

## The Georgia Legal Services Program: Providing Critical Legal Aid in Rural Communities

By Jeanette Burroughs

“**E**viction notices, unpaid wages, and consumer fraud are only a few of the critical legal problems our clients face today as did our clients of 31 years ago,” says Georgia Legal Services Program (GLSP) Executive Director Phyllis J. Holmen. The GLSP remains today what it was intended to be when founded by the Young Lawyers Division (formerly Section) of the State Bar in 1971 — one place where low-income clients find critical legal aid with family problems, housing issues, public benefits and health care to name a few. The GLSP’s commitment to fairness and justice is still compelling. The GLSP’s accomplishments demonstrate progress. The GLSP still attracts talented and gifted lawyers to its cause. A total of 165 employees carry on the mission to provide access to justice and opportunities out of poverty for low-income Georgians.

“We are very proud of the achievements of the staff throughout these years, and recognize that our accomplishments are built on the dedicated, hard, stress-laden every day work of those individuals,” says Holmen. “We’re also very gratified by the contributions of our many volunteers who have helped share the work, and of our many donors who have helped us to grow and endure.”

The GLSP is rural Georgia’s only not-for-profit law firm serving 154 counties surrounding metro Atlanta. One million Georgians with incomes at or below 125 percent of poverty are eligible for serv-



David and Patricia Bryant. “I feel most assuredly that I would have lost my home and everything else. There are a lot of people out there that cannot get help because of not enough money. But, with the GLSP, they might get the help that they need.” — Patricia Bryant

ices — 81 percent of our clients are women and children and 11 percent are elderly. About 30 percent of the service region lack major industrial or commercial centers, have high unemployment rates and offer minimal economic opportunity.

The GLSP lawyers and paralegals ride across 58,000 square miles to client accessible locations, such



The Victims of Crime Act funding from the State of Georgia Criminal Justice Coordinating Council supports the elder abuse prevention work of the GLSP.

as welfare offices and courthouses. Clients are provided free legal representation, advice and counsel on matters of family law, housing, employment, consumer issues and health care. Since 1971, the GLSP has served approximately 350,000 individuals and families. Last year, the GLSP closed 15,614 cases.

An \$11 million operating budget not only supports direct legal services for clients, but also supports special projects. The Statewide Domestic Violence Project provides legal services to victims of family violence. Elder rights projects assist senior citizens with legal problems involving Social Security, Medicaid/Medicare, consumer finance and nursing home care. HIV/AIDS projects provide legal aid to clients on housing, employment and health care problems. Elder abuse intervention/prevention projects in Savannah and Columbus address legal issues of physically abused or financially exploited seniors. Community economic development projects develop affordable housing, micro-enterprises, job creation and training, after school programs and daycare services in impoverished, rural neighborhoods. A farmwork-

er division in Tifton serves the legal needs of migrant farmworkers. A housing helpline assists callers with landlord/tenant problems.

## Deeper Involvement

In spite of this year's static funding in federal and state appropri-

tions, the GLSP lawyers and paralegals work hard to avoid dramatic reductions in the numbers of people served. These lawyers and paralegals get deeply involved in people's lives, providing the help that reflects our community's values of fairness, equality and responsibility to assist others in need.

Funding levels are not adequate to meet the needs of every eligible family with a legal problem. The GLSP staff establish priorities among legal needs to ensure that the most critical needs are served. New issues occasionally arise that require special attention. In recent years, these have included revitalizing impoverished neighborhoods through affordable housing and micro-enterprise opportunities, assisting Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) recipients transition off the welfare rolls successfully, and helping disaster victims rebuild their lives.

Case stories illustrate the commitment of the GLSP lawyers and paralegals to keep families together, pre-

serve shelter, protect income or create viable opportunities for improved quality of life in rural, low-income neighborhoods.

## Preserving the Home is a Priority

GLSP clients often face housing problems, which could result in homelessness through no fault of their own. The GLSP's priorities provide in part: "The loss of housing through unsafe or unhealthy conditions, eviction, or foreclosure can precipitate exposure to physical and medical risks in crowded shelters or the streets, disruption of the schooling of young children, loss of employment, and the splintering of families whose members may be dispersed in seeking alternate shelter."

