

Why Justice for All

The case supporting Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma



May 2017

Oklahoma City Administrative Offices

2915 North Classen Blvd. Suite 500

Oklahoma City, OK 73106 405.557.0020

Moving People 'Up the Ladder'

The need for civil legal services is greater today than ever before. The growing population of people living at the poverty line in Oklahoma, people who are trying to move up the ladder when life happens -- a child gets sick, a boss won't pay them, their apartment floods, their spouse turns violent – and they have no place to turn with a civil legal problem. These people must have an attorney's help in order to address their legal problem and move forward. The community benefits by helping these low-income Oklahomans get back to work and taking care of their families. This is the work of Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma and we invite you to help. Please call me at 405.488.6768 if you'd like to discuss your ideas.

MICHAEL G. FIGGINS

Executive Director

Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma

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 when it can make a difference in meeting basic human needs or enforcing individual 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.

History of Civil Legal Aid in Oklahoma	
1940's	Progressive 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 186 currently includes 107 attorneys, 32 paralegals, and 47 management, development and support staff providing administrative support.

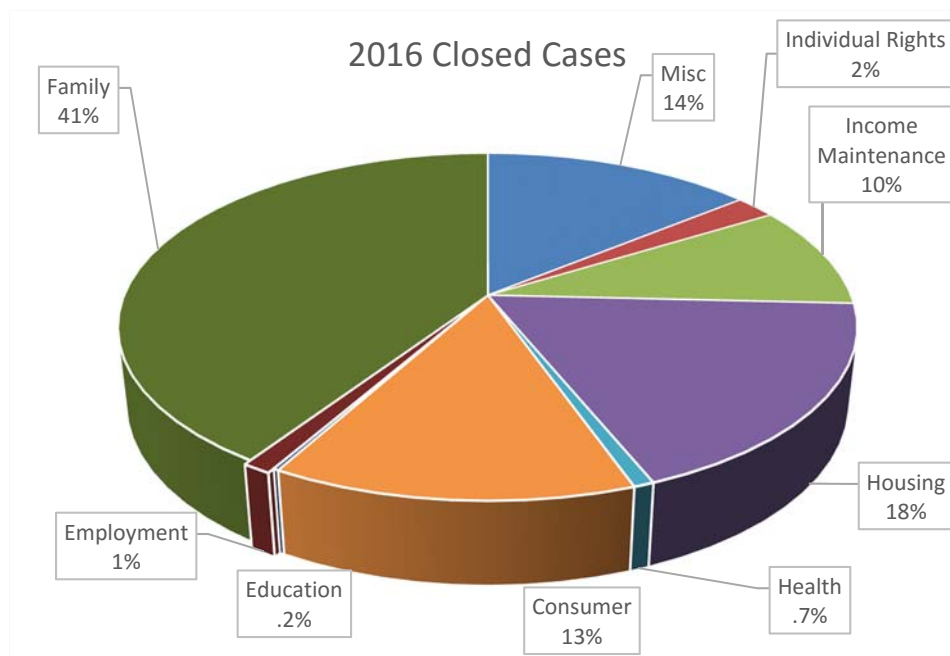
Through a network of law offices, strategically placed throughout the state, LASO provides services for low-income persons in all 77 Oklahoma counties. These fully-staffed offices are in Ada, Altus, Ardmore, Bartlesville, Guymon, Hugo, Lawton, McAlester, Muskogee, Norman, Oklahoma City, Poteau, Shawnee,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

LASO works closely with hundreds of Oklahoma attorneys who volunteer their time handling cases and representing clients, teaching legal seminars and otherwise using their talents to assist low-income clients without charge. These *pro bono* attorneys are an essential component to LASO's staff.

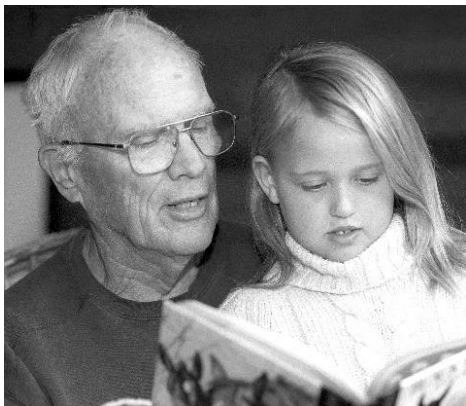
Those we help.

