



VLAS Serving Some of the Poorest Areas in the State

SARAH'S DAUGHTER WAS A freshman in high school when her ongoing anxiety became disabling, preventing her from functioning in school. The school responded with a Section 504 plan, which provided some limited accommodations for the girl.

The plan wasn't working. Sarah (whose name has been changed to protect her family's privacy) pleaded for an Individualized Education Program, which provides special instruction or services for the student. "They told me she was too smart," Sarah said. "It didn't matter that she couldn't stay in the classroom because her hands were shaking so bad she couldn't hold a pencil."

Desperate, the parents turned to Virginia Legal Aid Society. A VLAS attorney persuaded the school to do an extensive evaluation of the student. As a result, the school reconsidered and determined the student was eligible for special education services.

Sarah is convinced that if it weren't for the efforts of VLAS, "my daughter might not even be here now. My daughter needed more, and could do more, and they helped make it a reality. They're amazing."

Virginia Legal Aid Society, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2017, uses legal skills to solve the most critical problems of low-income people in a six-city, twenty-county region that covers Central, Southside, and Western Tidewater Virginia. With fifteen full-time lawyers and eight paralegals operating from four offices, plus 170 pro bono volunteer lawyers,

VLAS closes about 3,000 cases each year, helping more than 6,600 people on issues related to housing, consumer protection, income and benefit protection, education, and other family concerns.

The area we serve offers three particular challenges. The first is that it includes some of the poorest parts of Virginia. Twelve of the twenty-six cities and counties we serve have poverty rates of at least 20 percent, nearly double the statewide average of 11.2 percent. The rest of the state combined, served by eight other legal aid societies, has only twenty jurisdictions with poverty this high.

The second challenge is that much of our service area is sparsely populated, creating obstacles for connecting applicants with lawyers; and the third is that less than a third of the lawyers in our area take part in our pro bono program.

VLAS has always sought to increase efficiency through new technology. In the 1980s, we adopted computers for all staff and a Telephone Access Project that moved the application process for rural clients from in-person to a telephone line staffed by a paralegal.

In 2001, we created a statewide toll-free phone line, 866-LEGL-AID, connecting callers to their local legal aid programs, and in 2005, we created LawLine, an intake and advice hotline staffed by six paralegals and two lawyers.

We now receive 18,000 calls per year from new applicants. Our LawLine triage system determines via

computer whether VLAS or another provider is best source of help for the caller's needs, sends the caller to the correct system, and then provides the most appropriate help for the caller. People can also apply on our website, www.vlas.org, where they are given a code that allows them to complete the application by phone while moving their case to the front of the phone queue. Every eligible caller receives some form of assistance, from legal advice, to materials that can help callers help themselves, to representation by a lawyer, to referrals, to additional resources.

To increase pro bono engagement, VLAS has launched a three-part project to work with local bar associations, operate a clinical program with the Liberty University School of Law, and help connect all Virginia legal aid programs with a planned statewide online pro bono portal.

Every five years, VLAS re-examines our entire operation, from client outreach and interaction to our practice's areas of emphasis. We distribute surveys on paper and online, hold focus group discussions in our four offices, and conduct community forums in almost every county and city we serve. The collected information is the heart of our strategic planning process, which guides the types of cases we focus on, the technology we use and the grants we pursue. As this article goes to press, we are approaching the completion of this year-long process to create our plan for 2018–22.

David Neumeier is the executive director of the Virginia Legal Aid Society.