Rural Community Programs

- The Mobile Self-Help Legal Access Center in Ventura County, California, adapted a donated mobile home to provide a traveling law library and Internet services to pro se clients. They also offer self-help materials, including pro se pleadings and forms. There is a well-publicized schedule of times and locations for the clinic.

- Thanks to the efforts of a particularly engaged local bar leader, Blueridge Legal Services in Virginia launched a program through which each lawyer who joined the local bar association was assigned to a specific pro bono program team. The teams screen cases from legal services and take on pro bono cases when asked. The success of the program is largely due to its establishment by well-known and well-regarded leadership in the community.

- With over twenty offices and only fifty staff lawyers, California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA) covers thousands of miles of the agricultural and migrant areas of California. It does not cover any big cities with large law firms but the organization has built relationships with large urban law firms to assist in rural field offices. CRLA also works with local bar associations and sponsors clinics and workshops to train private attorneys in unfamiliar areas of law. In 2010, CRLA served 48,617 people, including 31% of migrant cases handled by LSC organizations nationwide.

- Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation covers the lower sixty-five counties in Southern Illinois, some of which have only three or four lawyers. It offers CLE courses focused on subjects such as family law to lawyers in exchange for taking pro bono cases. These CLE courses are available in multiple locations and via webcast and bring in about twenty-five new volunteer attorneys each year. It has had positive experiences setting up county pro bono coordinating committees throughout the state which have responsibility for recruitment and training of lawyers in each county.

- Legal Aid of Western Ohio (LAWO) covers two urban counties and thirty small cities and rural counties, resulting in an area that is 50% urban and 50% rural. The program has eight legal aid offices, one full-time pro bono coordinator, and it serves about 2,000 private attorneys located throughout the rural counties. LAWO actively involves local judges and encourages judges and courts to enact rules and procedures that help pro se litigants and pro bono attorneys. For example, some courthouses have a designated monthly courthouse parking space for pro bono attorneys. LAWO also works with small local bar associations and offers free CLE in exchange for lawyers’ committing to work on pro bono cases. LAWO finds that using urban lawyers for rural areas is not as effective because urban attorneys are already focused on urban programs; however, the program is successful working with corporate law departments of large rural corporations to do monthly intake days, give legal advice, draft short pleadings/documents, and hold clinics. Finally, LAWO utilizes technology to recognize volunteers through monthly e-mails and to list non-confidential pro bono case summaries to solicit volunteer lawyers.

- Legal Aid of West Virginia (LAWV) has twelve regional offices that each serves two to seven counties. Each office has one designated staff member who works with local pro bono lawyers and there are two staff members who work statewide on pro bono outreach efforts. Working with local bar associations, LAWV has made pro bono work an expectation for bar members in some areas. LAWV offers CLE courses taught by local judges that are free for lawyers who take a pro bono case. These courses attract lawyers because they receive CLE credit, meet judges, and network with each other. Pro bono lawyers are also recognized at awards lunches and during Pro Bono Week. LAWV also runs a hotline to facilitate case placement and establishes clinics on those legal issues that are most dominant in rural areas.

- Montana Legal Services Association (MLSA) covers the entire state of Montana, which is the fourth largest state geographically, but has the fourth smallest population. The state has 3,500 private attorneys, but only 350 attorneys are active in pro bono programs. MLSA utilizes a recruiting coordinator, staff members, private attorneys, judges, public officials, and local bar associations to recruit volunteers. It also solicits support from judges and courts, including a pro bono program in the name of the court in Helena and essentially mandatory pro bono in Butte where the local court assigns pro bono cases to attorneys. MLSA offers specialized programs,
clinics, and training in rural areas that require specific types of law, such as drafting Indian wills, or establishing family law clinics in which volunteer attorneys review pro se pleadings. Using technology such as HotDocs, MLSA engages pro bono lawyers in assisting clients with generating pro se pleadings based on guided interviews and reviewing documents at weekly clinics. Lawyers also can review documents electronically, which can help with long distances; however, extending this practice to urban lawyers was not successful because of a lack of local connection.

- Legal Aid of Nebraska (LAN) covers all of Nebraska, where some of the counties only have a handful of lawyers. Faced with long travel distances in between seven different field offices, LAN uses a central program coordinator to recruit volunteer attorneys. LAN offers training programs and access to online materials, such as sample pleadings and forms. It also stresses community responsibility to volunteers and gives awards and recognition to volunteer attorneys through newsletters and plaques.

- With thirteen offices, Northwest Justice Project (NJP) covers the entire state of Washington. Seventy percent of the area is rural and the eastern part of the state is almost entirely rural. NJP uses county bar associations to run volunteer lawyer programs, recruit volunteer lawyers, provide CLE courses, and encourage judicial involvement. It also works with the state bar for technology resources and provides a statewide hotline.

- Pinetree Legal Assistance (PLA) provides legal services to the entire state of Maine, most of which is predominantly rural. Its Volunteer Lawyers Project recruits volunteer attorneys by having private rural attorneys call their rural colleagues. It also joins with other assistance programs to provide volunteer opportunities, such as courthouse assistance programs, telephone help lines, and Saturday morning clinics.

- West Tennessee Legal Services (WTLS) serves seventeen counties in Tennessee, sixteen of which are rural. To recruit volunteer attorneys, WTLS builds personal relationships with lawyers in rural areas by participating in local bar associations and meeting with lawyers to encourage pro bono work. WTLS also offers CLE, either for free or at greatly reduced rates to volunteer attorneys. In order to offer the CLE, the program partners with bar associations and other groups or urban firms to sponsor the courses and utilizes volunteer urban attorneys to teach them. WTLS recognizes pro bono lawyers by giving plaques, having the names of volunteer lawyers published in the state bar journal, and highlighting volunteer lawyers at a big Law Day celebration that the state bar association hosts. Finally, WTLS sends emails to lawyers that describe pro bono cases and maintains a website that offers client forms and legal advice from volunteer attorneys.