in his twenties and John had paid support each month, but had fallen behind. Our attorney discovered the child support agency had seriously miscalculated the amount John owed. She successfully had the amount reduced from \$11,000 to less than \$3,000. The deduction taken from his disability benefit was also greatly reduced so he could again afford to pay rent.

### Fair Treatment

What our clients want, more than anything else, is simply to be treated fairly. LASEV exists to pursue justice for those who would otherwise not have an attorney. We provide free legal assistance in civil matters for people in poverty, and last year our work helped more than 15,000 people.

As a law firm, we assist individuals to secure some of the most basic necessities of life: to be free from domestic violence; to live in a safe and affordable home; to raise their families and have their children receive a meaningful education; to not be cheated by consumer fraud; and to get the public benefits they need to survive. We give advice, negotiate legal problems, and represent people in court and before agencies.

Legal Services has been here to level the playing field for the poor of Hampton Roads for more than fifty years. We serve more than 200,000 people living in poverty in our region, with twenty-three attorneys working out of five offices, located in Williamsburg, Hampton, Norfolk, Virginia Beach, and on the Eastern Shore.

Being poor means more than just not having as much money as other people.

Poverty creates roadblocks that those of us not in poverty can hardly imagine. Surviving itself can seem like a full-time job, especially for those facing other hurdles such as being the victim of abuse, being homeless, or suffering from mental illness. LASEV attorneys go out into the community to meet clients where they are and to make ourselves accessible to the people who need us most. We conduct regular intake at domestic violence and home-

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less shelters, at soup kitchens and food pantries, at senior and community centers, and in city parks and Walmart parking lots.

We are here for all members of the low-income community, but our clients are mostly women (79 percent), and mostly members of racial minori-

ties (71 percent). Last year, we served just under 400 veterans.

Funding remains a challenge. In recent years, our state and federal funding has been slashed dramatically, but the demand for our services has increased. Decreased funding has meant a reduction in our number of attorneys by 20 percent.

By being there month after month, year after year, reaching out

to people in poverty, we get to know the community. We understand their needs, and the evolving threats and challenges they face. And they develop trust in our familiar faces over time. Only in this way can we carry out our mission: to right wrong, do justice, and serve humanity.

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