As we approach the end of the fifth year of the Campaign for Legal Services, SMLS continues to face uncertain times and new challenges brought on by an unstable economic climate and the substantial reduction of federal support. Our clients’ lives are more stressed and their legal problems are more acute than ever before. They still face issues such as the terror of domestic abuse and the threat of becoming homeless.

The Campaign Committee has been charged with finding ways to acquire new sources of revenue to minimize the impact of impending budget cuts. Each year, it raises funds through a golf tournament, phonathon and an annual appeal. The goal of $100,000 was met in each of the first four years. Unfortunately, it looks as if it will not happen this year.

Members of our Board of Directors and the Campaign Committee offer their perspectives on the Campaign and the future of legal services.

A Fall ’05 auction dinner/dance is in the planning stages. Watch for a “Save the Date” card in the mail soon.

Campaign Struggles to Reach $100,000 Goal

The Newest Program at SMLS

The Homeless Advocacy Project

Homelessness is a growing problem in MetroWest. A census taken in the Framingham and Marlborough area on a single night in February 2004 counted 387 homeless people, including 133 children from 73 families. Not surprisingly, homelessness strikes the most vulnerable among us; 63% of homeless mothers are survivors of domestic abuse accompanied by frightened children.

Suburban homeless persons face enormous challenges in finding stable housing. They are three times more likely to have no income at all and twice as likely to be unemployed as the homeless population in Boston. Due to a shortage of shelter beds in the suburbs, homeless families are placed in motels, living without supportive services, public transportation or even cooking facilities. Many stay in motels or shelters for six months before finding permanent homes.

In 2003, SMLS launched its Homeless Advocacy Project (HAP) to begin to address the diverse legal needs of the homeless population in MetroWest. Brian Burke, the Project Attorney, focuses on the legal issues that are major impediments to obtaining permanent housing such as lack of income, poor credit ratings and denials of subsidies. He also makes weekly presentations to shelter residents and soup kitchens guests, and serves as a reference for area homeless providers. Primarily funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Project was able to raise required matching funds from the United Way of Tri-County and the Boston and Massachusetts Bar Foundations.

Homeless people feel powerless and believe there is no safety net for them. Since its inception, however, HAP has helped more than 150 homeless individuals and families. Many have obtained permanent housing; others are well on their way.

HAP has helped more than 150 homeless individuals and families. Many have obtained permanent housing; others are well on their way. Photo by Marlene DeSautels.
Many of our clients have no idea that there are viable solutions within their reach or that realistic paths to safety and security are available to them and their families. All of you help guide them through the roughest times of their lives so they may find a safe haven and begin again,” said SMLS Attorney and Pro Bono Coordinator Cheryl Palmeiri speaking before an audience of 75 volunteers at the SMLS Appreciation Reception at the Warren Center in Ashland on November 17, 2004.

Said SMLS Executive Director Nancy King, “It would be impossible to offer our clients all the services that we provide without the help of our volunteers. You take pro bono cases, sit on our Board of Directors and Fundraising Committee, and serve as mentors and trainers for new attorneys. We do not say thank you nearly often enough.”

The Honorable Lynda M. Connolly also lauded and encouraged the attorneys who are so generous with their time and talent in assisting SMLS. She stated, “You perpetuate one of the cornerstones of our system of justice—the level playing field—for the weakest and most vulnerable members of our society. Without your efforts the odds would be stacked against these individuals.”

The Honorable David P. Magnani, soon to retire from the State Senate, was recognized for his support and commitment to South Middlesex Legal Services throughout his entire legislative career. Pro Bono Service Awards were given to local Attorneys Beth Aarons, Brian Flynn, Bruce Ledoux, and Michael Schwartz for the countless hours of legal work they have donated to SMLS clients. Attorney Lloyd French, who is retiring from the practice of law after almost 40 years, received the Distinguished Service Award. He is another of our pro bono attorneys who never says no. The Outstanding Volunteer Service Award was presented to Attorney Robert Molloy, Vice President and Assistant General Counsel for Staples. Bob has been co-chair of the SMLS Fundraising Campaign for the past five years, and has brought great enthusiasm and optimism to the Committee.

Thank you all for your help over the years.

For more information about SMLS visit our website at www.smlegal.org.
As a result of filing bankruptcy, Carol would get her car back, as well as discharge debts that had been incurred to pay for extraordinary expenses necessary to support her daughter.

Attorney Soulé met with Carol, gathered the necessary paperwork and drafted the bankruptcy petition. The petition was filed the following day and Carol's car was promptly returned to her. Three months later, all of her debts were discharged. Carol could now make a fresh start, debt free. Carol stated, "I was overwhelmed with the quick assistance of my boss and Bob Molloy who knew to contact SMLS. Attorney Betsy Soulé was absolutely my life saver during this difficult time. My daughter and I are forever grateful SMLS was there for us."

"The staff of the Staples Legal Department was more than impressed with the efficiency and immediate solution achieved by Attorney Soulé," said Bob Molloy. "This could have been disastrous for Carol and her daughter. I cannot stress enough the importance of corporations like Staples lending their support to community services like SMLS. Without SMLS, Carol's and her daughter’s lives might have been irreparably damaged, and Staples could have lost a valuable employee."
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Campaign Struggles
(continued from page 1)

How can the Campaign help expand existing services, retain experienced staff and strengthen our organization given our anticipated funding cuts?

“The Campaign has and can continue to help diversify our resources. This softens the blow when we are faced with a major funding cut such as the loss of almost $200,000 from the Legal Services Corporation that will occur on January 1st,” offers Jack Merrill, current President of the SMLS Board of Directors.

“Our challenge is to gain greater participation from our local attorneys including those in law firms, the legal departments of local corporations, as well as sole practitioners,” said Jim McLaughlin, long time Board member and Campaign Committee member. “We, as board members and fundraisers, must explain the value of SMLS to the legal community. We need to establish a permanent donor base of attorneys, community and business leaders, and friends who put SMLS at the top of their charitable giving list. There are approximately 350 who give to our program each year, but that list must continue to grow.”

What steps can we take to make up the difference if we fall short of our $100,000 annual goal?

Bob Molloy, co-chair of the Campaign Committee, says, “We must get the word out to corporations, law firms and individual lawyers regarding the need for access to justice to the poor so we can alleviate a reduction in services.” He adds, “I’m optimistic that those in a position to give will realize that it’s vital to fund an organization like SMLS from the outset rather than deal with the disastrous effects cuts in services will have on individuals and families.

What new direction will the Campaign take over the next few years?

“We are mainly supported by local lawyers, small businesses, banks, such as Framingham Co-operative, and a few large corporations like Staples and Fidelity,” says committee co-chair, Michael Leon. “Based on business demographics, we need to expand our donor base to include more corporate employers. If you drive along 128 in Lexington or 495 in Marlborough, there are many high-tech companies we could reach out to for support. Within the legal environment, we expect lawyers to understand the need for equal access to the justice system and the tragic circumstances one must endure if someone can’t afford a lawyer. We attorneys must choose legal services as our first charitable contribution.”

South Middlesex Legal Services provides free legal representation in civil cases to low income people living in our service area, listed below. We handle cases involving **Housing, Government Benefits, Domestic Relations**, particularly for abuse victims and **Education**. We also specialize in **Elder Law**.


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