

**Innovations in Civil Legal Services  
By AARP Legal Advocacy Group and  
Management Information Exchange**

[Materials on these innovations and others are available in a booklet through the  
MIE Bookstore. Email [info@m-i-e.org](mailto:info@m-i-e.org) for information.]

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**Summaries of Innovations**

Access to Justice Center, Legal Aid of Central Michigan

In an effort to alleviate the burden of pro se representation on the court system, Legal Aid of Central Michigan (LACM) created the Access to Justice Center. The Center, to be located inside the Ingham County Courthouse, provides a centralized resource for litigants and members of the judiciary needing assistance. The Center consists of an information desk staffed by pro bono attorneys and law students, both paid and volunteer, who answer questions, disseminate legal information and provide referrals where appropriate. The Center will be fully integrated with LACM's office, allowing for access to all legal documents, a listing of agencies where a referral may be made and the ability to conflict check. The goal of this project is to help people achieve successful outcomes and reduce the burden of pro se litigation on the judicial system.

Domestic Violence Community Legal Project, Northwest Justice Project

The Domestic Violence Community Legal Project is a joint effort of Northwest Justice Project (NJP) and two local social service agencies. The project addresses the needs of refugee and immigrant women who are victims of domestic violence that may not aware of the resources available to them because of language barriers or cultural challenges. Two NJP attorneys, one bilingual and one with the aid of a translator, work exclusively with domestic violence advocates at the two agencies providing them with training and consultations and accepting appropriate cases for full representation. Workers at the agencies are able to complete intakes with prospective clients and refer them to NJP. Attorneys are also available to meet with clients on-site at the social service agencies. Through this project, NJP has been able to minimize the barriers faced by this under-represented population.

Legal Assistance for Rural Shelters VAWA Project, Texas Rural Legal Aid

The unique geography of Texas Rural Legal Aid's (TRLA) service area was the impetus for this project that provides help for victims of domestic violence in rural Texas. Often these victims have not been able to access the justice system due to their location or the lack of legal advocates at shelters. TRLA collaborated with 13 shelters in their

service area to expand legal services to shelter clients. All of the shelters are networked with TRLA's main office so advocates at the shelter can have access to TRLA's computer database for conflict checking and document production. TRLA staff attorneys are available to consult with shelter advocates via telephone and computer. Not only has this project helped shelter workers provide their clients with valuable information, but it has also helped create a community network to respond to domestic violence.

#### Self-help Outreach Office, AARP Legal Counsel for the Elderly

In order to increase its presence and empower its clients, AARP Legal Counsel for the Elderly (AARP/LCE) created a self-help outreach office. There are two such outreach offices which operate out of donated church space. Each office is equipped with a computer that is Internet accessible. Clients who come to the office for assistance are asked to complete and sign an intake. Office staff will then navigate a specially created website by inputting information from the client in order to access legal information. Before the client leaves, he or she will be given printed copies of information along with pleadings, letters, forms or applications needed. Office staff do not provide advice or representation. If the client needs further assistance, he or she can be referred to either the brief service and referral unit, the LCE hotline or AARP/LCE for full representation.

#### Brief Services and Referral Unit, AARP Legal Counsel for the Elderly

AARP Legal Counsel for the Elderly (AARP/LCE) established the Brief Services and Referral Unit in order to efficiently resolve those cases requiring only brief service or referral. The unit is staffed by a supervising attorney, a paralegal and specially trained non-attorney volunteers. The unit provides follow-up to LCE hotline clients and also receives referrals from staff attorneys, active intake and outreach programs. The attorney will deal with cases which require legal expertise. The paralegal is assigned cases that are complex or involve a tight timeline. All other cases are handled by the volunteers. If a client needs extended representation, the Brief Services and Referral unit can refer the case to AARP/LCE or another appropriate agency.