

# Justice for All

The case for supporting Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma



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## Who We Are.

Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma, Inc. (LASO) is Oklahoma's largest not-for-profit law firm and the only source of legal expertise for hundreds of thousands of Oklahomans facing critical civil legal problems but living in poverty, with no way of paying for an attorney. Established in 2002 in a merger of two regional programs in the state, LASO is a 501 (c) (3) organization, incorporated in the State of Oklahoma, to provide professional civil legal aid, keeping families together and individuals safe and stable with food, shelter, healthcare and income for which they are eligible.

LASO works to ensure that state and federal laws affecting poor people and the elderly are upheld while also addressing the systemic barriers to justice faced by Oklahomans with low incomes. To achieve this end, LASO provides free civil legal assistance in cases where it can make a difference in meeting basic human needs or in enforcing basic rights.

LASO works closely with the Oklahoma Bar Association and county bar associations, civic and community organizations statewide to improve the lives of Oklahoma's poverty population and to move our state closer to the goal of justice for all.

<i>History of Civil Legal Aid in Oklahoma</i>	
1940's	Some county bar organizations provided legal aid to veterans & their families.
1950's	The Oklahoma Bar Association and local United Ways created funding for free civil legal aid.
1964	Legal Aid became part of the U.S. War on Poverty and received funding through the Office of Economic Opportunity.
1973	President Nixon created the Legal Services Corporation as an independent, not-for-profit corporation, administering funds from Congress to all of the states, based on poverty population.
1977	Legal Aid of Western Oklahoma and legal services of Eastern Oklahoma, in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, respectively, were created to provide legal aid.
2002	Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma created as a statewide organization to serve low-income and elderly persons in all 77 counties.

## How we serve.



LASO’s total staff of 146 currently includes 63 full-time attorneys, 4 part-time attorneys, 26 paralegals, and 53 others in local offices providing administrative support and expertise in local offices and headquarters.

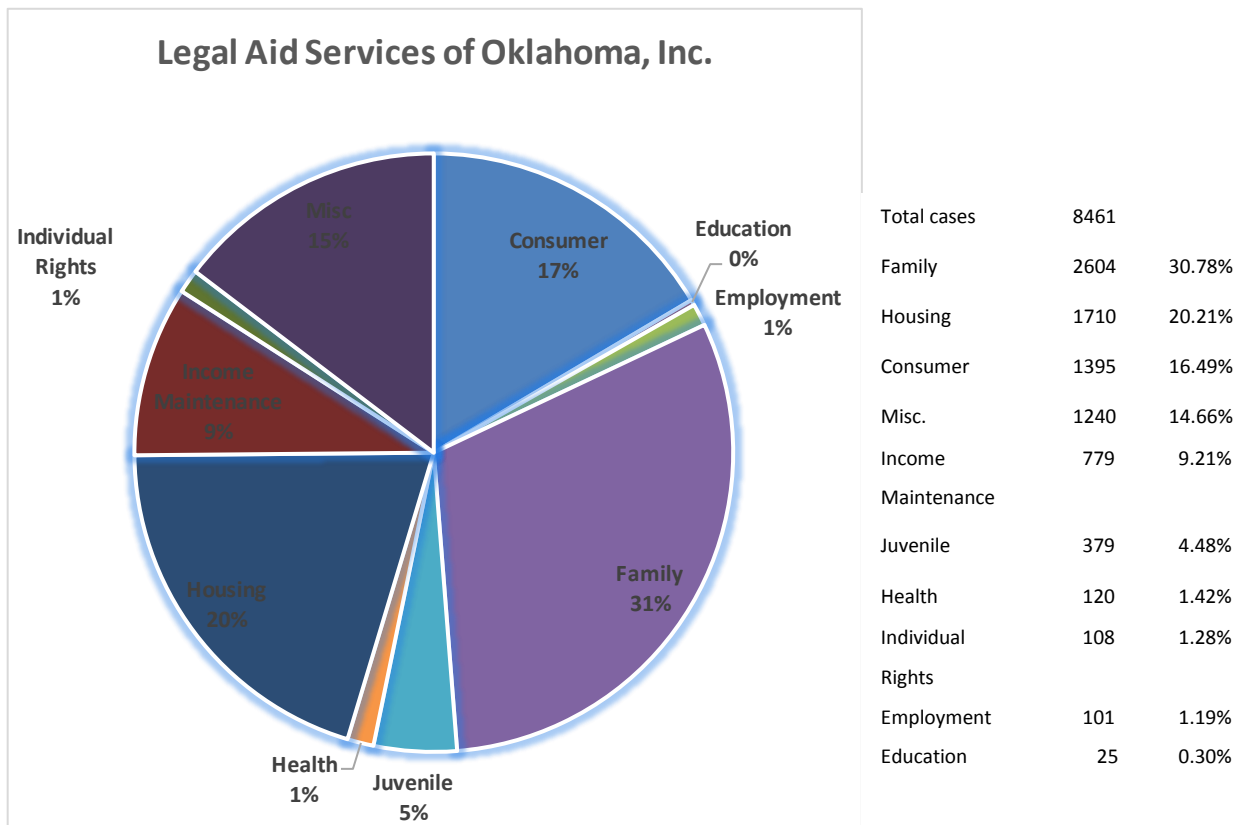
Through a network of law offices, strategically placed throughout the state, LASO provides services for low-income persons in all 77 Oklahoma counties. These fully-staffed offices are in Ada, Altus, Ardmore, Bartlesville, Guymon, Hugo, Lawton, McAlester, Muskogee, Norman, Oklahoma City, Poteau, Shawnee, Stillwater, Tahlequah, Tulsa, Weatherford and Woodward.