*Almost Homeless* — Patricia Bryant is like a lot of other grandmothers who are taking care of their grandchildren these days. Yet, Bryant's situation presents extraordinary challenges. Her grandson, David, is 12 years old, developmentally disabled and con-



Domestic violence affects families of every income level and every age.



Brenda Crawford and her family enjoy the first home built in Athens-Clarke County under the Community Land Trust Model.

*Photo courtesy of GLSP lawyer Skipper Stipe Maas.*

fined to a wheel chair. He is dependent on a breathing machine at night while sleeping. Bryant is unable to work outside the home because of her responsibilities to her grandson. Her husband recently died leaving no will, minimal insurance to cover burial expenses and very little income. Bryant tried to lower her mortgage payments so that she could keep her home. The mortgage company told her that she had to get a quitclaim deed from her stepchildren since her husband had no will. Two of her stepchildren contested her petition in probate court. If a GLSP lawyer had not represented her, Bryant might have lost her home.

## Supporting the Safety of Families is a Priority

Advocacy for victims of family violence has taken on increasing importance for the GLSP in response to the need and the availability of funding from the Judicial Council of Georgia and under the federal Victims of Crime Act and Violence Against Women Act. Last year, the GLSP lawyers and parale-

gals assisted 1,754 family violence clients. The legal services provided to these victims also benefited an additional 3,177 family members who are primarily the children of victims. In addition, the GLSP lawyers and paralegals work collaboratively with shelters, victim

assistance offices, law enforcement trainers and officers, local bar associations, private attorneys and the bench to create local family violence taskforces that address the social and psychological forces at work for victims in their local communities.

Recently, the GLSP has implemented a Web-based program that enables family violence victims and their advocates to create temporary protective orders (TPOs) via the Internet. The GLSP's TPO Web site enables victims to meet their immediate needs for court protection. A victim goes to the Web site and answers questions that appear on the computer screen. Without an attorney present, the victim is able to produce a court petition, ex parte court order, and a TPO directly from the Internet. These forms are court approved and appreciated by judges for their accuracy and completeness. Judges can act faster and more comprehensively on the victim's behalf, thereby providing the victim with the relief he or she needs.

The TPO Web site was piloted in 1998 in three counties with assistance from the Fund for the City of New York. Today, the Web site is accessible from 29 shelters, 13 victim witness assistance programs and the GLSP's 12 field offices, and is being replicated across the nation.

*Finally Breaking Away* — Marietta Hair was working with her husband laying concrete. Her nine-year-old son, Israel, was with her. Her husband accused her of inadequately performing her job. He demanded his wife to walk over to him. He grabbed an iron rack and swung it into her left thigh, leaving her entire leg black and blue and dented with puncture wounds. Then, he ordered her to get back to work. Hair had to kneel on her right leg to finish the concrete job. Later that night, her leg was so swollen she literally had to cut her jeans from her body. A GLSP lawyer obtained a TPO for Hair and, later, the divorce Hair requested. Hair and Israel now live in Kentucky with her family.

## Protecting the Exploited is a Priority

Senior citizens become particularly vulnerable as their capacity to make independent and informed judgments declines. The GLSP's elder abuse prevention projects in Columbus and Savannah are effective in training the elderly to take measures to prevent exploitation from occurring in their lives.

The Seniors and Law Enforcement Together (SALT) Council in Columbus is chaired by a GLSP paralegal. The council provides leadership in educating, assisting and involving the elderly in conferences and workshops that

empower them to become less vulnerable to victimization. Seniors learn common sense methods many of us take for granted such as refraining from filling out solicitation forms or sharing personal information with strange companies, not throwing credit card offers in the trash until after they have been destroyed, and not talking to phone solicitors.

A GLSP lawyer is secretary for the Chatham County SALT Council, which was organized in 2000. The council provides a forum for collaboration among older adults, law enforcement and other agencies serving seniors to prevent and respond to safety and crime issues.

