



MidPenn Legal Services

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January 6, 2012

John Eidleman
Program Counsel
Legal Services Corporation
3333 K Street, NW 3rd Floor
Washington, DC 20007-3532

Re: MidPenn Legal Services
Recipient Number: 339040

Dear John:

This is written in response to the Draft report dated November 21, 2011. While the letter from Ms. LaBella stated that our comments were due to you on December 28, 2011, however in recognition that the due date was during the Christmas holiday season you granted me an extension to January 6, 2012, in which to provide comments to the Report. With that being said, we appreciate the comments made by the reviewers in the Report and have determined to respond only to those with which we feel need to be clarified or corrected.

Regarding the recommendation that we proceed with the Needs Assessment, as we informed team members when you visited, it is our plan to update our 2007/2008 Needs Assessment in the spring of this year. That is still our plan and we will look at the methods outlined in the Report to see if they can be utilized as ways to update the Assessment.

Regarding the Recommendation that we provide private interview spaces for client meetings in offices where those don't exist, we are looking at the physical lay-out of offices where this might be a problem to reconfigure those spaces to ensure that client confidentiality is maintained during the interview process. When all counties are on the program-wide intake this will be less of an issue in those offices as most first time applicants will be making contact with us over the phone. However, we recognize the importance of this issue and are reminding intake staff and managers in offices where this could be a problem of the need to ensure client confidentiality during the interview process.

Another issue the Report raises is the handicap accessibility of one office. Regarding that office, I have spoken to the staff there and it was explained that there is a handicap accessible entrance in the rear of the building with a wheelchair ramp. Applicants and clients who indicate that they use are wheelchair are advised of the handicap entrance which affords them ability to park in the rear. Staff also reports that they always meet the individuals who require use of this entrance to assist them up the ramp and with the door that leads to the office.

Regarding the comment about the appearances of some of the offices, as office leases are renewed, we negotiate with landlords to make improvements to the facilities. For example in Reading, we have negotiated with the landlord to re-carpet the office and have a group of volunteers coming in to paint. In the past, when funding has been more stable we have relocated offices to better facilities. We still have plans to relocate a couple of offices, but that is dependent upon funding. However, we strongly believe that we must maintain as many local offices as we can so we can better serve our clients and also because of the strong local support that we receive in most of our counties.

As we reported when the team visited we are moving ahead with the plans to implement a program-wide intake and telephone advice system. The Report states that the project will be staffed by two attorneys and two support staff. To clarify the project will have 4 full-time attorneys and four full-time support staff. The project is currently operational in eleven counties and the 12th county is being added on Monday January 9th. Plans are to have the remaining 6 counties on the system by March 31, 2012. Currently there are 3 attorneys who work full-time on the project. A fourth attorney who is fluent in Spanish has been hired and will start with MidPenn on January 10, 2012. Currently in the CIU, there are three full-time support staff doing intake for the counties in the CIU. One the support staff is Spanish Speaking. There are five other support staff who are available to back up the full time support staff when they are out sick or are on vacation. Three of the back-up support staff speaks Spanish. The project continues to be refined and updated as counties are being added. We took a deliberate approach to rolling out this project to ensure that it was successful and that included ensuring that it was fully staffed with competent staff including an attorney who speaks Spanish fluently in order to address the needs of the growing Spanish speaking population in our service area.

The Report also recommends that we develop an intake manual as part of the intake system. One of the reasons we wanted to develop a CIU is to ensure uniformity in intake across our large geographic region. Many of the policies and procedures have been developed and are available on the Share Point site for easy access by the CIU staff.

Regarding case assignment distribution, the eleven 11 counties currently in the program-wide intake system and telephone advice system (with a 12th county to be added on 1/9/12 and all others by 3/31/12) careful thought has gone into the process for determining case assignments in local offices, based on a number of factors, including knowledge and experience in particular areas of the law and the need to cover all areas identified as a priority. Once cases are assigned by support staff in the intake unit, a supervising attorney for each advocate is responsible for monitoring caseloads, discussing cases during case review meetings, and making any adjustments in case assignment responsibilities as may be appropriate. In offices not currently in the program-wide intake system, similar efforts have been made by managing attorneys to assure that case assignments to specific advocates are appropriate.

We will continue to work on the updating the Language Access Plan and to train staff on the Plan. This will be done in continued recognition of the changing demographics in our

Region. Footnote 5, should however, be updated to reflect the correct number of bilingual staff all but one of whom is also Bicultural who are employed at MidPenn.
Lancaster: two paralegals, two support staff and one attorney
Reading: two paralegals, two support staff and one attorney
Harrisburg: one attorney and one support staff and beginning January 10th a second bilingual/bicultural attorney will be housed in the Harrisburg office to work on the Telephone Advice Project
York: one support staff
Lebanon: one support staff

We regard supervision of staff as an important part of providing high quality legal services to our clients. We do have supervision standards in place to ensure that staff is being supervised. The Report mentions that we need to ensure that staff is being supervised consistently across the program. To that end, we are in the process of finalizing some changes in management to ensure that supervision across the program is being conducted in accordance with the standards set out in our Standards of Practice. Review of the written work of advocates is part of the supervision and evaluation process and it will be stressed to those who are managers and supervisors that review of written work is an important part of the on-going supervision of advocates.

