



Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles

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Our File Number

February 25, 2010

Chuck Greenfield
Program Counsel
Office of Program Performance
Legal Services Corporation
3333 K Street, NW 3rd Floor
Washington, D.C. 20007-3522

**RE: LSC Program Quality Visit
Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles
Response to Draft Report, Recipient No. 805080
August 31 – September 4, 2009**

Dear Mr. Greenfield:

As requested in Ms. Schneider's letter to the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA), I am writing to you with LAFLA's response and comments to the draft report for the August 31 – September 4, 2009 Program Quality Visit.

I am pleased that you confirm that LAFLA is providing high quality legal services and performing outstanding advocacy. We take great pride in having one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse staff in the legal services community providing legal services to one of the most diverse populations in the country. We are indeed proud of our API and Immigration Units for their work with cultural and linguistic minorities.

Your report will be used as a framework for internal evaluation, assessment and program development. Thank you and your team for the time you spent with us and for your recommendations.

Before you and your team arrived, LAFLA had already begun many initiatives to better assess our work. We engaged staff, clients and community partners in reviewing what we do. Since your team's visit, we have implemented a new phone system, have purchased new computers and have upgraded our servers as well as increased bandwidth. We continue to assess our technology and will implement upgrades to Kemp in 2010.

One minor edit, on page 3, last full paragraph of your draft report: LAFLA's has had two other EDs since February 2006 not October 2005.

Below, please find LAFLA's response to several areas noted in your report:

Finding 1: It has been a number of years since LAFLA last completed a comprehensive assessment of legal needs.

Response: LAFLA was engaged in a strategic planning process at the time of the Office of Program Performance (OPP) visit, and the aim of that process was to assess our client's legal needs by engaging community based organizations, partners in the legal and non-profit arena. We worked diligently to review census data and to bring in expertise from consultant as necessary. As a result of that review, we have engaged in an assessment of how to better serve clients. This is a continuing review and we will use OPP's findings to improve our assessment.

FINDING 2: Even though LAFLA has not completed a recent comprehensive legal needs assessment, the program has made adjustments to its priorities based on newly identified needs.

Response: One other area where LAFLA has made adjustments to our priorities has been in employment law. In order to meet the growing need of unemployed clients, we have dedicated more resources to helping clients win their unemployment benefits in response to the current wave of layoffs and job losses.

Criterion 4: Evaluation and adjustment.

FINDING 5: With some exceptions, it appears that in the last several years LAFLA, as a program, has failed to regularly analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of its delivery system and work. Case statistics are significantly below the national medians, including the percentage of extended representation cases.

Response: The evaluation and assessment of our delivery system and work began in 2007 and continued throughout 2008. Part of the strategic planning process that LAFLA engaged in included many of the indicators suggested by the LSC Performance Criteria. These indicators included the following: Focus groups with client members, questionnaires sent to clients and done at individuals offices. LAFLA staff also had focus groups of our partner agencies including advocacy and social services and community based organizations. Based on the results of these focus groups and questionnaires, the Delivery of Services sub-committee of the SPC made critical recommendations that LAFLA is currently addressing.

We are also evaluating the issue raised regarding caseload standards. One area that is not discussed in the finding is that of the policy work that LAFLA staff participate in throughout the foundation. This work entails working with our community partners, the courts, social service agencies and government agencies. This work has allowed us to address systemic issues faced by our clients.

FINDING 7: Low-income persons have a difficult time accessing the program's services

through its intake system.

Response: Prior to LSC's visit, LAFLA was engaged in an assessment of our intake system and what technology we would need to address a change in our intake system. I am pleased to report that as of December 28, 2009, LAFLA has a new phone system that has dramatically changed how we do intake. Our 800 number is now answered by six receptionists who handle initial screening of clients. Once the client meets our eligibility criteria they are sent to an intake screener who performs a full assessment of client needs and who, under the supervision of an attorney, provides counsel and advice when needed. The new system is complemented by a database that allows us to track the number of callers, the specific areas they need help with and the problem they have so that when the intake screener receives the caller, this information is already available to him/her and the client has a seamless experience with upfront assessment.

Additionally, through our Community Access Committee, LAFLA is assessing and reviewing walk-in access to our offices. This committee is evaluating and making proposals regarding LAFLA wide protocols for walk-in clients and how we as an organization respond to client needs for services. Recommendations and implementation will take place by summer 2010.