***Dignity and Self-Respect Restored*** — Albert Young suffers from the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. With no one to properly care for him, he was placed in a personal care home. The owner of the home and her son swindled him of his home, car, boat, truck and savings totaling \$22,500 — leaving him with nothing. The owner even attempted to isolate Young from his outside friends and contacts. A GLSP lawyer represented Young in a lawsuit against the personal care operator. The jury found that the defendants had committed fraud and awarded Young \$10,000 in damages and an additional \$7,500 in punitive damages. The sales contracts for Young's home, car, truck and boat were rescinded.

## Revitalizing Low-Income Communities is a Priority

The GLSP lawyers collaborate with the A Business Commitment (ABC) Pro Bono Project of the State

Bar of Georgia to assist community based organizations to build their capacities to provide low-income neighborhoods with home ownership and micro enterprise opportunities.

The GLSP lawyers and private lawyers work together to provide low-income community groups with technical assistance to: (1) achieve 501(c)(3) tax exempt status; (2) develop the capacity of directors to handle the legal issues involved in managing their organizations; (3) write and draft organizational policies and procedures; (4) train and develop business plans and strategic plans; and (5) negotiate Memorandums of Understanding with local banks and governments to leverage long-term financial support. These steps prepare community groups to mobilize low-income families and individuals out of poverty.

***Accomplishing the American Dream*** — Brenda Crawford and her three youngest children recently moved into the first home built in Athens-Clarke County under the Community Land Trust




Albert Young was represented by a GLSP lawyer in a lawsuit against a personal care operator.

model. The ownership of the land will stay with the Athens Land Trust while the house is sold to the resident.

A GLSP lawyer provided the legal assistance to complete this first-time project of the Athens Land Trust — a client of the GLSP that for the past eight years has been working to build affordable houses for low-to-moderate income families in the Northeast Georgia region. A GLSP lawyer provided legal assistance to clear title to the property, draft the ground lease and recruit volunteer lawyer assistance from Sutherland, Asbill and Brennan, LLP.

## Conclusion

Other work of the GLSP lawyers and paralegals does not involve representation of individual clients. Like their colleagues in the private practice of law, the GLSP lawyers and paralegals are called upon to serve on boards, committees and taskforces, to make presentations to judges, lawyers and other members of their communities, and to participate in developing creative and collaborative solutions to persistent problems. Widely praised for their expertise in the special legal problems of low-income Georgians, the GLSP lawyers and paralegals understand the value and effectiveness of working together to make Georgia's communities better places for all residents. To learn more about the GLSP, visit the Web site at [www.glsp.org](http://www.glsp.org). 

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## 2002 "And Justice for All" State Bar Campaign for GLSP

Assuring access to justice and emphasizing the responsibility to help others describe the 2002 "And Justice for All" State Bar Campaign for GLSP. The campaign was launched on April 22, 2002, with a goal to raise \$325,000 from individual lawyers and law firms.

"If every bar member who has never given to this campaign would each contribute a minimum gift of \$50 and every bar member who has contributed in the past would contribute again at the same gift level or higher, we could raise over \$1 million," said Frank Strickland, GLSP's fundraising chairperson.

"Individual contributions usually range from \$25 to \$2,500 and law firm gifts range from \$150 to \$6,000," said Jeanette Burroughs, GLSP's director of development. Law firms have the option to make special project gifts, too. Two large law firms have already pledged \$40,000 in support of GLSP's community economic development work to revitalize low-income and rural communities.

Bar members are solicited through the Bar dues "check-off" and special appeals by mail. A total of 2,888 lawyers and law firms contributed last year. "We are hopeful to increase our nine percent response rate to 12 percent given our exciting publicity activities and the launching of a public education campaign this fall," said Burroughs.

Campaign contributions support legal aid in civil matters for victims of domestic violence, veterans, the elderly, children and others who have critical legal problems and no place else to turn for help. "We help low-income individuals and families protect their basic rights to be treated fairly, and this campaign serves to remind bar members of their promises to assure access to justice for all," said Phyllis J. Holmen, GLSP's executive director.

Campaign contributions can be sent to: State Bar of Georgia Campaign for GLSP, P.O. Box 78855, Atlanta, GA, 30357-2855. Visit the Web site at: [www.glsp.org](http://www.glsp.org).