

DIALOGUE

Spring 2010
VOL. 14, NO. 2

News and Perspectives from the ABA Division for Legal Services

[Home](#)

[Pro Bono](#)

[LRIS](#)

[Delivery](#)

[IOLTA](#)

[Social Media
in IOLTA
Programs](#)

[From the Chair](#)

[Grantee
Spotlight](#)

[News and
Notes](#)

[LAMP](#)

[Download this
issue in PDF](#)

[Download this article
in PDF](#)

Grantee Spotlight: Answering the Call - Delaware's Legal Help Link

By Janine Howard-O'Rangers

On a cold Monday morning in January, second and third year law students at Widener University's School of Law make their way to the Honorable Philip D. Cloutier Public Service Wing. Here the students turn on the computers and telephones and by 9:00 a.m. are ready to answer the call: "Legal Help Link, may I help you?"

The Legal Help Link was the brainchild of the Delaware State Bar Association's Standing Committee on the Provision of Legal Services to Low Income Persons. Under the leadership of Donald Parsons, now a Vice Chancellor in Delaware's Court of Chancery, the committee embarked on a number of collaborative efforts for legal services in Delaware. The first project was the creation of the Legal Help Link, a joint effort begun in New Castle County, Delaware in 1997, by the Delaware State Bar Association ("DSBA"), Delaware Volunteer Legal Services, Inc. ("DVLS"), Widener University School of Law ("Widener"), Community Legal Aid Society, Inc. ("CLASI"), and Legal Services Corporation of Delaware ("LSCD"). The program became statewide in 1998. Since its inception, funding for the Legal Help Link has been provided by IOLTA grants from the Delaware Bar Foundation.

A Needed Service

Prior to the creation of the Legal Help Link, if you were looking for legal assistance in Delaware you could be on the telephone all day. You may have been referred to three or four different agencies just to be told to go back to where you started. There was so much confusion in the community about which agency provided legal assistance for which legal matter that potential clients could not even remember which agency agreed to help them. In fact, on one occasion, a client ended up being represented by two different legal services providers, which was not discovered until both appeared in court on his behalf. It was also too easy for someone facing significant legal issues to become frustrated and to give up. Potential clients were falling through the cracks of a disjointed system. Clearly something needed to be done in order to make the delivery of legal services more efficient.

The concept of the Legal Help Link was simple: instead of having to call each of the legal aid agencies and the DSBA's Lawyer Referral Service in an effort to determine what kind of help was available from each organization, a person would have only one number to call. The Legal Help Link would provide one central statewide telephone number that would be answered by live intake workers. The intake worker would determine which, if any, of the participating organizations could assist the caller. If none of those could provide assistance, the intake worker could give the caller other appropriate referrals.

When the Legal Help Link became a statewide service in 1998, the DSBA suggested that Lawyer Referral Service calls also be routed through the Legal Help Link. It was agreed that this would serve callers well, and all Lawyer Referral Service calls were transferred to the Legal Help Link at that time. Prior to being transferred to the Legal Help Link, the Lawyer Referral Service operated through an automated system. With the move to the Legal Help Link, which enabled referrals to be completed by a live person,

the number of requests for lawyers through the Lawyer Referral Service more than doubled.

A Collaborative Effort

All the agencies involved contribute to the Legal Help Link. The system relies on Widener University School of Law for space and the manpower – law students serve as the intake workers. DVLS runs the day-to-day operations of the program. The DSBA provides its Lawyer Referral Coordinator, who is housed along with DVLS and the Legal Help Link at Widener, and provides a toll free telephone number for the Legal Help Link. The other legal aid agencies are relied on for their cooperation in supporting the program, as well as providing information on a regular basis regarding the legal matters they are handling so that appropriate referrals can be made.

Expansion of the Program

Since its inception the Legal Help Link has expanded in space and volume of calls. Originally, the Legal Help Link was in a converted dorm room at Widener. In 1999, Widener moved DVLS and the Legal Help Link to newly constructed space. Funding for this new construction came in part from a grant from the Delaware Bar Foundation's IOLTA fund, as well as the State of Delaware and several law firms. This new space not only allowed DVLS and the Legal Help Link to expand, but also provided DVLS' clients with a more professional law firm setting in which to meet. In 2009, the Legal Help Link and DVLS moved again, still on Widener University School of Law's campus, but in newly renovated and larger space.

The Legal Help Link has been very successful. In 1998, a manual count of telephone calls received over a two week period provided an estimate that the Legal Help Link was receiving 18,000 – 20,000 calls a year. In 2008, a new telephone software program demonstrated that the Legal Help Link was receiving 30,000 to 40,000 calls a year.

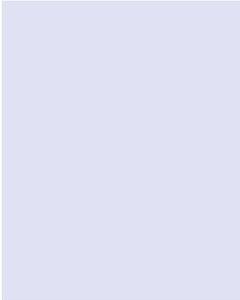
Assistance Provided

The success of the Legal Help Link can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that calls are answered by trained intake workers, who are law students from Widener University School of Law. The students are either paid or volunteer law clerks for the Legal Help Link or legal interns with the Delaware Civil Clinic of Widener. While the law students are not permitted to give any legal advice, their law training gives them insight in determining a caller's legal issues and the ability to extract information from the caller that is necessary to determine how best the caller can be helped. In addition, the intake workers are trained on the many other services that may be available to assist callers with various problems.

During a brief interview with the caller, the law students determine what the caller's legal issues are, if the caller is eligible for free legal services and if so, which agency is best suited to assist the caller. Callers that are eligible for the services of either CLASI or LSCD are transferred directly to that agency, avoiding the need for the caller to hang up and make another call. If the caller is eligible for the services of DVLS, and provided that there are no conflicts, the law student will complete an in-depth intake interview over the phone.

If the intake worker determines that the caller is not eligible for free civil legal services, then other options are available to the caller, such as a referral to the DSBA's Lawyer Referral Service. If the caller chooses to be referred to the DSBA's Lawyer Referral Service, the intake worker completes a form with the names of the parties, court dates, if any, and the legal issue the caller is calling about. The caller is then forwarded to DSBA's Lawyer Referral Service Coordinator, who will match the caller with an attorney from the Lawyer Referral List. Alternatively, the intake worker will provide the caller with the number for appropriate state agencies or community services programs, such as the Public Defender, Division of Child Support Enforcement, or the Attorney General's Office.

Not everyone who contacts the Legal Help Link can be helped by a legal



services agency or the lawyer referral service, but everyone who calls the Legal Help Link is helped in some way, even if it is by letting them know that the assistance they are searching for is not available in Delaware. Before the Legal Help Link was created, one could spend an entire day on the telephone without talking to anyone who could be of help. Now thousands of people are helped each year just by making one call.

***Janine N. Howard-O'Rangers** is the Executive Director of Delaware Volunteer Legal Services, Inc. and a Supervising Attorney for the Delaware Civil Clinic of Widener University School of Law.*

Dialogue is published by the [ABA Division for Legal Services](#)

Copyright © 2010 American Bar Association

[ABA Privacy Statement](#) | [ABA Copyright Statement](#)

Updated: 05/13/2010