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The Defense of Justice Never Rests: Providing Civil Legal Services to Minnesotans with Low Incomes and Disabilities

Ron Elwood
Galen Robinson

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THE DEFENSE OF JUSTICE NEVER RESTS:
PROVIDING CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES TO MINNESOTANS
WITH LOW INCOMES AND DISABILITIES

Ron Elwood† and Galen Robinson‡‡

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I. INTRODUCTION

The provision of civil legal services to low-income persons
serves the societal goal of ensuring equal access to justice for all. So vital
and widely held is this goal that it is enshrined in stone on
the entrance to the United States Supreme Court Building. As
former Associate Justice Lewis Powell has famously opined:

Equal justice under law is not merely a caption on the
facade of the Supreme Court building. It is perhaps the
most inspiring ideal of our society. It is one of the ends
for which our entire legal system exists . . . [and] it is
fundamental that justice should be the same, in substance
and availability, without regard to economic status.¹

† Ron Elwood is the Supervising Attorney at the Legal Services Advocacy
Project, a statewide division of Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid.
‡‡ Galen Robinson is the Litigation and Advocacy Director at Mid-Minnesota
Legal Aid.
¹ Lewis Powell Jr., prior to his tenure on the Supreme Court, made this
remark in his capacity as the president of the American Bar Association, as quoted
in Michael A. Mogill, Professing Pro Bono: To Walk the Talk, 15 NOTRE DAME J.L.
The Minnesota Constitution underscores this fundamental principle of our democracy when it declares that every person has the right to a “remedy in the laws for all injuries or wrongs” and to “justice . . . without purchase.” And it was embraced by LaFayette Emmet, the first Chief Justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court, who declared that denial of justice “to any one member of society is an injury to [the] community at large.”

Seven regional legal services programs, a variety of other legal services providers, and pro bono attorneys throughout Minnesota strive to reach this goal daily by offering civil legal services to low-income clients. They advise and represent low-income clients on a myriad of issues affecting basic needs for shelter, safety, income security, family matters, and health care.

Minnesota’s legal services community is dedicated to helping low-income Minnesotans meet their basic needs and obtain the civil legal services they require to achieve this goal. However, as a Minnesota State Bar Association task force recognized, “critical funding for the state’s civil legal services providers” is diminishing as the need and demand for it is increasing. Although clients are not required to pay to receive legal services, the provision of these vital services is by no means without cost.

A legal system that includes those without means is an essential part of a just society. Thus, we all must continue to strive for ways to assure achievement of this goal while identifying new ways to reach clients, maintain sufficient financial support to serve clients, and stretch existing resources.

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2. MINN. CONST. art. 1, § 8.
3. Davis v. Pierse, 7 Minn. 13, 18 (1862).
4. The seven regional programs include Anishinabe Legal Services; Central Minnesota Legal Services; Judicare of Anoka County; Legal Aid Service of Northwestern Minnesota; Legal Services of Northwest Minnesota, Inc.; Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid; and Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services, Inc.
5. Examples of other programs providing civil legal services in Minnesota include the Battered Women’s Legal Advocacy Project, Children’s Law Center of Minnesota, Farmers’ Legal Action Group, Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota, Indian Child Welfare Act Law Center, Legal Assistance of Dakota County, Legal Assistance of Olmsted County, and Volunteer Lawyers Network.
II. BRIEF HISTORY OF CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES

The very first legal services program “was launched in the District of Columbia and elsewhere across the South in 1865 under the auspices of the Freedman’s Bureau”; however, this short-lived effort was terminated in 1868.\(^7\) The founding in 1876 of the German Immigrants’ Society, the predecessor to the Legal Aid Society of New York, marked the first successful and sustained effort “to provide civil legal assistance for poor people in the United States.”\(^8\) Legal services programs grew throughout the country during the 1920s and 1930s.\(^9\)

The proud tradition of providing civil legal services to low-income Minnesotans, through the dedication of committed and compassionate attorneys, may be traced back to the turn of the twentieth century, when “the Family Welfare Association of Minneapolis, and individuals such as Minneapolis City Attorney Daniel Fisher, attempted to start . . . legal aid programs in the Twin Cities.”\(^10\) A decade later, efforts by three local lawyers led to the creation of the Legal Aid Bureau of the Associated Charities in St. Paul in 1909.\(^11\) The Legal Aid Bureau “consisted of one attorney and primarily addressed problems related to wage claims, loan sharks and domestic issues.”\(^12\) The Legal Aid Society of Minneapolis followed shortly thereafter, opening its doors in 1913.\(^13\) From these modest beginnings, the modern statewide coalition of civil legal services programs emerged.

