

# Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma helping vulnerable populations

By Joy Hampton Senior Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, October 6, 2015 7:41 pm

People below the poverty line often have few resources when dealing with basic issues like domestic abuse, child support, housing and other civil issues. Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma is there to fill the gap for those who cannot afford an attorney.

“We provide free legal assistance to low-income and senior citizens,” managing attorney Richard J. Vreeland said. “Sometimes preventive advice is very useful before something occurs.”

Persons aged 60 and older can get free advice from Legal Aid. If an attorney is warranted, those who qualify can help through the service. Clients of any age must meet federal poverty guidelines, Vreeland said.

“We don't compete with the private bar,” he said.

For a single person with no dependents, the income bar is about \$1,200 per month.

Vreeland said Legal Aid partners with other United Way agencies to help clients in need, including the Norman Housing Authority and Senior Nutrition sites. Sometimes Legal Aid provides educational seminars that equip people to better help themselves.

Many of Legal Aid's clients are within vulnerable populations. They need, but may not be able to afford, legal assistance for divorce, paternity, child support, guardianship or domestic violence issues.

While family law is still the primary area where Legal Aid provides help, housing law dealing with foreclosure, eviction, public housing and section 8 or other landlord versus tenant issues can be a vital need.

“We understand that housing is a basic need,” Vreeland said. “We've been active in foreclosure defense.”

The agency is currently very busy dealing with fair housing issues, he said. Legal Aid's focus is civil



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Legal Aid Services managing attorney Richeard J. Vreeland and staff attorney Holly Lantagne work to provide justice for those who couldn't otherwise afford legal help.

law.

“We do no criminal law,” Vreeland said. “For the purposes of the court, we're like any other law firm.”

Legal aid can help clients get a victim's protection order and can work with them on custody issues and have helped on the civil side of drug court and child deprived cases, but they do not get involved in the criminal side of the law. For that, there are court-appointed attorneys.

After a person has served time, particularly on something like a non-violent drug felony, Legal Aid can help the person moving forward to new beginnings.

“We consider expungements important because it (a felony conviction) can be a barrier to employment and housing,” he said.

New to Legal Aid is the Disaster Response Unit.

“We're still working cases from the 2013 disaster,” Vreeland said.

The team has helped people regarding storms this year. Most commonly, people first need help with lost documents and landlord versus tenant issues immediately following a disaster such as a tornado. Next come issues related to insurance claims and, finally, contractor fraud or other contractor issues. There can be legal needs related to probate.

“To get assistance, they need to have a clean title,” Vreeland said.

In some cases, parents may die and a grown child will continue to live in a home without changing over the title and going through probate. Often, the state doesn't follow up on these issues, so no one notices until a tornado or other disaster hits the home and the person needs a clean title to qualify for help, he said.

The Disaster Response team worked out of the Norman office to serve regional needs. Vreeland said grants from Americo and help from United Way made the Disaster Response team possible.

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