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Justice   
For  
Montanans

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# AmeriCorps State Justice for Montanans Project

Presentation to  
Montana Commission  
on Community Service  
October 19, 2009



# Overview

- The goal of the Justice for Montanans Project is to expand access to justice throughout Montana
  - Civil (not criminal) issues
  - Primarily serving low-income people
  - Empowering people by providing legal information and other self-help legal services so litigants can clearly present their positions to courts and other people involved
  - Engaging members to consider future service, including service in access to justice issues
- New program! Pre-service orientation was September 28-29 in the State Law Library.
- 10 full-time positions filled to date, with one less than full-time position starting soon and additional recruitment in process

# Oath administered by Chief Justice Mike McGrath



# Placements

- Members are based in the following communities:
  - Helena (2 plus a less than full-time member starting soon)
  - Missoula
  - Billings (3)
  - Bozeman
  - Kalispell
  - Havre
  - Choteau
  - OCPVS Helena, SHLP Sidney, and part of one MLSA Helena position are not filled at this time.

# Members

- All wonderful personalities!
- Wide variety of ages and backgrounds, including:
  - Former teacher
  - Recent college graduates, including a graduate in documentary film
  - Former library staffer in Minnesota involved in that state's self-help law program
  - People interested in law school and law-related careers

# Members Joan, Danielle and Richard at MLSA annual meeting with VISTA member Leah



# Project Partners

- Montana Legal Services Association (MLSA)
  - Nonprofit law firm that provides free legal services to low-income people throughout Montana. [www.mtlsa.org](http://www.mtlsa.org)
- Self-Help Law Program (SHLP) of the Office of the Court Administrator, Montana Supreme Court
  - Establishes and maintains court-based self-help law centers to assist people in finding free legal information and resources, especially those representing themselves in court.  
[http://www.montanacourts.org/supreme/self\\_help/default.mcp](http://www.montanacourts.org/supreme/self_help/default.mcp)
- Office of Consumer Protection & Victim Services (OCPVS), Montana Department of Justice
  - Includes a consumer hotline, victim restitution projects, and other consumer programs. <http://www.doj.mt.gov/consumer/default.asp> and <http://www.doj.mt.gov/victims/default.asp>

# What do members do?

## MLSA

- MLSA members' main function is to help with statewide intake, the processing of applications for services and scheduling of appointments with advocates
  - HelpLine members assist with processing applications over the phone
  - Intake & Outreach members primarily process written applications, including “walk-ins” who need assistance
  - Members also help with clinics, such as MLSA's bankruptcy clinic, by communicating with clients before each clinic, proctoring the clinic sites, and developing and processing surveys
  - One member will serve with the Native American Unit, by going to reservations on “circuit rides” and processing applications onsite for people who do not have telephones, computers, or the ability to travel to an MLSA office

# HelpLine Member Christina in MLSA Annual Meeting HelpLine Impact Project Presentation with MLSA staff member Luann



# What do members do?

## OCPVS & SHLP

- The OCPVS member(s) will primarily serve on a consumer hotline and participate in victim restitution programs and other projects.
- SHLP members serve in court-based self-help law centers
  - Designed to help people find legal information and resources
  - Especially focused on self-represented litigants
  - No income restrictions, but many served are low-income people who cannot afford an attorney, especially in family law cases



# Other Member Activities

- Recruiting volunteers, including pro bono lawyers and law students
  - Two members are creating a survey for partner staff members on volunteer needs and past experiences with volunteers to ensure members are recruiting appropriately
- Outreach
  - Promoting self-help law centers and MLSA programs so people are aware of these services
  - Most members are interested in a film project
  - Developing a social media presence on Facebook, Twitter and MySpace
  - Members are brainstorming other outreach ideas
  - MontanaLawHelp.org, a legal information website
- Serving as LiveHelp Navigators, to assist people in finding legal information online

# MontanaLawHelp.org and LiveHelp

The screenshot shows the MontanaLawHelp.org website in a Mozilla Firefox browser. The browser's address bar displays the URL <http://montanalawhelp.org/MT/index.cfm/index.cfm>. The website header includes the logo "MontanaLawHelp.org" and navigation links for "About Us", "Feedback", "News Survey", "National LawHelp", "Find Legal Help Near You", "Help", and "Legal Programs".

