

Client Council and WMLS Host Rural Poverty Discussion

Rural poor can lack access to legal services

By George Claxton, *Greenfield Recorder*
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HATFIELD -- The people of Western Massachusetts Legal Services say they exist to help the rural poor, but they can also provide services to middle-income people with large families and farmers who have lost crops to persistently bad weather.

Tina Elzeneiny, executive director for Western Massachusetts Legal Services, says that her job is to help people get in touch with those who can provide them with the services that they need. She also said that those challenges can be very difficult for those in rural areas.

Of all of the speakers who appeared at a statewide meeting of legal services workers that was held in North Hatfield on Thursday afternoon, most of them noted that one of the greatest problems facing the rural poor is getting to the places where they can get the services that can help them improve their lives.

Deborah Marchand, one of the WMLS managing attorneys, said that she has dealt with clients who are the victims of domestic abuse who can't get to a hospital to have their wounds treated because the EMT on duty that night, in a hill town with only one or two ambulance personnel, is the brother of the abuser.

"And, then the (Department of Social Services) will tell you that you have to get your kids to a therapist and get yourself into a battered woman's program, and that's great, but those programs are 20 miles away and how do you get there?" she asked.

Marchand noted that, in rural towns, if you have no car, there is also no bus that can take you to a shelter if you want to get out of an abusive situation immediately.

"You also have the problem that 'Yeah, they gave me a cell phone to call if I get into trouble, but there is no cell phone service where I live,'" she said.

Kitty Callaghan, another WMLS managing attorney, said that as a cost-cutting measure, the state has been talking about eliminating shelter beds in Hampshire County entirely and reducing the shelter beds to two in Berkshire County, two in Greenfield and two in Orange. This, she said, would not be enough to deal with the number of people who need these services on a daily basis, let alone for the longer term.

According to Elzeneiny, domestic abuse is one of the three top problems that her staff have to deal with on a typical day, the others are housing and elder services.

"The population is aging, particularly in Franklin County, and we are busy every day with elder services. We make sure that they have access to food and medical care and housing," she said.

Elzeneiny said that her organization has programs to help the homeless, but she would prefer to keep people in homes that they already have.

"It is better for everyone and easier for everyone if we don't have to try and find you housing and we can keep you in safe, clean and well-maintained housing that already exists," she said.

The WMLS executive director said that people often think that the services of her office are only for the very poor, but she said that what counts as eligible can depend on a number of factors.

"If you make \$60,000 a year, that sounds like a lot, but its not that much if you have a lot of children, or you are taking care of other family members who live with you, or you have elderly or disabled people who live with you," she said.

According to Elzeneiny, a farmer who owns a lot of land, but has just suffered a flood or lost all of his crops in a

hailstorm, may still be eligible for help from the Western Massachusetts Legal Services.

In Franklin County, Western Massachusetts Legal Services can be reached at 55 Federal St. in Greenfield, or by telephone at (413) 774-3747 and 800-639-1309.