LASO works closely with hundreds of Oklahoma attorneys who volunteer their time to handle cases, represent clients, teach legal seminars and otherwise use their talents to assist low-income clients without charge. These *pro bono* attorneys are an essential component to LASO’s staff.

## Those we help.

LASO's core services are defined by the results they produce. Top priority is given to cases involving domestic violence, so that individuals and families can live in peace, without threat of harm. Other priorities are keeping healthy, nurturing families together; preserving safe and stable housing for children and adults; helping clients obtain and maintain government benefits for which they are eligible; and assisting clients who are exploited financially or through unfair employment and wage claims.

In 2014, 626,906 Oklahomans were living in poverty and eligible for LASO's assistance with their critical civil legal problems. LASO closed 8,461 cases that year, delivering critical legal services that protected and stabilized families and strengthened communities. Of the 8,461 cases, those involving family issues, housing, consumer, health and income maintenance account for 78.11 percent.



## **OUR CLIENTS: Real People, real problems.**

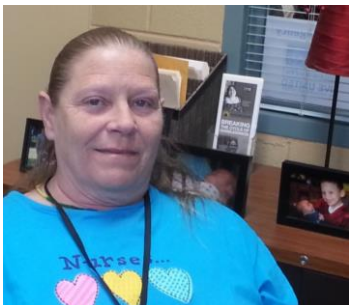
**Following are photos and brief sketches of a cross sampling of clients helped in 2014, all provided with their permission.**



Legal Aid helped Annette obtain a guardianship of her seven-year-old granddaughter, stabilizing the family and increasing her granddaughter's chances for success in school and beyond.



Kay and LaVonne are WWII Navy veterans who asked for help with a bankruptcy. LASO's attorney realized they had not filed for VA benefits and had no wills in place, so she filed a pension claim for each of them asking for additional aid and attendance benefits, and executed wills and durable powers of attorney for each of them. She also filed a Chapter 7 bankruptcy for them, which was discharged, relieving them of \$46,000 in debt.



All of Debra's possessions were stolen while she was staying in a shelter so LASO helped her obtain a copy of her birth certificate, allowing her to apply for a new ID card and begin the application process for public benefits.



Brittany attended a divorce clinic in Muskogee, sponsored by LASO, where the attorney discussed child custody agreements. After the event, the attorney worked with Brittany and her daughter's father to reach an agreement which clearly sets out each parent's responsibilities, allowing them to focus on meeting the needs of their growing child.

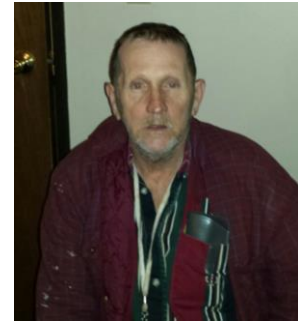


Kenneth was homeless and struggling with significant mental health issues when he encountered LASO in Tulsa. The attorney helped him file for disability for which he was approved. He now is hopeful his life will improve.



