

The Legal Pad

SMLS articles, profiles and news briefs

Winter 2007



SMLS

SOUTH MIDDLESEX
LEGAL SERVICES

On your side

In This Issue

Cover

Annual Online Auction

Page Two

*A Message from
the Director*

Page Three

Page Four

Page Five

*Client Story:
Tenants Rescued from
Contaminated Apartment*

Mission Statement

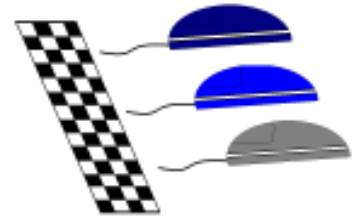
Back

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, START YOUR MOUSES!

The SMLS 2nd Annual Online Auction Revs Up

March 12-26, 2007

Maybe you'll be the lucky winner of a week's stay in the heart of Miami's South Beach or if your tastes run closer to home, you'll win those coveted front row seats to a Bruins or Celtics game. We've got restaurant gift certificates, spa services, jewelry and unique experiences. So, lube up your mouse and get clicking. New auction items arriving daily!!



To participate: Just go to www.smls.cmarket.com and register. Or, visit our website, www.smlegal.org and link directly to the auction homepage.

To donate an item: Fill out the sponsor/donor form in this newsletter and mail or fax it back. Or, go to www.smls.cmarket.com and donate online. Last year's top selling items were once-in-a-lifetime experiences, entertainment, like tickets to sporting events or shows, gift certificates to restaurants and retail stores, or a bottle of wine (a tasting would be ideal!).

To become a sponsor: Simply fill out the enclosed form and mail or fax it back to us. As a sponsor, your business will be advertised to an active, engaged community of over 4000 attorneys in our service area. Your logo and tagline will be featured prominently on our auction website, with a direct link to yours. Targeted emails will be sent to a list of over 700 community members, mostly attorneys, giving your business the potential for thousands of impressions. More details can be found on the sponsor form.

Thank You!

You'll be helping us to continue to provide desperately needed legal services to impoverished people. It costs upwards of \$20,000 for the state to provide shelter to a single mom and her two kids for a year, but just \$750 for SMLS advocates to represent the same family and prevent an eviction.

Please join SMLS and our title sponsor, the Peter Condakes Company, in helping to make the 2nd online auction a success!

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A Message from the Director

It's gratifying to see how far SMLS has come in just over 30 years. We began as an offshoot of a local human services agency- a staff of five dealing mainly with benefits- and housing-related issues- and assisted a few hundred clients a year. We've since relocated and have nearly outgrown our current space. Our service area has expanded from five towns to 36. We now have ten? staff attorneys and two paralegals, each specializing in housing, domestic violence, the homeless, benefits, access to educational services for learning disabled children, and consumer law. We've added four support staff and a development person. Over the past year, nearly 2300 children, women and men have directly benefited from SMLS' work.

Here are a few of SMLS' most significant achievements of 2006:

- **We expanded our services to include consumer law.** Fraud, predatory mortgage lending, illegal redlining, discriminatory denial of credit, debt collection abuses, and related problems directly contribute to our clients' loss of homes, cars and even their livelihood. In suburban areas, people often are pushed into poverty temporarily due to divorce, domestic violence, illness or unemployment.
- **We were awarded a two-year Bart Gordon Fellowship.** This award enabled us to hire a full-time employee to provide legal aid to low-income consumers. Our Fellow is a Spanish-speaking, Latina law school graduate who will take the bar exam in February.
- **We implemented a new program, the Commonwealth Care Project, in January.** Last April, Massachusetts passed the Health Reform Act which mandated health care coverage for most adults in the Commonwealth.* The program provides coverage for "limited income" adults, the "working poor", who were otherwise ineligible. The project is funded by the MetroWest Community Health Care Foundation.
**Persons without citizenship or legal residency- "the "undocumented"- are not covered under the new law.*
- **We undertook a priority setting process to determine which legal problems were most urgent.** A survey of low-income persons and local service providers determined that the five most cited legal problems encountered by our clients concerned housing, government benefits, consumer, family (including domestic violence) and health issues. These needs closely track our casework.
- **We provided Spanish classes in the office to our advocates through a special grant.** A dedicated group of students has attended faithfully and made noticeable progress in their ability to understand and communicate in Spanish. Some advocates are now able to translate simple documents and speak conversational Spanish. Clients have been very patient and seem extremely pleased at the advocates' efforts to learn their language.
- **We installed and implemented a new case management system.** The move from a very antiquated DOS based program to a faster, more accessible one has been a major improvement. SMLS now has several laptop computers and two cards that allow wireless Internet access. These technology upgrades required software customization and intensive staff training, but they have made the advocates' work in the community more efficient.
- **We are developing standard outcomes measurements in conjunction with other legal services programs across the state.** This will help us better track how our interventions improve clients' lives. SMLS services prevent homelessness, ameliorate poverty by restoring or securing needed benefits or child support, and protect victims of abuse. We maintain records of the disposition of every completed case in a database, along with demographic information on clients. In addition to these hard measures, we also measure "soft outcomes" through random client satisfaction surveys

Looking Ahead

Projecting into FY 2008, we anticipate serving upwards of **2400 clients** through direct assistance by our staff attorneys, paralegals, and volunteer members of our *Pro Bono* panel. Staff advocates will provide **50 outreach presentations** to client groups, community organizations and agencies serving low-income clients. We will also offer advice and assistance to approximately **300 unrepresented litigants** through housing clinics and the Lawyer for the Day Project.