In 1964, federal funding was provided to legal services programs through the enactment of the Economic Opportunity

\(^8\) Id. at 3.
\(^9\) See id.
\(^11\) Id. at 3 (identifying William West, W.O. Washburn, and C.H. Bigelow as the three attorneys who created the Legal Aid Bureau).
\(^12\) Id. at 7 (quoting McCaffrey, supra note 10).
Act\textsuperscript{14} and the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty.”\textsuperscript{15} The idea for an independent, nonprofit entity to receive and distribute federal funding for legal services to programs across the country emerged in the 1970s. In 1974, in one his last official acts, President Richard Nixon signed the Legal Services Corporation Act into law.\textsuperscript{16} To this day, the Legal Services Corporation and civil legal services programs across the country offer critical legal services to low-income individuals and families, including the elderly and persons with disabilities, and “have become an accepted part of the civil justice system.”\textsuperscript{17}

III. THE NEED FOR CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES

The state poverty rate has risen to nearly twelve percent.\textsuperscript{18} Approximately 600,000 Minnesotans live below the poverty line.\textsuperscript{19} Forty-four percent (about 264,000) of those Minnesotans are experiencing extreme poverty.\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, the consequences of the Great Recession have taken their toll on the financial stability of Minnesotans. For instance, about 124,000 jobs were lost in 2009 alone.\textsuperscript{21} In addition, more than 125,000 foreclosures have occurred between 2005 and 2011.\textsuperscript{22} While economic conditions are improving, recovery for many has been slow or has simply failed to materialize. The sluggish pace of the recovery places increased

\begin{itemize}
\item 15. \textsc{Houseman & Perle}, supra note 7, at 7.
\item 17. \textsc{Houseman & Perle}, supra note 7, at 47.
\item 19. Id.
\item 20. Greater Twin Cities United Way, Faces of Poverty 2012, at 1 (2012), available at https://www.unitedwaytwinities.org/_asset/4lj81r/PovertyBrief1_April_2012.pdf. This report defines extreme poverty as those with incomes of less than half of the income designated as the official poverty level. Id.
\end{itemize}
pressure on these individuals and families if they confront a legal problem that threatens their physical or financial security.

Unfortunately, due to insufficient resources, only a small portion of clients requiring legal services is able to obtain them. And despite the fact that the bulk of funding provided to legal services programs goes to direct client services, for every client served by the Minnesota legal services community one is turned away because of lack of funding. A significant disparity of resources exists for low-income clients requiring legal assistance: while there is one practicing attorney for every 446 Minnesotans, there is only one legal services attorney for every 4453 eligible clients. And the situation is worsening. While poverty is increasing, the number of legal services attorneys is shrinking due to funding cuts. Not surprisingly, courts adjudicating issues affecting low-income people report a rising number of unrepresented litigants.

Diminishing financial support for civil legal services is not the only barrier low-income Minnesotans face to accessing the justice system. Transportation, especially for persons with mental, physical, or developmental disabilities, can be an obstacle to visiting a legal services office or traveling to the courthouse to obtain redress. Cultural and linguistic barriers are deterrents to New Americans and those with limited English proficiency from seeking help from legal services providers. Despite the challenges, Minnesota’s legal services community is committed to providing quality legal services to the clients it can serve and striving to find new ways to increase its reach.


24. MINN. STATE BAR ASS’N CIVIL GIDEON TASK FORCE, supra note 6, at 5.


26. MINN. STATE BAR ASS’N CIVIL GIDEON TASK FORCE, supra note 6, at 6.


IV. MEETING THE CHALLENGES

A. A Variety of Services

For legal services attorneys, working to assure equal access to justice is often a calling, but it is not without its challenges. Funding deficiencies require a careful balancing of priorities to determine how to “triage” clients seeking legal assistance. A variety of generalists and specialized providers comprise the network of civil legal services providers who work every day to meet these challenges.\(^\text{29}\) Income eligibility is generally established at 125\% of the federal poverty guidelines.\(^\text{29}\)

Civil legal services providers across the state serve more than 50,000 clients annually.\(^\text{30}\) The nature of the services provided varies based on the nature of the problem presented and the resources available. Legal services attorneys frequently assist clients by providing advice and referrals to government or nonprofit agencies with social and support services. Other times, legal services attorneys represent clients in negotiations with adverse parties to resolve disputes, appear before administrative and judicial forums on behalf of clients, and take matters to appellate tribunals on behalf of clients.