Clint needed help with a pending eviction when he visited LASO's Stillwater Law Office. The attorney prevented the eviction and filed a fair housing complaint with a long-term goal of keeping him in affordable, safe housing.

When Von came to LASO, he was homeless, with no income or health insurance. Diagnosed with schizophrenia and a seizure disorder, he depended on a free clinic for his prescriptions. He desperately needed disability benefits and had waited two years for his out-of-state attorney to notify him of a hearing. One of LASO's first actions was to file a special request for the case to be expedited for undue hardship, which was



accepted, and the hearing scheduled within the month. At that time, the administrative law judge issued a fully-favorable decision, approving Von for Social Security benefits of \$733 a month and making him eligible for Medicaid and public housing. Von now is living in his own apartment for the first time in years and can afford all of the regular prescriptions he needs to keep his medical conditions under control.

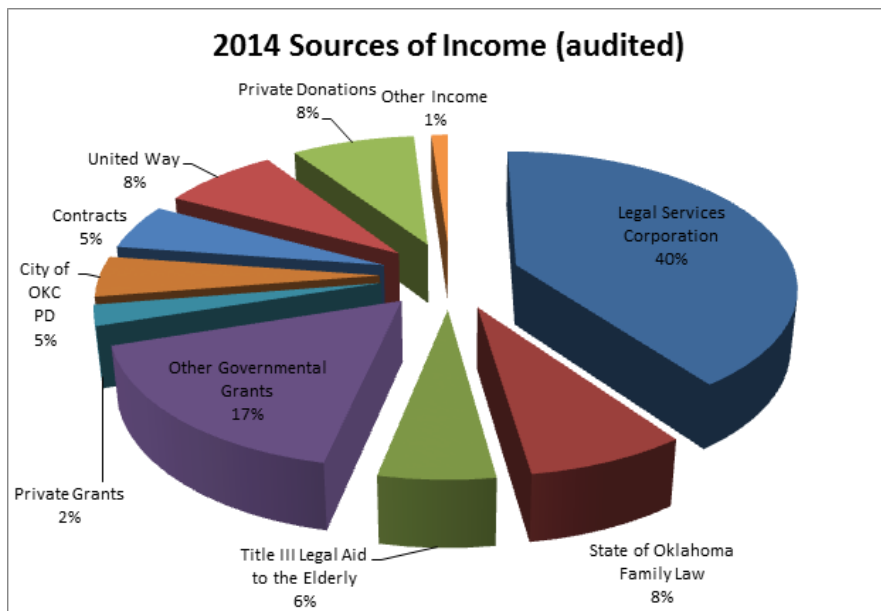
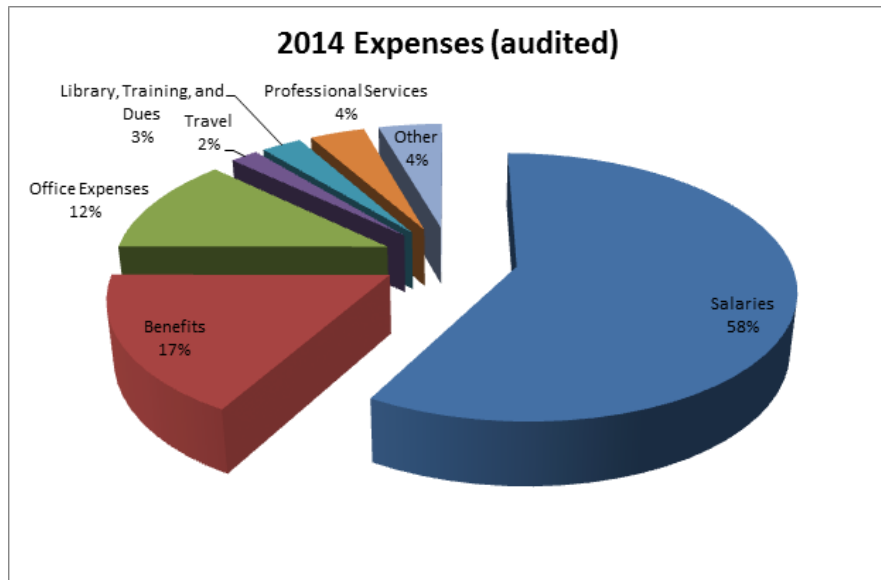


Oklahomans across the state were affected by the national foreclosure crisis and LASO was able to help find many solutions. LASO's attorney was able to find an alternative to foreclosure for Ruby.



