



"PROMOTING JUSTICE, HOPE, DIGNITY AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY THROUGH QUALITY CIVIL LEGAL AID FOR THOSE WHO HAVE NOWHERE ELSE TO TURN"

## From the Executive Director...

2010 brings with it new opportunities and challenges for Legal Aid of Nebraska. As our state's population continues to grow, so does the percentage of that population which qualifies for our services.

We regard that growth as both a challenge and opportunity for the attorneys, paralegals and staff members who work in our state-wide offices – Scottsbluff, Grand Island, Lincoln, North Platte, Norfolk, Bancroft and Omaha.

Having more and more low-income families and individuals seek out our help certainly is the challenge. The opportunity is for us to find more and better ways to serve them and for us to extend our reach by being more efficient.

One example of greater efficiency is our new Web site at [www.legalaidofnebraska.com](http://www.legalaidofnebraska.com). Visitors will quickly see that there is more for them on the site. Legal Aid can help tens of thousands of Nebraskans this year, but a lot of people can help themselves – faster and better – by going on-line with us. The redesigned site offers many more self-help options, documents, legal forms and basic advice.

Another way we stretch our service is by constantly improving our "front doors." Legal Aid's AccessLine®, ElderAccessline®, Farm-Ranch Hotline and other 800-num-

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## Legal Aid Launches Updated Web site

Legal Aid kicked off the new decade by revamping its Web site, <http://www.legalaidofnebraska.com>. The site offers Board members, employees and clients an online arena with the latest news and information affecting Legal Aid of Nebraska.

The changes on the site are designed to help clients more, says Executive Director Dave Pantos. "Ultimately, the changes we made will lead to greater functionality," he said.

Changes include a cleaner home page, easier access to staff directories, important documents and phone numbers and a search engine designed to assist clients with legal issues.

The search engine lets visitors to the site enter a brief description of their legal question before being redirected to an accurate list of search results.

The site also features links to Legal Aid's annual reports and an online edition of *Briefly* newsletters.

Legal Aid has also joined Facebook, the social networking Web site that allows people and groups to connect online.



Pantos

## Attorney Involvement Focus Restorative Justice: One Case at a Time

For Omaha attorney Patrick Runge, the difference between his everyday practice and his involvement with Legal Aid of Nebraska's Private Attorney Involvement Program (PAI) is sometimes hard to spot.

"It's a lot of the same stuff," Runge says. "I'm not a high-end lawyer. I'm usually working with

low to middle income people who need some help. The people I assist with Legal Aid aren't much removed from what I see full-time."

Runge handles a variety of cases, both in his day-to-day practice and his PAI work: family law, divorce, custody issues, abuse, neglect. "It's a little slice of everything," he said.



Patrick Runge

In a typical year, he'll handle between 10 and 15 cases for Legal Aid.

Runge believes people go to law school for a lot of different reasons, but for him, it was all about helping people. After graduating from Creighton University's School of Law in 1994, he ventured out into the real world in a big way. "I hung out my own shingle," he said of his decision to open Runge Law Office. One of his first cases was a divorce case and his opposing counsel was Barbara Kueny, who offered Runge encouragement throughout the proceedings.

She must have been impressed with his work.

About a month after the case ended, Runge received a call from the Winnebago Tribal Court. The court was looking for a public defender, and Runge had been recommended by Kueny, who

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Legal Aid of Nebraska in

# Grand Island



Grand Island staff, from left, back row, Rodrigo Gamboa, Ann Sukraw-Lutz, Crystal Schott; foreground, left, Managing Attorney Kay Strong, and Lori Wilson, inset, who recently transferred to Grand Island from the Lincoln office.

## Legal Aid Assists Sudanese Refugees

Fleeing from a country torn by civil war, poverty and drought, a group of Sudanese refugees found themselves deposited in a strange and foreign land: Nebraska.

Having little or no formal education, they arrived in the United States, greeted by people who spoke differently, held different values and live a metropolitan lifestyle that was, frankly, overwhelming. Seeking to preserve their traditional lifestyle, the refugees forged westward, seeking rural vistas to raise their families.