Policy advocacy and community education are two other services provided. The Legal Services Advocacy Project (LSAP)\(^\text{32}\)

\(^{29}\) In 1982, the Minnesota Legislature tasked the Minnesota Supreme Court to establish an advisory committee to distribute funds to legal services programs offering services to low-income clients. Distribution of Surcharge Funds to Qualified Legal Services Programs, 1982 Minn. Laws, ch. 489 (codified at MINN. STAT. § 480.242 (2010)). This entity—the Legal Services Advisory Committee (LSAC)—typically distributes funds to a network of civil legal services providers across the state. Legal Services Advisory Committee, MINN. JUD. BRANCH, http://www.mncourts.gov/lsac (last visited Oct. 5, 2012). Recipients of LSAC funds in 2012 include: Anishinabe Legal Services, Battered Women’s Legal Advocacy Project, Central Minnesota Legal Services, Children’s Law Center of Minnesota, Estate & Elder Law Services at VOA, Farmers Legal Action Group, Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota, Indian Child Welfare Act Law Center, Judicare of Anoka County, Legal Aid Service of Northeastern Minnesota, Legal Assistance of Dakota County, Legal Assistance of Olmsted County, LegalCORPS, Legal Services of Northwest Minnesota, Minnesota AIDS Project, Minnesota Disability Law Center, and Minnesota Justice Foundation. Id.


\(^{31}\) Legal Services Advisory Committee, supra note 29.

\(^{32}\) LSAP is a statewide division of Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid.
carries out one of legal services’ most cost-effective functions: seeking to shape laws affecting low-income persons throughout the state. LSAP advocates for a broad range of low-income clients’ critical legal needs, including safety, shelter, food, minimum income, health care, and protection from financial exploitation. And legal services attorneys provide community education through appearances at community forums and presentations to social service delivery agencies.

B. Helping Clients Case by Case

Issues presented by clients to legal services attorneys fall into broad areas of need for safety, shelter, income stability, food support, consumer protection, health care, disability services, and assistance with family law matters. Clients frequently arrive at legal services’ offices during a crisis. And while clients often seek assistance for a discrete legal problem, legal services attorneys look to identify other potential legal issues confronting the client, understanding that resolving interrelated or interdependent legal matters can often make a significant difference in improving the lives of low-income individuals and families.

The following examples of client stories from actual legal services cases humanize the impact that legal services attorneys have in improving the often difficult lives of the clients who seek their assistance.

1. Preserving Housing and Utilities: A client—a single mother of two—found herself homeless and sought help from Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services (SMRLS) after she lost her housing voucher and her utility service was disconnected. A SMRLS attorney discovered that the client lived in battered-women’s shelters for thirteen months but never received a family violence waiver to protect her housing voucher. The failure to obtain the waiver caused her eligibility for the voucher to prematurely expire, leading to the utility shutoff. The attorney

33. Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services provides civil legal services, as part of the Minnesota Legal Services Coalition, to clients in thirty-three counties, with offices in St. Paul, Mankato, Rochester, Winona, Albert Lea, Worthington, and Shakopee. SMRLS—How Do I Get Legal Help?, S. MINN. REGIONAL LEGAL SERVICES, http://www.smrls.org/AboutUs.cfm?pagename=AboutUs (last visited Oct. 5, 2012). SMRLS has been serving clients for more than 100 years. See id.
2. **Staving Off Foreclosure**: A sixty-year-old client sought help from Legal Aid Service of Northeastern Minnesota (LASNEM)\(^{34}\) to stop an eviction following a foreclosure. The legal services attorney, based on a variety of defects in service and standing, was able to restore the title to her property, obtain a reduction in the redemption amount, and negotiate an agreement from the mortgagee to work out a repayment plan.