One clarification to the OPP report is that our Government Benefits Unit also provides counsel and advice over the phone to clients. Additionally, the courthouse clinics now have access to our Kemps case management system because all of LAFLA is on remote desktop access. Prior to Remote Desktop Access being implemented, LAFLA did indeed perform conflicts checks at clinics by checking the names of the people helped in pro per in Legal Solutions, and calling to the office to have a staff person check Kemp's for conflicts. With Remote Desktop this has been resolved and can be done on site. For example in the Family Law Unit, the screener did provide basic counsel and advice and referrals under the supervision of the assigned Attorney of the Day (AOD) who would take the call if it went beyond what the intake screener could handle on her own. There is a detailed assessment sheet that was developed for the screener to assess the caller's issue and to determine the urgency of the matter.

FINDING 9: LAFLA's six offices are appropriately located to provide services in convenient locations. However, access to the full range of services is not available at each office.

Response: Through our Community Access Committee, we are assessing and reviewing walk-in access to our offices. This committee is evaluating and making proposals regarding LAFLA wide protocols for walk-in clients and how we as an organization respond to client needs for services. Recommendations and implementation will take place by summer 2010.

The recognition that LAFLA is performing outstanding advocacy is greatly appreciated. Our advocates have performed outstanding work with the same or limited resources.

We appreciate the recommendation regarding a director of litigation position. We will further review caseloads and caseload standards. With respect to employee training, 2009 was a year of belt-tightening year due to the economic downturn and for the first time in many years, LAFLA reduced its training budget. To compensate for that reduction, LAFLA provided more in-house trainings and sought the help of pro bono assistance for trainings. This proved to be very fruitful.

In 2010, the training budget is greatly increased and staff will be attending training as deemed appropriate.

FINDING 11: LAFLA needs to upgrade its technology and is beginning to do so but more needs to be done.

Response: LAFLA understands the need to upgrade its technology and to that end, since the OPP team left LAFLA, we have purchased and installed a new telephone system. Our 800 number is now answered by six receptionists who handle initial screening of clients. Once the client meets our eligibility criteria they are sent to an intake screener who performs a full assessment of client needs and who, under the supervision of an attorney, provides counsel and advice when needed. The new system is complemented by a database that allows us to track the number of callers, the specific areas they need help with and the problem they have so that when the intake screener receives the caller, this information is already available to him/her and the client has a seamless experience with upfront assessment.

Additionally, LAFLA has moved to a remote desktop connection for our computer system that includes an upgrade to a new “cloud” system. This system was implemented in the fall of 2009 and our IT department continues to work with our vendors and consultant to ensure that connectivity issues are resolved.

LAFLA also purchased the upgrade to the Kemps case management system and will install those in late Spring.

LAFLA’s IT director attended the LSNTAP conference and has been in contact with IT directors throughout California. We will explore HotDocs.

FINDING 17: The current program has some overlapping and ambiguous areas of management responsibilities. There is no deputy director position and no litigation director in the program.

Response: LAFLA has worked with a consultant, JohnTull to assist in an evaluation of management that addresses both recommendations 4.17.1 and 4.17.2.

FINDING 20: The program has some effective internal communication systems in place, however improvement is needed.

LiNC, LAFLA’s intranet will be overhauled to make it a more useful tool.

In terms of cross unit communications and collaborations, LAFLA does indeed work on cross unit cases and collaborations. Examples of this include, cross unit work between the family law, immigration, housing and government benefits unit. Each unit works in concert with the other in order to properly address client’s needs. Additionally, the employment unit and the government benefits unit have worked to address issues related to wage and hour claims and government benefits needed by clients. Family law and Housing have worked on cases to address client needs. Additionally, the managing attorneys meet on a monthly basis to discuss programmatic issues. LAFLA has a long standing culture of creating committees in order to address programmatic issue

and as a means of having staff work on issues that affect clients, all units and the organization as a whole.

Finally, LAFLA's technology has greatly improved since OPP's visit. The technology budget has also been increased in order to meet necessary upgrades. The recommendation regarding adequate funding for technology in grant requests is one we will implement in future requests.

LAFLA thanks you and your team for the input during the August 31-September 4 visit. The staff and I appreciate the recommendations contained in your report and will use this report as a planning tool for LAFLA's future and as a means of improving the various areas discussed in the report. We always benefit from any comments and findings that help us do our work better and your visit was very helpful.

Sincerely,

Silvia Argueta
Executive Director