## Financial Statement.

LASO receives funding from many sources including the Legal Services Corp.; the State of Oklahoma Legal Services Revolving Fund; numerous private and corporate foundations; United Way and United Fund agencies in Ada, Ardmore, Duncan, Durant, Enid, Idabel, Lawton, McAlester, Muskogee, Norman, Oklahoma City, Shawnee, Stillwater, Tulsa and Woodward; and donations from law firms, the business community, sovereign nations and individuals statewide. The 2014 operating budget was \$10.4 million.





## **Board Governance.**

The priorities of LASO attorneys are to first ensure the safety of clients and then to work to secure food, housing, and a source of income. This work includes helping victims secure protection from domestic violence, assisting individuals and families who are making the transition from welfare to work, handling cases that gain access to necessary health care services, helping individuals secure social security income and other benefits for which they legally qualify, insuring that poor families are able to maintain or secure safe and affordable housing and shelter, assisting individuals gain access to education and training, and providing legal assistance on consumer and employment-related matters.

To ensure that Legal Aid follows best practices, the program is governed by a 25-member board comprised of private attorneys representing county and specialty bar associations as well as persons representing agencies and programs which serve low-income persons in Oklahoma.

*Our mission: To be a partner in the community  
making equal justice for all  
a reality.*



## 2015 Board of Directors

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**Aimee Vardeman**, Esq., Lawton, representing Comanche County Bar Association.

**Earnest Ware**, Oklahoma City, representing City-County Area Council of Oklahoma County.

## 2015 Campaign for Justice



### Oklahoma City Team

<b>Sharon Gentry, chair</b>	Riggs, Abney, Neal, Turpen, Orbison & Lewis
<b>Luke Abel</b>	Abel Law Firm
<b>Steven L. Barghols</b>	Gable Gotwals
<b>J. Chris Condren</b>	Pierce, Couch, Hendrickson, Baysinger & Green, P. C.
<b>Daniel G. Couch</b>	Housley & Couch
<b>Kevin R. Donelson</b>	Fellers, Snider, Blankenship, Bailey & Tippens, P. C.
<b>Bryan G. Garrett</b>	Holloway, Dobson & Bachman, P. C.
<b>Jimmy K. Goodman</b>	Crowe & Dunlevy, P.C.
<b>Lauren Barghols Hanna</b>	McAfee & Taft
<b>Laura McConnell-Corbyn</b>	Hartzog, Conger , Cason & Neville, P.C.
<b>Kelsey Quillian</b>	Law Office of William E. Liebel
<b>W. Dale Reneau</b>	Fenton, Fenton, Smith, Reneau & Moon
<b>Robert N. Sheets</b>	Phillips Murrah, P.C.

### Tulsa Team

<b>Frederic Dorwart, chair</b>	Frederic Dorwart, Lawyers
<b>Molly Aspan</b>	Hall Estill
<b>Bradley J. Brown</b>	Jones, Gotcher & Bogan
<b>Bill Eagleton</b>	Pray Walker
<b>Tony Haynie</b>	Conner & Winters
<b>Theresa Noble Hill</b>	Rhodes Hieronymous
<b>Gerald L. Jackson</b>	Crowe & Dunlevy, P.C.
<b>Jo Lynn Jeter</b>	Norman Wohlgemuth Chandler & Jeter
<b>C. S. Lewis III</b>	Riggs, Abney, Neal, Turpen, Orbison & Lewis
<b>D. Michael McBride III</b>	Crowe & Dunlevy
<b>James J. Proszek</b>	Hall Estill
<b>Eric Schelin</b>	Frederic Dorwart, Lawyers
<b>Judge Deborah Shallcross</b>	Gable Gotwals
<b>Vani Singhal</b>	McAfee & Taft
<b>G. Steven Stidham</b>	Sneed Lang Herrold