We would also like to clarify the following information that is contained in the Report. First, regarding the supervision of middle management staff, the Director of Advocacy has responsibility for the supervision of their legal work. The Executive Director is responsible for the administrative duties of these individuals. When evaluations are conducted for middle managers, they are done with the Director of Advocacy handling a review of the legal work and the Executive Director handling the administrative portion. This arrangement works well for us and allows us to divide responsibility for middle management staff. The Executive Director directly supervises and evaluates all administrative staff with the exception of the two accountants and the grants manager who is supervised by the Director of Finance and Director of Development respectively. Finally, the Executive Director is responsible for all personnel issues that arise within the Program and has the responsibility to handle them in accordance the Personnel Policies and procedures and the Union Contract.

Regarding training, while requests for training from advocates are sent to the Director of Advocacy for approval, the decision about which trainings staff attend is always decided in consultation with the Executive Director. In an effort to further clarify the value we place on staff training, below you will find a list of trainings that staff has attended in 2010 and 2011.

- Two staff attorneys attended the **NLADA Substantive Law Conference** July 2010- in Chicago, Illinois
- Two staff attorneys attended the **National Institute for Trial Advocacy training**-in July 2010 in Boulder, Colorado
- The Development Director and Director of Technology attended training on **Essentials of a Nonprofit website**- in July 2010

- Grant Administrator attended session on **Advanced Grant Writing-**
- Thirteen attorneys, and one paralegal attended training on at the Statewide Domestic Violence Organization entitled **Transforming Our Programs**
- Two attorneys attended the **National Consumer Law Conference** in May 2010 in Boston, MA
- One paralegal and one attorney attending training in Oklahoma City, OK entitled, **Stepping Stones to Recovery** training for advocates who work with Adults who are homeless and who are trying to obtain Social Security benefits.
- Two attorneys attended training on **Addressing Domestic Violence** within the local community
- Director of Finance attended Gerry Singesen's **Financial Management Training** in New Orleans- December 7-11, 2010
- Six attorneys attended the **PLAN Mortgage Foreclosure Training**
- Director of Technology attended the **2011 TIG Conference-** New Mexico
- One Staff attorney attended the **RHC Housing Summit-**Philadelphia
- (31 Staff Attended, 3 trainers), **PLAN Statewide Conference-** May 11 and 12, 2011
- Three Ombudsman staff attended the **Ombudsman Enrichment Conference-** Gettysburg- May 3-5, 2011
- One attorney attended the **VAWA Training in** Scranton-Sept. 15, 2011
- Three staff attorneys attended the **National Housing Law Project-**Washington, D.C.- October 15-17, 2011
- One attorney attended the **Consumer Rights Litigation Conference-** November 2-7, 2011- Chicago, IL.
- (3 attorneys, 4 paralegals and 2 clients) attended the **PLAN Public Benefits Training** November 29-30, 2011

While most of the training opportunities have been afforded to advocates, we conduct regular trainings for all staff during the yearly all staff meetings. We also try to hold quarterly conference calls among support staff to discuss issues that they encounter in their jobs. These calls are convened by the Assistant to the Ex. Director and a middle manager.

We recognize that training for middle managers has not been as coordinated as we would like, and as funding allows, we will make a concerted effort to provide more training to those in middle management.

Performance Area Four mentions the Director of Advocacy's Report to the Board. To ensure that the Report accurately reflects the full extent of the information that Board members are provided, it should be noted that at each Board meeting, members receive a Directors Report which contains information about the work done in the prior quarter including updates on funding, programmatic, personnel and other relevant information. Members also receive a report from the Development Director on the development activities in the prior quarter. Finally, they receive a Finance Report from the Chair of the Finance Committee in conjunction with the Director of Finance.

The section on Human Resources states that the Program instituted a four-day work week. Currently, out of 88 staff, we only have three staff (two paralegals and one support) who have elected to work four days a week. This point requires clarification because it needs to be understood that the four day work week schedules were not mandated by the Program, but rather offered as a choice to anyone who wanted to avail themselves of this opportunity.

In the same section the report points out that job descriptions and evaluations were recently revised and updated so they would be in alignment with the recently developed Performance Standards. At the conclusion of revision process, it was determined that staff evaluations would take place in the first quarter of each fiscal year. This requirement is now in place and all managers and supervisors are aware that this is the time frame for evaluations of their staff. The Executive Director will continue to be evaluated in the spring of each year.

Regarding internal communication, we will attempt to make better use of the Intranet site, where we now have documents posted on benefits, rules regulations and other programmatic information. We also recognize the value of gathering together as much as possible as a staff to share ideas and impart information. However, so there is no confusion, I would like to clarify, that the All Staff meetings which were held twice a year were reduced by agreement with the Union to once a year as a cost-saving measure. Generally, these meetings cost between 6 and 7 thousand dollars to conduct. This includes renting the facility, providing meals, and paying associated mileage for staff to travel to and from the meeting. We will however, continue to work on ways to facilitate improved interaction with staff through conference calls and more localized regional meetings.

Regarding the need to relieve the Director of Advocacy and Executive Director of some duties, a middle manager has been promoted to oversee pro bono, compliance with grants and manage the client data base. Adding this staff person, should serve to lesson some of the responsibilities that the Director of Advocacy and the Director currently have.

Finally, while it is our goal to relieve both the Director of Advocacy and Director of more of their duties, that just isn't feasible at this time. With the recent 15% decrease in LSC funds this fiscal year and the more recent 10% reduction in state funding, we are unable to free up more money to add addition administrative staff at this time. While we appreciate the recognition that both Howard and I have too many duties, unfortunately, we will have to continue as is until we are again at a point financially where we can increase our staff.

Thank you and the team members for your thoughts and recommendations that MidPenn can take in an effort to improve its services. If you any questions, or would like to discuss this response with me, please feel free to contact me. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Rhodia D. Thomas

Rhodia D. Thomas, Esq.
Executive Director

CC: MidPenn Board of Directors