



## Montana Legal Services Association 2013

### LEGAL NEEDS

Approximately **49%** of low-income Montana households have at least one civil legal need; almost half of those are unmet, according to the Legal Needs Study commissioned by the Montana Justice Foundation in 2010. Requests for MLSA help are rising. In 2012, MLSA had **8,595** requests for help, compared to 7,593 requests in 2011.

### MLSA

MLSA is the only statewide law firm providing free civil legal aid to over **150,000** low-income Montanans. For example, MLSA advocates get repairs made for tenants so that housing is safe and healthy, help domestic violence survivors keep custody of their children from their abusers, prevent disabled Montanans from unfairly losing the benefits that pay for their food, housing, and transportation to medical appointments, and more. Representation by a legal aid attorney can help prevent events that would be devastating to families and costly to the community.

### STATEWIDE SERVICES

MLSA provides legal services throughout the state and all Montana tribal reservations with advocates in three primary offices in Missoula, Billings, and Helena, as well as at the Crow Tribal Court. Advocates provide services according to subject matter, not based on geographic location. For example, MLSA's housing attorney in Helena is available to provide services to clients in all 56 Montana counties.

### STRATEGIC FOCUS

Only 13 FTE case-handling attorneys provide services (out of 39.5 total staff) due to funding cuts and resulting layoffs. Accordingly, MLSA has strategically narrowed its focus to cases with the greatest potential impact for the most people. MLSA provides advice and representation primarily in the areas of consumer, housing, domestic violence family law, and public benefits. MLSA provides general family law services through information, pro se forms, and pro bono attorney representation.

### STATS

Dedicated MLSA attorneys and staff work extraordinarily hard for low-income Montanans with pressing civil legal needs. From January 1, 2013 to May 31, 2013, MLSA has handled 1,786 cases, helping 3,982 people. The MLSA Intake staff has fielded approximately 459 requests for services per month. Pro Bono attorneys donated 1,980 hours of legal work. 42,273 people visited [MontanaLawHelp.org](http://MontanaLawHelp.org) , viewing 126,924 pages.

Despite this hard work, every day MLSA must turn away clients with legal needs due to lack of staffing and resources. Decreases in federal and IOLTA funds have had a direct negative impact on the number of cases MLSA is able to handle. In 2012, MLSA closed 2,763 cases, a significant decrease from the 4,771 cases closed in 2011. MLSA continually develops innovative programming to attempt to address this unmet need, but at the end of the day, many low-income people with meritorious legal claims have no meaningful access to justice.

PROJECT Two MLSA projects demonstrate how strategic impact advocacy results in positive results not  
SNAPSHOTS only for individual clients but for other Montanans with similar legal issues.

The Foreclosure Assistance Program (FAP) advocates provide civil legal information, advice, and representation to homeowners facing illegal foreclosures or foreclosure practices.

FAP prevents mortgage loan servicers from violating Montana homeowners' legal rights without recourse and forces servicers to change their illegal practices. FAP's efforts benefit not only clients, but also other Montana homeowners who are similarly at risk of foreclosure or may be in the future. Further, since home-ownership helps prevent poverty, FAP's work has a significant and positive impact to the economic health of Montanans as a whole.

MLSA's Domestic Violence (DV) Law advocates represent survivors and their children in cases needing victim-focused interpretation in the courts, resolution of incorrect application of domestic violence laws, changes in practices that violate state and federal statutes, and more. Currently, besides general issues, DV Law advocates are working on projects dealing with orders of protection and Native American assistance.

The DV Law advocates also provide one-on-one technical assistance for pro bono attorneys, social service advocates, law enforcement, and others who assist survivors, and provide numerous community trainings every year.

FUNDING Due to 2010 Census changes, MLSA's primary funding from the federal Legal Services Corporation will decrease in 2014, likely by 15%. While MLSA enjoys regional and national recognition for innovation and effectiveness, and has diversified funding to 28 sources, these mitigations do not make up for lost federal funds. If projected future losses are realized, the MLSA Board of Trustees and administration will face very difficult choices, likely resulting in staff cuts with corresponding decrease in services.

MLSA is taking steps to combat funding losses. These include establishing a Development Committee to identify and implement creative strategies to increase MLSA's revenues and expand its service capacity, as well as partnering with the Montana Attorney General's Office in the "Keep My Montana Home" program, which funds MLSA's FAP program to represent and advise clients who have foreclosure legal issues.

For more information or to find out how you can help, contact: Alison Paul, Executive Director, [apaul@mtlsa.org](mailto:apaul@mtlsa.org) 406/442-9830 x115 or Christine Mandiloff, Communications Director, [cmandilo@mtlsa.org](mailto:cmandilo@mtlsa.org) 406/442-9830 x 131