A total of 10,133 cases closed were closed in 2016, cases directly affecting 22,724 men, women and children. These low-income Oklahomans had no other option for help with the legal problem that threatened their safety, health or well-being. LASO's 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 preserving healthy families; ensuring safe housing; helping eligible clients obtain and maintain government benefits; and assisting those who are exploited financially or through unfair employment and wage claims.

In 2016, 829,320 Oklahomans were living within 125 percent of poverty and thus eligible for LASO's assistance with their critical civil legal problems. Due to limited resources, LASO is able to provide legal assistance to one of every five persons who requests help.



Actual 2016 cases.



When **Mr. Gentry** contacted LASO he had just received a 48-hour order to vacate the Section 8 apartment he shared with the four grandkids he was raising. LASO's attorney realized the landlord wrongfully moved to evict the Gentry family after the housing authority erroneously abated payments when the apartment failed inspection. But, HUD

prohibits holding tenants responsible for that part of the rent. The landlord obtained a default judgment because he never obtained service. Mr. Gentry didn't know he had been evicted until receiving the sheriff's 48-hour order to vacate. Legal aid filed an emergency motion citing lack of service and lack of grounds for the eviction, recalling the writ, vacating the judgment, and preserving housing for the family just days before Christmas. Preservation of clients' housing is a LASO priority and involved more than 17 percent of casework in 2016.



Maria could live with her abusive husband no longer and, when he was charged with strangulation, she decided to file for divorce. She did not know where to turn for help but took a chance with legal aid. LASO accepted the case and Maria was granted a divorce and custody of their child. The court ordered the father to pay child support and allowed visitation only as the minor's counselor deemed appropriate. Of the 10,133 cases closed in 2016, 1,191— or more than 16 percent— involved domestic violence.



Mrs. Graham was hospitalized for a few days and, when she returned, she found a notice to move. The landlord felt Mrs. Graham would be unable to care for herself when and if she returned to her apartment. However, Mrs. Graham's apartment was only a block from a family member and she already had arranged weekly visits from a nurse. United Way contacted LASO on behalf of Mrs. Graham to see if she could be helped. A legal aid attorney called the landlord, persuading him to drop the eviction. In 2016, a total of 2,757 LASO cases

-- or almost 30 percent of the caseload -- involved persons 60 years and over.