For many, this journey ended in Grand Island, Nebraska. A strong agricultural community surrounds the town, and a large meat-packing plant offers the refugees opportunities for employment and growth they would never have in the larger cities.

While most Grand Islanders were accepting of their new residents, the refugees lacked any kind of legal cohesion or organization.

After expressing a desire to organize, Legal

Aid of Nebraska moved forward to help them. In order to assist the group's relationship with local government and commercial entities, Legal Aid helped the Sudanese community form a 501(c)(3) non-profit group.

Despite the group's members being on opposite sides of warring Sudanese tribes, they were able to settle their differences for the greater good of the population. Their new legal status also helped the refugees receive financial aid and social coaching to assist in the transition to their new home. The group's efforts were key in legitimizing the population's status in Grand Island, showing a desire to participate in the social structure of the United States.

The group has already worked with the police of Grand Island to improve the understanding of cultural differences between the Sudanese refugees and the Nebraskans, avoiding future altercations and easing the interactions between the newly arrived Sudanese and the people of Grand Island.

In helping the Sudanese create a 501(c)(3)

Non-Profit Organization, Legal Aid of Nebraska has helped the Sudanese Refugee community of Nebraska to take one step closer to removing the barriers between them and self-sufficiency.

## Grant Helps Aid Abuse Victims

For a client who is a victim of domestic violence and living in poverty, a little financial assistance can make a big difference.

The Grand Island Community Foundation recognizes the importance of this assistance and has stepped up to the plate to assist clients of Legal Aid of Nebraska. The Foundation recently awarded Legal Aid funding to sustain its representation of domestic violence victims – often the difference between success and failure in a family's quest to stop abuse.

Spouse abuse affects an entire family, including young children. Often the tactics used by an abusive spouse go beyond the conventional expectations of domestic violence. An abusive spouse will go to great lengths to oppress family members: shutting off electric and gas utilities, making false accusations of drug use and threatening to take away the couple's children. Thankfully, Legal Aid is there to step in, whether by supplementing funds for utility deposits to keep families together or providing drug testing for clients falsely accused of drug abuse. These efforts contribute to a client's successful legal outcome and self-sufficiency.

Women continue to be the primary victims of domestic violence, but men and children are affected, too. A local father was recently assaulted by the mother of his children. As the children's primary caregiver, he was unable to drive to Lincoln to procure a certified birth certificate necessary for court proceedings. A gas card – provided through this important funding – made it possible for the father to obtain such a critical document.

The Grand Island Community Foundation's award allows the Grand Island office of Legal Aid of Nebraska to sustain a fund necessary to provide these essential services to those who otherwise would be without such means.

These resources now are more important than ever, and this funding helps fill the gap for low-income and elderly central Nebraskans by providing free services to victims of domestic violence of all ages.

## Attorney Involvement Focus

# Restorative Justice: One Case at a Time

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took over as judge. In 2004, Runge applied for the judicial post, where he's served to this day.

The story got even better for Runge and Kueny when she introduced him to his future wife, her sister.

Working as a judge has been an eye-opening experience for Runge, who says it's made him see cases differently. "Being a judge makes you a better lawyer," he said. "If you've heard an argument and you know it's not persuasive, you learn not to make that same argument yourself. It gives you better perspective."

His experience with the Winnebago tribe has also brought home for Runge a key principle of the law: restorative justice. "That's one of the real bellwether principles of tribal courts," he says. "Courts are there to find a way to make people whole, as opposed to acting as a punishing, sanctioning body. The tribal courts are about problem solving and getting parties to work together. It's fascinating how state courts are now working towards those models."

**S P O T L I G H T**

**Patrick Runge • Runge Law Office**  
**7701 Pacific St., Ste 323, Omaha, NE 68114**

**Education:** Law degree from the Creighton University School of Law, 1994

**Years as a PAI attorney:** 5-6 years

**Number of Legal Aid cases handled each year:** 10-15

Runge carries that principle of restorative justice with him in all his endeavors. It's a constant reminder of why he entered law in the first place.

"One of the things that I find most satisfying about being an attorney is the opportunity to make a real positive difference in someone's life in a really tangible way," he said. "Working for Legal Aid is an extension of that. To be able to provide these services for people who don't have anywhere else to turn, that's what you're supposed to do as a lawyer. It's part and parcel of the oath that you take."