The main content area is titled "Legal Information and Resources" and is intended for "Low to Moderate Income Montanans". It features a grid of 14 categories, each with an icon and a list of related topics:

- Families and Kids**: Parenting Plans, Abuse, Wills, Divorce, ...
- Consumer**: Utilities, Bankruptcy, Loans, Cars, Credit, ...
- Employment**: Workers' Compensation, Farmworker Rights, ...
- Domestic/Sexual/Dating Violence and Stalking**: Orders of Protection, ...
- American Indian Issues**: Indian Child Welfare Act, Tribal Government, ...
- Taxes**: Filing Your Taxes, Tax Credits, Audits, ...
- Housing**: Landlord-Tenant, Public Housing, Discrimination, ...
- Public Benefits**: Medicaid, Cash Assistance, Disability Benefits, ...
- Seniors**: Elder Abuse, Guardianship, Medicare, ...
- The Legal System**: Common Legal Terms, Finding an Attorney, The Courts, ...
- Veterans and Military**: Benefits, Disability, Veteran's Families, etc.
- Self-Help**: Forms and instructions to help you represent yourself.

On the right side of the page, there is a "Live Help Unavailable" notification with a "Please leave a message" button. Below this is a "What is LiveHelp?" section with a search bar and a "GO" button. A "Legal Tip of the Week" section highlights "Mobile Home Lot Rentals" with the text: "Do you know that there are specific laws about renting spaces for mobile homes?". At the bottom of the right sidebar, it states "You are viewing information for MT" and provides a "Choose Another Location" link.

The browser's taskbar at the bottom shows the Windows Start button, several open applications (Spark - edahl, Micah Jalloh, Microsoft Power..., MontanaLawHel..., Downloads), and the system clock showing "October 19 200..." and "10:29 AM".

# Members Building Relationships

- State and Local Bar Associations
- Judges, including supervisors
- Clerks of Court
- Librarians
- Local Service Agencies (ex. Offices of Public Assistance, Human Resource Councils)
- Low-income People

# Why are relationships important?

- The access to justice community frequently collaborates on projects, and strong relationships assist in that process.
- Example: Technology Initiative Grant from the Legal Services Corporation, recently awarded to MLSA and others including SHLP
  - To expand existing LiveHelp program to set up virtual self-help law centers in communities (to be determined) where there is no physical presence
  - To begin in January of 2010—members' presence throughout Montana will assist in this effort

# MLSA AmeriCorps Relationships

- MLSA has sponsored a large VISTA program for several years, including VISTA members placed in the MLSA Helena office
- MLSA also sponsors AmeriCorps Equal Justice Works Fellows, attorneys who serve in Billings, Helena and Missoula
- MLSA encourages Justice for Montanans members to engage with these and other AmeriCorps members during their service
- Example: Missoula MLSA member Richard will collaborate with EJW fellow Beth on law student recruitment efforts

# Justice for Montanans member Harmony with VISTA member Micah at MLSA annual meeting



# Commitment to Members to Help Them Succeed in Service and As Individuals

- Training!
- Involve members in project partner programs at large (ex. MLSA annual meeting)
- Help members explore their future service and career plans
  - Anticipated mid-year training will include:
    - presentations by legal professionals engaged in service and other non-traditional careers
    - guided reflections on service
- Support from “access to justice” community (other than project partners)
  - In addition to C.J. McGrath, Pre-Service Orientation included:
    - State Law Librarian/Commission on Self-Represented Litigants Co-Chair Judy Meadows
    - Reference Librarian Susan Lupton
    - Justice Jim Rice
    - Clerk of the Supreme Court Ed Smith
  - State Bar of Montana has also expressed support

# Looking to the future!

- Members are developing their service plans with their supervisors
- First members' call on October 13 indicated members were settled in and ready to serve
- Learning as we go
- Excited about this project!
- Questions?

# Contact Information

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