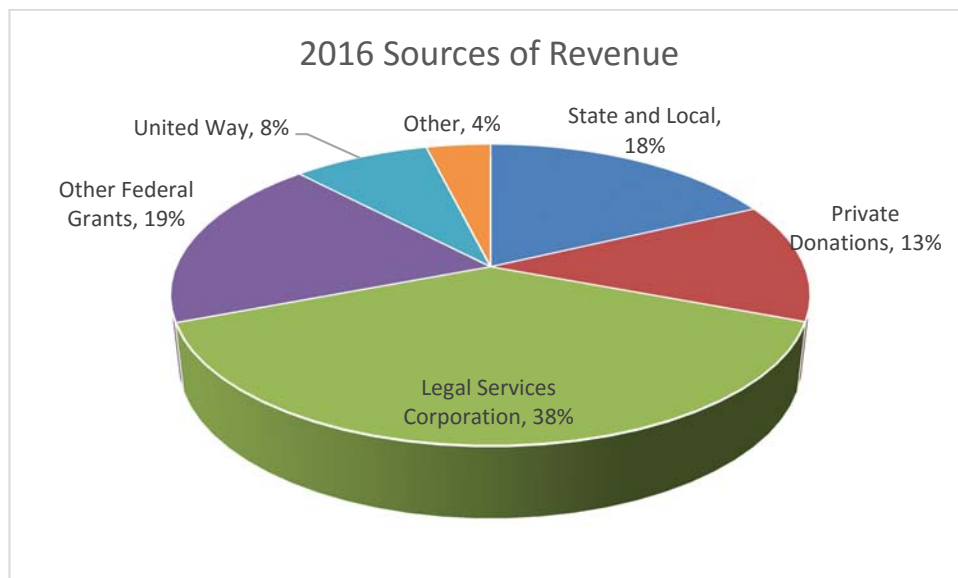
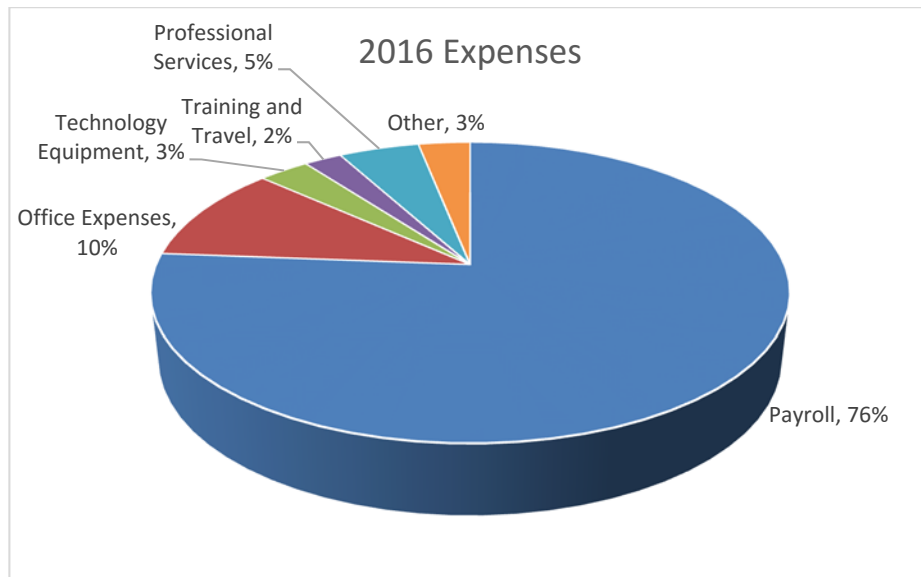
Sherry and Roddy, a married couple, came to legal aid after they were tricked into signing away their home. When their daughter's boyfriend convinced them they needed a will, which he offered to draft, they agreed. He brought them a document and obtained their signatures. Instead of a will, the couple – both deaf, mute and



illiterate -- had signed a deed giving the boyfriend their homestead property. LASO won a summary judgment, ordering the property to be placed back in the couple's names and vacating the fraudulent deed. The couple now has clear title to their home and is living there again, planning to leave it to their church when they both die.

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, businesses, sovereign nations and individuals statewide. The 2016 operating budget was \$11.4 million.



Board of directors.

The priorities of LASO attorneys are, first, to 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 allow 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.***

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Why Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma?

- 1. In 2016 829,320 Oklahomans had incomes at or below 125 percent of poverty** and thus were eligible for LASO's services. These households need access to the justice system in order to protect their homes, families and health.
- 2. The essence of LASO's work is providing critical legal assistance** to people living in poverty and to the elderly. This work is essential to families and individuals. With access to legal aid they can often keep their families together. LASO is likely to be the only provider available to these clients because they have no money to pay.
- 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 107 lawyers - or one attorney for every 7,750 low-income Oklahomans.
- 4. LASO helps our judicial system function more efficiently** by providing quality 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.
- 5. LASO provides critical and cost-effective services that improve and save lives.** For example, securing a protective order can save individuals from severe physical and emotional harm; gaining access to needed health care at a critical time prevents more serious and expensive problems later on; preventing an eviction through early legal intervention can avoid the much more expensive societal costs of homelessness later; and helping a person make the welfare to work transition increases the potential for a sound economic future.

6. **Oklahoma's poverty rate in 2016 was 16.1%** while poverty rates for children and women were 21.8 and 18 percent, respectively. These households need access to the justice system to collect child support, obtain orders of protection when there is domestic violence, receive medical care for their families, enable their disabled children to 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 involvement in class action suits or fee-generating cases.** LASO generally refers these cases to the private bar while LASO focuses on civil law. Regulations prohibit assisting with any criminal defense issues or representation of incarcerated persons.
9. **LASO drew to the state \$6.5 million in out-of-state funding in 2016.** 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. 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, making Oklahoma a better place to live.