3. **Protecting Victims of Domestic Violence**: LSAP successfully convinced the Minnesota Legislature to enact a statute that allows victims of domestic violence to break a lease when they must relocate out of fear for their safety or the safety of their children.\(^{35}\)

4. **Clearing the Eviction Record**: A client sought the help of Central Minnesota Legal Services (CMLS)\(^{36}\) because she fled the apartment in which she was living to protect herself from abuse. Although she had entered an agreement to vacate and pay a portion of the rent, the landlord filed an eviction following her departure. The client never received the summons to appear in court. The CMLS attorney was able to clear her record by obtaining expungement of the eviction, preserving her future ability to obtain housing.

5. **Obtaining Unemployment Compensation**: An African-American medical laboratory technician sought help from SMRLS after her claim for unemployment insurance was denied.\(^{37}\) She was fired from her position because she was unable to afford the cost of online courses that were required to meet increased educational requirements.\(^{38}\) She was then refused unemployment insurance because her employer claimed she was fired for misconduct.\(^{39}\)
SMRLS attorney filed an appeal with the Minnesota Court of Appeals, which concluded that her inability to afford the up-front cost of the training did not establish negligence, or “misconduct,” and ordered the state to pay the unemployment benefits she deserved.\footnote{40}

6. **Averting Homelessness:** An eighty-three-year-old client was facing eviction from an assisted living facility after the Department of Human Services ceased providing medical assistance because of an alleged illegal transfer of assets and a purported excess of resources. A Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid (MMLA)\footnote{41} attorney filed an appeal and benefits were restored (and eviction averted) upon a showing that the transfer of a burial fund to a funeral home was permissible, and thus, the client was not disqualified due to an excess of resources.

7. **Enforcing the Cold Weather Rule:** Minnesota law offers special protections against utility shutoffs during the winter for low-income Minnesotans.\footnote{42} Known as the “Cold Weather Rule,” the statute provides that a utility company may not disconnect, and must restore, service between October 15 and the following April 15, provided the customer enters into, and remains current on, a payment agreement.\footnote{43} During the covered period, a client with two young children came to a SMRLS office for help keeping the heat on after she was mistakenly told by the utility provider that full payment of all arrears would be required to avert a disconnection. The legal services attorney intervened, and arranged a ten percent payment plan,\footnote{44} assuring that the utilities remained connected.

8. **Fighting Illegal Garnishment:** Public benefits are protected against seizure to satisfy a debt.\footnote{45} When a small rural bank froze the account of a client whose sole source of income was a public

\footnotesize{\textit{Id.} at *2–3.}\footnote{40} \textit{Id.}\footnote{41} Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid provides civil legal services, as part of the Minnesota Legal Services Coalition, to clients in twenty counties, with offices in Minneapolis, St. Cloud, and Willmar. \texttt{MID-MINNESOTA LEGAL AID, www.mylegalaid.org} (last visited Oct. 5, 2012).\footnote{42} \textit{See} MINN. \textsc{stat.} § 216B.096 (2012) (governing public utilities); § 216B.097 (governing municipal and cooperative utilities).\footnote{43} § 216B.096, subdiv. 5.\footnote{44} \textit{See id.}\footnote{45} \textit{See} 42 U.S.C. § 407(a) (2010) (providing that “none of the moneys paid or payable . . . shall be subject to execution, levy, attachment, garnishment, or other legal process”); \textit{see also} MINN. \textsc{stat.} § 550.37, subdiv. 14 (2010) (providing for exemption of assistance based on need and protecting the income of persons who are or have been recipients of assistance based on need).}
benefit, a legal services attorney working at CMLS intervened. The bank, after receiving notification of the attorney’s effort, freed the funds for the client.

9. **Keeping Rural Elders in their Homes**: A wheelchair-bound elder requiring oxygen twenty-four hours a day and suffering from a variety of other health complications sought the help of Anishinabe Legal Services when her Personal Care Assistance service hours were dramatically reduced. The cut in hours resulted in the loss of critical housekeeping, cooking, and transportation assistance. The legal services attorney assigned to the case prevailed at an appeals hearing, resulting in the restoration of services and the lifting of an exceedingly stressful physical and emotional burden from the client.

10. **Combatting Bias**: MMLA successfully won an eviction case and obtained both an expungement of the improperly filed eviction case and a $10,000 settlement for a single mother and her children for violation of the Minnesota Human Rights Act prohibition against discrimination on the basis of status with regard to public assistance.

