

**UPDATE OF STATE PLANNING FOR LEGAL SERVICES: THE LONG ISLAND
REGION
October, 1999 to March, 2001**

Nassau and Suffolk Counties combine to create a readily identifiable region, which as a suburban/rural area is distinct from New York City both culturally and governmentally, and which is geographically remote from the "upstate" locations of New York State. Overall, Long Island is a relatively affluent area with Nassau ranking first in median family income in New York State and Suffolk, fifth. Despite the wealth, however, the poverty population exceeds 61,000 in Suffolk and 47,000 in Nassau County (1990 U.S. Census). Combined, the two counties have the largest numbers of persons living below the poverty level next to New York City and Erie County. The extremely high cost of living on Long Island makes the effects of poverty all the more devastating.

There is only one LSC-funded provider for the bi-county region of Long Island: Nassau/Suffolk Law Services Committee, Inc. (NSLS). As the single largest provider of the widest variety of civil legal services to Long Island's poor and disadvantaged, NSLS has spearheaded the coordination of services among the local agencies which through various sources of funding provide legal services to the poor of Long Island. At the same time, NSLS and the Long Island regional group has remained involved in the State-wide Planning process with other LSC- and IOLA-funded legal services providers.

On the local level, the Executive Director of NSLS co-chairs, with the Director of Public Interest at Touro Law School, the Long Island Civil Legal Services Regional Planning Group. Additionally, LIHS Board members and several NSLS staff are actively involved by attending meetings, working on issues between meetings, and acting as liaisons to subcommittees of the Statewide Planning Initiative. A complete list of the other agencies involved in the planning process is

attached. While we have found the formal planning process very useful, there has been de facto coordination of services and cooperation between many of these agencies for years. Among the groups who are engaged in this local planning process are other IOLA-funded agencies, including Touro Law School, with which NSLS has had a long-standing relationship in the form of a joint Housing Rights Project, which utilizes the resources of NSLS staff and Touro's students to provide advise and legal representation in landlord-tenant cases. Touro also receives IOLA funding for a Social Justice Fellow to handle cases, such as welfare reform, class actions and cases of undocumented persons, which NSLS is prohibited from handling by the LSC regulations.

Also participating in the regional planning are the coalitions against domestic violence of both Nassau and Suffolk Counties. These agencies have legal components which, far from duplicating services provided by NSLS, focus exclusively on family court matters which NSLS does not handle, while NSLS provides representation to victims of domestic violence in matrimonial matters in Supreme Court. NSLS also has a joint project with the Nassau County Coalition Against Domestic Violence to provide legal representation to victims of domestic violence.

Another regional planning participant is the Legal Aid Society of Suffolk County, which primarily represents clients in criminal matters, but which receives federal funding to provide legal assistance to senior citizens (NSLS receives this funding in Nassau County) and also handles some domestic legal matters (eg., respondents in child support, child neglect and paternity cases) which NSLS generally does not handle. Early in its history, NSLS came to an understanding with the Legal Aid Societies of both Nassau and Suffolk Counties, with the result that the three agencies are clear on the scope of cases which each will handle. Similarly, Law Services does not handle most education

cases because the Long Island Advocacy Center specializes in that area.

By virtue of its historical willingness to expand the scope of the legal services it provides (so long as the services do not conflict with its obligations under the LSC regulations), NSLS has successfully attracted funding from various sources to develop a wide variety of specialized projects addressing specific legal issues or servicing particular vulnerable populations. Our Disability Advocacy Project (utilizing New York State OTADA funds to provide legal assistance in Social Security/SSI disability cases), our David Project (utilizing AIDS Institute and Ryan White funds to represent HIV-positive individuals), our Mental Health Law Project (funded by the state Office of Mental Health to represent mentally ill clients) and our Adult Home Project (funded by the NYS Commission on Quality of Care for the Mentally Disabled to protect the legal interests of Adult Home Residents) are only a few of the many specialized projects NSLS maintains. In other counties in New York State, similar projects are maintained as free-standing programs or as small legal components of social service organizations, rather than as an integrated part of a large legal services organization which seeks to address as many legal needs of the poor and disadvantaged within its geographic area as possible.

The regional planning group, which has held three meetings since the last planning report, was honored at one of its meetings to have three judges responsible for court administration attend: the Hon. Juanita Bing Newton, New York State Deputy Chief Administrative Judge for Justice Initiative, the Hon. Gail Prudenti, Chief Administrative Judge of Suffolk County and the Hon. Edward G. McCabe, Chief Administrative Judge of Nassau County. Judges McCabe and Prudenti believed that the group's effort in planning for the provision of legal services for the poor was so important that each of them assigned a permanent representative from his and her staff to the group. To our knowledge, this is the

first region in the state to have formal appointments by the judiciary to the planning process for access to justice. The group feels that having the input and the support of the judiciary in its planning process is of enormous benefit to the client population.

The regional planning group has developed a directory of legal services available to the poor of Long Island, which will be a resource not only to the participating groups themselves, but to other agencies serving the poor, and to court personnel. The directory serves to formalize the referral system that the participating agencies have in place, and to ensure that the personnel taking the initial calls for assistance know what the appropriate referrals are. The court personnel have indicated to us that this resource will be invaluable to them as well, in attempting to assist unrepresented litigants to obtain legal assistance. In addition to the development of a regional directory, seven of the agencies participating in the regional planning process have provided information so that they are included on the statewide legal services providers “map”, maintained at the Western New York Law Center website.

While focusing on the provision of legal services on Long Island, NSLS and the regional planning group have also continued their involvement in planning efforts at the state level. The NSLS Executive Director regularly meets with other project directors from all over the state, and NSLS staff represent the Long Island Region on the statewide task forces on intake and technology, in the Statewide IOLA meetings and in Statewide Pro Bono Coordination. NSLS staff also participate actively in the statewide task forces on various areas of substantive law. Other agencies in the regional planning group provide representatives for our group on the Statewide Steering Committee and in the effort to establish permanent state funding for legal services.

Nassau/Suffolk Law Services is always a major participant in the "Partnership Conference" for

legal services, and sent more than two dozen staff members to the most recent conference. Some staff participated as trainers in continuing legal education seminars at the conference. Other agency members of the regional planning group also sent participants and speakers to the event.

The Long Island Regional planning group is scheduled to meet quarterly and will continue to pursue issues involving technology, training, resource development, community education, priority setting and quality control. The participants will also continue to explore ways to expand cooperation among legal providers with diverse funding sources and missions, and yet with a common goal to better service Long Islanders in need.

