

Helaine M. Barnett



Helaine Barnett, who has devoted her entire professional career to providing legal services to the poor, always knew she wanted to be a lawyer to help those less fortunate. She was encouraged to work at the Legal Aid Society of New York—the oldest and largest legal aid organization in the country, whose mission is to provide the poor in New York City with meaningful access to justice—by her law school advisor at the New York University School of Law. She began working there as a staff attorney in 1966 and remained there for the next 37 years.

She knows firsthand the meaningful difference legal aid lawyers make in the lives of their clients, an example of which is her creation of and responsibility for the Society's Homeless Families Rights Project, which dealt with the plight of homeless families with children sleeping in a barrack-style gymnasium or in a welfare office. She also brought the first civil contempt motion in New York's highest court on behalf of elderly infirm nursing home residents uprooted in the middle of the night in violation of a court order.

For nearly three decades, she was involved in managing the Society's multi-office civil division, which she headed from 1994 until the end of 2003. Under Ms. Barnett's leadership, the division grew into a nationally-recognized provider of high-quality legal services to more than 25,000 clients annually and earned universal respect for its legal work, innovative projects, and adherence to the highest professional and ethical standards. Ms. Barnett developed and executed the disaster response plan for the delivery of critical legal assistance to New Yorkers in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Ms. Barnett was appointed president of the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) in January 2004, the first legal aid attorney to serve as its president. LSC was created by Congress in 1974 as a private, not-for-profit corporation to promote equal access to the civil justice system in the United States. It is the single largest source of funding for civil legal aid to low-income individuals and families. With a \$390 million budget for FY 2009, LSC funds 137 legal aid programs serving every county throughout the country with over 900 offices and approximately 10,000 staff. LSC is responsible for ensuring that LSC-funded programs provide high-quality civil legal services in conformity with the mandates of Congress. The programs handle close to one million

cases annually. Nearly 75% of the clients are women.

As president of LSC, Ms. Barnett represents LSC before the Congress, testifying at congressional hearings on LSC's budget and programs. She has traveled extensively throughout the country visiting programs in urban and rural areas, on Native American reservations, and in hurricane devastated areas, meeting with grantee staff, bar leaders, and state chief justices.

Since her appointment as president and now in her sixth year, making her the longest-serving LSC president and the first woman to serve more than three months, Ms. Barnett has emphasized strategies to enhance the quality of legal services provided by LSC programs. These initiatives include revising LSC's performance criteria; issuing a major report, *Documenting the Justice Gap in America*, which provides compelling evidence of the current unmet civil legal needs of low-income Americans; instituting a Pilot Loan Repayment Assistance Program to help LSC programs recruit and retain high-quality lawyers; and developing a Pilot Leadership Mentoring Program to provide guidance to programs for developing a well-trained diverse corps of future legal services leaders.

She is the only legal aid attorney to serve on the ABA Board of Governors and its executive committee.

Ms. Barnett has been the recipient of numerous awards and honors, including the New York State Bar Association's Gold Medal Award for Distinguished Service in the Law, the Association's highest award; an Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree from Suffolk University; the National Association of Women Lawyers Public Service Award; the ABA Young Lawyers Division Fellows Award for Public Service; and the New York University School of Law Alumni Association Alumni Achievement Award.

As a result of Mrs. Barnett's career, she has had a major impact on helping low-income women obtain equal access to justice, as well as on advancing the opportunities and careers for women. She has served as a role model and mentored women attorneys to pursue and excel in legal aid careers and has been an effective advocate for diversity among staff.

2009 Margaret Brent Awards