Thanks in large part to donations from our supporters, and to our *Pro Bono* panel and many volunteers, we can continue to broaden our legal expertise and provide advocacy and representation to clients well into 2007.

Nancy King
Executive Director

Happy New Year!

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“Lawyers, because of their education and legal expertise, are in a privileged position. It is because of this position that we owe a level of duty to those people who cannot afford to hire an attorney, but have a need for one.”

And the Golden Gavel Award Goes to... John-Paul LaPré

For over 20 years, John-Paul LaPré has participated in SMLS' PBI program, assisting clients with issues ranging from divorce and restraining orders to bankruptcy. With the change in the bankruptcy law last year, John-Paul stepped up his efforts and accepted five new cases to be sure clients would get their discharge before the new law went into effect. Last summer, he assisted a client with a restraining order and a divorce.

In each case, John-Paul helped a person in great need. One was a mother of two, whose husband had left her with crushing debt and no support. Including a deficiency after a foreclosure, her debts totalled nearly \$100,000, while her annual wages were about \$20,000. John-Paul was able to give her a much-needed fresh start.

Donating time and energy to SMLS, John-Paul has helped many clients resolve legal problems with which they might still be struggling. He also contributes as a mentor to younger attorneys and participates as a regular panel member to our Divorce Basics Training Seminar. SMLS is extremely thankful for his service.

We have made every effort to include all donors. If we inadvertently omitted anyone, please accept our apologies and contact our office.

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Client Story

Tenants Rescued from Contaminated Apartment

SMLS provides low-income families and individuals with access to the justice system; access they might otherwise be denied because of their economic status. The heart of SMLS' work lies in helping people with day-to-day legal problems. The following client story is typical of the people helped and the kinds of cases handled by SMLS.

After fleeing first from Vietnam and then from an abusive husband, Hong Nguyen settled into an apartment in Framingham with her four children. Working full time as a manicurist, she supported her family with the help of a housing subsidy. Things went well for seven years.

Everything changed when the house Hong lived in was sold and new tenants moved in upstairs. The tenants were loud and destructive and soon caused damage in both their own and Hong's apartments.

"We were so sad. I didn't know where to go. I'm very thankful for SMLS."

Water, and even refuse, leaked into Hong's apartment from above. Soon there were large cracks in the ceiling. Hong's son's room was irreparably flooded and his clothing and other possessions were destroyed.

The new landlord was unresponsive to the family's pleas for help. Hong's daughter Winnie, who no longer lived at home, made repeated calls to the landlord on behalf of her mother. The landlord's secretary was hostile, and on one occasion accused Hong and her children of being lazy and living off taxpayers' money. The call left Winnie in tears.

As conditions deteriorated further, the cracked windows and ceilings caused Hong's heating bills to soar. She was continually replacing their ruined belongings, and eventually began to withhold the rent. Within a month, she received an eviction notice.

Hong and Winnie contacted South Middlesex Legal Services. SMLS advised Hong to call the Board of Health. The inspector found that the neighbors had dumped urine and water on the floor. Thirty code violations were noted. Again, Winnie called the landlord, and again the secretary responded abusively.

By now, Hong was more than ready to move, but her landlord demanded back rent. Having an eviction on her record meant Hong would lose her housing subsidy, which she needed for her new apartment. SMLS compiled documentation and went to court with Hong. The landlord agreed to a settlement, dropping the the demand for back rent and the eviction. Hong's subsidy was preserved, and she and her children are now settled in an apartment in Natick.



Hong and Winnie Nguyen

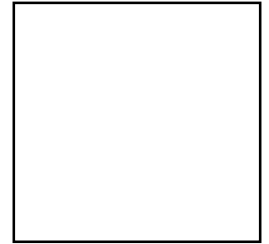
Filthy refuse was seeping through the ceiling and down the walls.

Mission Statement

South Middlesex Legal Services provides free legal advocacy in civil cases to protect and advance the rights of the poor, elderly, disabled, homeless and other disenfranchised people in our service area so they may obtain legal, social and economic justice. SMLS assists client eligible persons in securing access to basic needs and in challenging institutional barriers in order to achieve justice.



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