11. **Protecting Tenants from Retaliation**: A client making a written request to her landlord to complete repairs on the roof of the property she rented was shortly thereafter served with an eviction notice. Although the client demonstrated that the eviction was filed in retaliation following her request for repairs, the district court entered an order in favor of the landlord. She came to MMLA for help, and the legal services attorney assigned to the case obtained a reversal from the Minnesota Court of Appeals.

**C. Stretching Resources**

The legal services community continually evaluates and implements ways to leverage resources. One key strategy is to partner with private firms and attorneys willing to contribute pro bono hours on behalf of legal services clients. Maximizing technology is another vital means of extending capacity to reach as many clients as possible.

46. Anishinabe Legal Services provides civil legal services, as part of the Minnesota Legal Services Coalition, to residents of the Leech Lake, White Earth, and Red Lake Reservations. ANISHINABE LEGAL SERVICES, www.alslegal.org (last visited Oct. 5, 2012).

1. The Private Bar Steps Up

Partnerships between the private bar and civil legal services programs can yield positive outcomes for clients and enriching experiences for associates and solo practitioners. The following provide some examples of these beneficial partnerships.

- **PCA Appeals.** The law firm of Briggs and Morgan and MMLA teamed up in 2011 to offer legal assistance for persons with disabilities who need help with daily life activities.\(^{48}\) Funding for Personal Care Assistants (PCA) who provide this vital help was cut and hours for these services were reduced, threatening the ability of many to live independently.\(^{49}\) Pro bono Briggs attorneys, following training from legal services attorneys, took on PCA appeals and, in many cases, were successful in winning restoration of services, enabling clients to remain at home, and finding rewards in changing the lives of clients eligible for civil legal services.

- **The Housing Court Project.** MMLA, private attorneys, and the Volunteer Lawyers Network (VLN)\(^{50}\) work together to aid clients with housing and eviction issues. One poignant example of the value of this particular project is chronicled in the 2011 Legal Aid Annual Report, and it involves an elderly Russian Jewish immigrant on a fixed income who lived in the same federally subsidized Minneapolis apartment for nineteen years: As is the custom in the Jewish faith, on the highest holy day, Yom Kippur, which was also the anniversary of his wife’s death, he lit candles in honor of his deceased family. Unfortunately, some fell, igniting a small fire that resulted in minimal damage. Nonetheless, the landlord terminated the client’s lease and sued for more than $10,000. Volunteer attorneys from the law firm of Faegre Baker Daniels helped the client defeat the damages claims. The settlement included a positive letter of reference from the former landlord, which enabled the client to move to a new home. The attorneys, who


\(^{49}\) See 2010 Minn. Laws, ch. 1, art. 15, sec. 7, subdiv. 11(a)(10).

\(^{50}\) The Volunteer Lawyers Network was established in 1966. Volunteer Law Network, http://www.volunteerlawyersnetwork.org (last visited Oct. 5, 2012). Its mission is to advise and represent economically disadvantaged people with civil legal problems through volunteer attorneys and without charge to the clients. Id.
were trained by Legal Aid lawyers, were connected to the client through Legal Aid’s “Housing Court Project.”

- **Policy Advocacy.** Pro bono resources can also be utilized to advance policy positions to improve the lives of low-income families. In 2010, MMLA conceived a school lunch research project to gather information on a troubling problem. MMLA found that low-income children on the federal reduced-lunch program were being turned away at school cafeterias when their parents’ accounts were in the red. Four law firms in the Twin Cities—Fredrikson & Byron, Faegre Baker Daniels, Leonard, Street and Deinard, and Lindquist & Vennum—agreed to assist MMLA to determine the scope of the problem and the policies of school districts around the state.

The attorney volunteers on the project found that “district policies often unwittingly place children in the middle of a financial transaction between parents and the school district” and that policies vary across the state. The pro bono work by these four prominent firms identified the type of policies that MMLA sought to change and was instrumental in shaping a legislative proposal prohibiting schools from denying lunch to reduced-price eligible children or from withholding diplomas when a low-income child’s account has a deficit.

- **Volunteer Attorney Programs.** Volunteer attorney programs exist in several regions of the state. The Volunteer Attorney Program in Duluth serves several counties in Northeast Minnesota. The CMLS Volunteer Attorney Program in St. Cloud serves eight counties in Central Minnesota. The Volunteer Lawyers Network in Minneapolis serves Hennepin

51. See LEGAL AID, supra note 48, at 4.
52. Id. at 8.
53. Id.
54. Id.
55. Id.
56. Id.
County and offers certain services on a metro-wide basis. All of these programs provide free legal services to income-eligible clients in all areas of civil law.

