

## Empowering People in Poverty



## MISSION

The mission of the Montana Legal Services Association is to protect and enhance the civil legal rights of, and promote systemic change for, Montanans living in poverty.

### First a few facts about the Montana Legal Services Association

- MLSA was founded in 1967
- Legal aid organizations across the country were established as part of President Johnson's War on Poverty, just like the AmeriCorps VISTA program
- Founded on idea that neighborhood law offices were necessary for an effective anti-poverty program because they provided a vehicle and voice for low income people

### Montana Legal Services Association Principles Behind Legal Aid

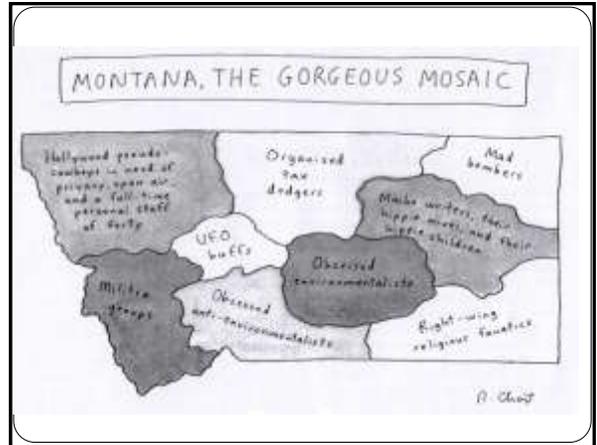
Responsibility to all poor people in Montana as our "client community", not just individuals that seek assistance

Emphasis on rights of client to control decisions about priorities that MLSA pursues

A tool for poor people to use, rather than an agency that just provides services to people living in poverty that seek help

### Montana Legal Services Association

- State-wide law firm serving all 56 counties and 7 Indian Reservations in Montana
- App. 40 staff total, with only 12 casehandling attorneys serving entire state.
- 3 main offices (Missoula, Helena, Billings)



### Montana Legal Services Association

- 2 parts of program – Advocacy and Community Engagement
  - Advocacy: provides civil legal services primarily in the areas of consumer, housing, bankruptcy, domestic violence, family law and public benefits
  - Community Engagement: AmeriCorps programs, Pro Bono attorneys, and Community Education and Outreach

### Montana Legal Services Association

- Emphasis on Impact Work – Activities that effect the rights and lives of more than just one individual client
  - Impact Litigation
  - Community Engagement and AmeriCorps projects
  - Community Education and Outreach

Montana Legal Services Association  
AmeriCorps Projects

- AmeriCorps\*VISTA
  - MLSA has been an AmeriCorps\*VISTA sponsor for more than 25 years
  - Use VISTA members to build capacity for local communities to address the issues keeping people in poverty

AmeriCorps\*VISTA members working with MLSA

- Established MontanaLawHelp.org



AmeriCorps VISTA members working with MLSA

- Built the Capacity for Successful Community Outreach Campaigns



Montana Legal Services Association  
AmeriCorps Projects

- Justice for Montanans Project
  - AmeriCorps State project funded by the Governor's Office on Community Service.
  - Members provide access to the legal system and legal information for people with civil legal problems
    - MLSA
    - Montana Courts
    - Montana Office of Consumer Protection

## Montana Legal Services Association AmeriCorps Projects

- Equal Justice Works AmeriCorps Fellows
  - National AmeriCorps project that provides AmeriCorps attorneys
  - MLSA attorneys provide direct services in these areas:
    - Indian Law Fellow
    - Public Benefits Fellow
    - Bankruptcy/Consumer Law Fellow

Brittany Waiss

MLSA AmeriCorps Coordinator

## National Service Involvement

- MLSA Sponsors both an AmeriCorps VISTA Program and an AmeriCorps State project:
  - MLSA AmeriCorps\*VISTA Project
    - Currently has 25 members serving at 22 partner sites
  - Justice for Montanans
    - Currently has 13 members serving in MLSA offices, Self-Help Law Centers, and the Office of Consumer Protection and Victims Services

## What are these members doing?

- MLSA AmeriCorps\*VISTA Project
  - These members serve in partner not for profit organizations bettering Montana and the country through economic opportunity and healthy futures initiatives
  - These partner organizations focus on three areas:
    - Poverty Law
    - Asset Development
    - Domestic Violence

### What are these members doing?

- Members serving with asset development organizations offer economic opportunity to those in poverty by:
  - Increasing housing availability and opportunity
  - Creating and implementing financial education programs
  - Expanding the reach of existing financial support programs
  - Increasing access to transportation

### What are these members doing?

- Members serving with poverty organizations offer economic opportunity to those in poverty by:
  - Offering important legal information and developing important legal resources
  - Expanding the capacity of legal aid organizations
    - Allowing them to serve more clients
  - Getting people the tools to help themselves in legal matters

### What are these members doing?

- Members serving with domestic violence organizations offer economic opportunity and healthy futures to those in poverty by:
  - Increasing housing availability and opportunity
  - Creating and implementing financial education programs for survivors of domestic violence
  - Expanding education about domestic violence and setting up support networks for survivors
  - Empowering young people to break the cycle of violence

### Where are they doing this?

- MLSA AmeriCorps\*VISTA members serve throughout the state:
  - Helena
  - Missoula
  - Butte
  - Great Falls
  - Dillon
  - Havre
  - Kalispell
  - Deer Lodge
  - Red Lodge
  - Livingston
  - Bozeman

### What are these members doing?

- Justice for Montanans
  - Empower low to moderate income Montanans by increasing access to justice
- Members in the MLSA offices:
  - Perform intake and outreach
  - Support the Helpline
  - Offer important legal information
- Justice for Montanans members at MLSA are serving in Helena, Missoula, and Billings

### What are these members doing?

- Self-Help Law Centers
  - Provide important legal information
  - Assist customers with finding the right forms, resources, statutes
  - Refer customers to other resources and programs
- Self-Help Law Center members are serving in Helena, Billings, Great Falls, Kalispell, and Bozeman

### What are these members doing?

- Office of Consumer Protection and Victim Services
  - Assure that the legal rights of consumers are being protected
  - Assist those who's rights have been violated in filing the proper complaints
- Our OCPVS member serves in Helena

### What are these members getting done?

- MLSA AmeriCorps\*VISTA Members:
  - Expanding capacity
  - Building sustainable projects and solutions
  - Creating awareness of poverty and moving people to action

### What are these members getting done?

- In the last year:
  - VISTAs mobilized 903 community volunteers, who donated 10,259 hours of their time
  - VISTAs generated \$202,618 of funding for their organizations
  - VISTAs generated \$46,785 worth of in-kind resources

### What are these members getting done?

- Justice for Montanans member:
  - Expand capacity for the organizations which they serve
  - Provide resources for pro se litigants and for those in search of legal information
    - Increased access to services within MLSA by 7%
    - Increased access to services within SHLC by 44%
    - 52% of people receiving these services felt better about their situation after receiving this information

Shaunagh McGoldrick

Justice for Montanans Member  
Montana Attorney General's  
Office of Consumer Protection

Dan O'Brien

MLSA VISTA Member  
Montana's Credit Unions for Community  
Development

## Challenges

- Uncertain federal funding means levels of service varies from year to year
- Difficulty attracting and retaining client eligible board members to guide the work
- Federal restrictions limit MLSA activities and advocacy tools
- Rural, remote nature of Montana's poverty population

## Response to Challenges

- Creative uses of Technology
- Focus on Impact Work
- Community Partnerships

## Contact Information

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