## Why Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma.

- 1. The essence of LASO's work is providing basic legal assistance** to people living in poverty and to the elderly. This work is essential to families and individuals. If they cannot access legal aid, they may not maintain custody of their child, have a place to live, food to eat or medical care. LASO is likely to be the only provider available to these clients because they have no money to pay.
- 2. LASO provides critical and cost-effective services that improve – and save – lives.** For example, securing a protective order can save women and children from severe physical and emotional harm; gaining access to needed health care at a critical time often prevents more serious and expensive problems later on; helping an individual make the welfare to work transition increases the potential for a sound economic future; and preventing an eviction through early legal intervention can avoid the much more expensive societal costs of homelessness later.
- 3. LASO provides access to the justice system for poor people** who have very limited access to justice compared to the general population. Few attorneys practice Poverty Law, a specialized area which includes Family Law, Government Benefits Law, Homelessness Law, Housing Law, Legal Assistance to the Poor, and Social Security Law. Even fewer practice for free. LASO is Oklahoma's largest poverty law firm, staffed by specially-trained and experienced professionals. To help all these families in our community, LASO has the full-time equivalency of 65 lawyers - just one attorney for every 9,646 low-income Oklahomans. In Oklahoma, only one person out of five receives Legal Aid's help due to lack of resources, resulting in a critical justice gap.
- 4. LASO helps our judicial system function more efficiently** by providing expert legal advice and representation to families and individuals who might otherwise attempt to resolve their legal problems without the benefit of counsel or outside the civil justice system. Legal aid helps people overcome pressing problems of everyday life – domestic violence, homelessness, divorce and child custody, financial exploitation, unfair employment and wage claims and denial of government benefits, such as food stamps and disability. Unresolved issues of child support, custody, home repairs, benefits wrongfully denied by a governmental agency can take significant emotional tolls on anyone and people without financial resources can be powerless when faced with these problems . . . unless they have an attorney to help them.
- 5. Our clients, for the most part, would not have had legal help if LASO were not available.** For many of them, and maybe all, their legal problems would not have been addressed, wreaking havoc with their lives. Civil legal problems tend to have a cascading effect if not addressed, and these repercussions often result in crises. An unskilled mechanic takes payment from a customer even though he knows her car is not fixed, resulting in the customer's lack of transportation to work. She gets fired from her job, then evicted from her apartment and becomes homeless, then loses custody of her child. It all started with a car problem but quickly became a complicated series of problems which demanded the skills of an experienced attorney.

6. **Oklahoma’s poverty rate in 2014 was 16.8% of the general population, the child poverty rate was 24%; 18.3 percent of women lived in poverty; and 38% of single-parent families with children lived in poverty.** These households need access to our justice system in order to collect child support for their children, to obtain orders of protection when there is domestic violence, to help them obtain medical insurance for their families, to make sure their disabled children receive critical services and to protect their homes.
7. **One of Oklahoma’s most respected attorneys, William G. Paul, who served as chair of the first statewide Campaign for Justice in Oklahoma 2003-2005, said the best way of providing civil legal services to low-income persons is with a stand-alone program with Poverty Law expertise.** Paul, who served as president of the American Bar Association in 1999-2000, said *“The most cost-effective way to meet the need of providing free civil legal help to the poor is through a full-time professional legal aid program.”*
8. **LASO’s work is strictly regulated by the Legal Services Corporation and prohibits becoming involved in class action suits or fee-generating cases.** LASO generally refers these cases to the private bar. Except for a long-standing contract with the City of Oklahoma City for municipal court defender services, LASO focuses on civil law. Regulations prohibit assisting with any criminal defense issues or representation of those who are incarcerated.
9. **LASO draws to the state over \$5 million in out-of-state funding every year.** Not only does that funding directly allow tens of thousands of low-income and elderly persons to achieve justice, but thousands more are affected indirectly, greatly improving their lives also. In addition to the lives improved, each \$5 million in outside funding translates to an economic impact of over \$7 million in within Oklahoma, according to an analysis done by OCU economists in 2011.
10. **LASO’s services are a great investment for Oklahoma.** A donation to the Campaign for Justice is a charitable contribution and a great investment, which makes Oklahoma a better place to live.