- **Financial Support.** Finally, the importance of the financial support provided by the private bar to legal services programs in Minnesota cannot be overstated. Each year, private law firms and individual attorneys donate generously to bolster the ability of legal services programs to continue to strive toward ensuring equal access to justice for all Minnesotans.

2. **Using Technology**

Technology is critical to cost-effectively maximizing the reach of legal services throughout the state. Formed in 1981, Legal Services State Support (State Support) is pioneering the effort to develop and deploy technological resources to expand and improve service to clients. Working collaboratively with all segments of the justice community, including the courts and the private bar, to leverage resources in pursuit of sophisticated innovations, State Support has created a variety of new tools to improve client service. In times of diminished resources and increased legal need, the efficiencies provided by this work have become ever more vital, especially to increase access to legal services in rural communities throughout the state.

Perhaps State Support’s signature accomplishment is the development and implementation of LawHelpMN, a comprehensive statewide legal education and referral website that is readily available to all Minnesotans, no matter what their income or where in the state they reside. LawHelpMN provides information and self-help tools. It also offers personal assistance to navigate the site and the legal system through LiveHelp, where a client can engage in an electronic conversation with a State Support staff member. The site enables clients to learn about their legal rights and responsibilities, complete court forms, and find free and low-cost legal help. This innovative site has fielded more than 800,000 inquiries since 2005.

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60. Legal Services State Support was established by the Minnesota Legal Services Coalition, a coalition of the seven regional legal services providers.

LawHelpMN is part of LawHelp, an award-winning client website platform aimed at empowering low-income persons seeking legal information and civil legal services. LawHelp received the prestigious Webby Award in 2007. Available in English, Spanish, and Somali, LawHelpMN provides hundreds of legal information factsheets, multi-media resources, and self-help forms on numerous civil legal problems from evictions to public benefits terminations, from access to health care to divorce and child support, and from help with abusive debt collection practices to assistance with foreclosures. Even if clients do not have Internet access at home, it is available at public libraries located in even the most remote rural communities. As part of an innovative collaboration, State Support is training public librarians to provide quality legal information and referrals.

Among many other online innovations developed by State Support are:

- ProJusticeMN.org, a website for legal services and pro bono practitioners, law students, and others, including substantive poverty law materials and volunteer opportunities;
- An online advice tool in Northwest Minnesota, through which clients in the region can ask legal questions of volunteer attorneys;
- A Somali LawHelp website, the first Somali-language website of its kind in the United States;
- Automated form completion for pro se litigants and court self-help centers, which, among other things, provides an easy way to obtain a harassment restraining order, answer a debt collection lawsuit, postpone a foreclosure sale, and recover a security deposit; and

62. LawHelpMN.org is a member of LawHelp.org, a website created by Pro Bono Net, a national organization whose mission is to increase access to justice for the poor.


• Criminal Expungement Start-to-Finish, an automated pleadings generation interview for legal services and pro bono attorneys that was awarded the 2011 National Pro Bono Innovation award from Law Technology News.68

But for the assistance of many partners, State Support would not be able to achieve these milestones. Included among those individuals and organizations with which State Support has worked to launch and sustain so many initiatives to assist low-income clients access and navigate the judicial system are the Minnesota State Bar Association, the Fourth District Court Self-Help Center, the Volunteer Lawyer Network, Minnesota’s law schools, public and law librarians, and community organizations.

V. CONCLUSION

Funding for the provision of civil legal services comes from a variety of sources: federal, state, and local governments; United Way; foundations; private law firms; corporations; and individual donors. Resources from many of these avenues are diminishing. Given current economic uncertainties, the ongoing provision of quality civil legal services to ensure that the most vulnerable among us can obtain access to our legal system, and that the founding principle of equal access to justice is not just a hollow platitude, will remain a challenge for the foreseeable future. However, there is a significant return on society’s investment when, for instance, we secure safety for victims of domestic violence, prevent homelessness, and keep seniors and people with disabilities living as independently as possible in the community. While provision of these services is not without cost, the value to each recipient is priceless, and the cost to our fundamental principles of justice and fairness from failure to provide them would be too dear.