## Legal Aid's Pat Ford Helps 'Build Youth'

*Legal Aid's Pat Ford on Friday, January 15, spoke to "Youth Build," a group of 16-24 year olds who meet at Goodwill to learn and develop job skills. The program is funded by the Department of Labor.*

## OFFICE LOCATIONS

### Omaha

**P 402-348-1069 F 402-348-1068**  
1904 Farnam Street, Suite 500, Omaha, NE 68102

### Lincoln

941 "O" Street, Suite 825, Lincoln, NE 68508

### North Platte

102 E. 3rd Street, Suite 102, North Platte, NE 69103

### Scottsbluff

1423 1st Avenue, Scottsbluff, NE 69363

### Norfolk

214 N. 7th Street, Suite 10, Norfolk, NE 68701

### Bancroft

415 Main Street, Bancroft, NE 68004

### Grand Island

207 W. 3rd Street, Grand Island, NE 68802

## ACCESSLINE® NUMBERS

### Statewide AccessLine®

**1-877-250-2016**

Mon-Thurs 9 am-4 pm (CST)

Fri 9 am-12 pm (CST)

Spanish-speaking staff available

Translation services available

### Rural Response Hotline

**1-800-464-0258**

Mon-Fri 8:30 am-4:30 pm (CST)

### Native American AccessLine®

**1-800-729-9908**

### ElderAccessLine®

**1-800-527-7249**

Mon-Thurs 9 am-12 noon & 1 pm-3 pm (CST)

Fri 9 am-12 noon (CST)

Questions and comments should be directed to: Dave Pantos, Executive Director, 402-348-1069 (ext. 203).

If you do not wish to receive this newsletter or know someone who would appreciate a copy, please email: [dpantos@legalaidofnebraska.com](mailto:dpantos@legalaidofnebraska.com) or call 402-348-1069.



*Make your Legal Aid of Nebraska contributions online at:*

[www.legalaidofnebraska.com](http://www.legalaidofnebraska.com)

## From the Executive Director . . .

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ber telephone systems are answered by top legal professionals who work constantly to improve the speed and accuracy of the legal advice they offer.

Our reach is also extended by the numerous lawyers in our Private Attorney Involvement (PAI) program who selflessly offer to handle Legal Aid representation cases at greatly reduced rates. You'll read about one of those fine attorneys in this issue.

From time to time we like to focus our readers' attention on the good work being done by the people who staff one of our offices. This issue looks at the Grand Island office.

— **David Pantos, Executive Director**

## Legal Aid of Nebraska Welcomes Staff

Last November, Legal Aid of Nebraska announced the following additions to its Lincoln and Omaha offices:

**Jennifer Kulwicki** and **Brittani Lewit** joined the Lincoln office of Legal Aid of Nebraska as staff attorneys. Kulwicki, a recent graduate of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's College of Law, worked as a law clerk during law school, researching legal precedents on a diverse range of topics, including insurance litigation and railroad regulations.

Lewit is a graduate of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's College of Law and has experience working as a law clerk for Nebraska's chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

**Jonathan Seagrass** and **Scott Mertz** joined the Omaha office of Legal Aid of Nebraska as staff attorneys. Seagrass graduated from Creighton University's School of Law, and while in law school, worked as an intern for U.S. Magistrate Thomas D. Thalken.

A Cum Laude graduate of Creighton University's School of Law, Mertz worked as an intern during law school at Baird-Holm, LLP.

In December, Legal Aid hired **Theresa Thin Elk** as domestic violence attorney for its Native American program in the Bancroft office.

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## You Can Donate Online

Nearly one-fifth of the residents of Nebraska qualify for Legal Aid of Nebraska's services due to low incomes and this group continues to grow during hard economic times. There are many ways to support Legal Aid, but now it's easier for those of you who are used to working on-line to conduct financial transactions. Try it today by visiting [www.legalaidofnebraska.com](http://www.legalaidofnebraska.com). Simply click on the Donate Now link and follow the instructions. We – and our clients – thank you in advance for your help.



**Legal Aid of Nebraska**

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