



2003/2004

Volume 1, Issue 1

Newsletter

A Year in Review

2003/2004 Program Highlights

Since its inception, the Watsonville Law Center has assisted more than **2,400** low-income individuals, expanded its sources of funding, and developed a strong staff and advisory board. In 2003 and 2004, the WLC continued to successfully provide free legal services, in both English and Spanish, for low-income residents of Santa Cruz, San Benito, and Monterey Counties through the Barriers to Employment Project, The Agricultural Workers' Access to Health Project, and The Consumer Project.

The Barriers to Employment Project

This past year the *Barriers to Employment Project* helped more than 140 clients address legal barriers preventing them from gaining or maintaining employment. The most common barriers the Law Center addressed involved credit/debt disputes, criminal convictions, driver's license suspensions, and family law issues. The

Law Center assisted clients by preparing documents, negotiating with opposing parties, advocating on clients' behalf, and, when necessary, referring clients to private attorneys.

The Agricultural Workers' Access to Health Project (AWAHP)

A collaborative with California Rural Legal Assistance, Salud para la Gente and Applied Survey Research, AWAHP provides outreach and education, legal and medical clinics, and direct representation to agricultural and low-wage workers in the tri-county area who have experienced a work injury or illness. The clinics provide workers with free legal advice, referrals to a private attorney or legal representation if a private attorney is not available. Since August these clinics have served 166 clients. *(Continued on page 4)*

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The Watsonville Law Center's Mission:

The Watsonville Law Center's mission is to provide equal access to the law by helping low-income individuals understand and exercise their rights through education and outreach, and to enforce those rights through the provision of effective and accessible legal services.

Serving a predominately low-income, agricultural community, the law center focuses on providing services related to worker's compensation, consumer fraud, economic justice and barriers to employment. The Watsonville Law Center delivers its services through one-on-one consultations, drop-in advice clinics, and direct representation.

2004 Fields of Justice Event

Our Second Anniversary Event on October 14, 2004 was a tremendous success and well attended. We enjoyed approximately 100 attendees including such special guests as Congressman Sam Farr and Assemblymember Simon Salinas. Judge Lydia Villareal gave an inspiring Keynote speech and City Councilmember Ana Ventura Phares helped remember and honor our board member and friend Darryel Nacua.

Event awardees included local attorneys Todd McFarren, Jim Gonzalez, Robert Taren, Keith Lesar Cosimo Ailleo, Mary Thuerwachter and client Alexis Hernandez. Local artist Jose Ortiz's beautiful oil painting of the WLC logo, entitled "Fields of Justice", a huge array of donated food and wine, candlelight and live music by Orlando Castro and CRLA's own Sam Gallegos, made for a perfect evening!

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Message from the Director



"Thank you for helping me when I needed it the most. I couldn't have done it without you!"
(Barriers to Employment participant)

It is exciting to see the Watsonville Law Center enter its third year of service. The WLC, an idea inspired by need, has developed into four programs serving more than 2,400 community members since its inception. This year has been a fulfilling and successful one. The Barriers to Employment Project, The Agricultural Workers' Access to Health Project, and The Consumer Project have excelled. These programs have not only served thousands of community members, but have also uncovered patterns and practices that repeatedly injure an already vulnerable population. The WLC gathers this information and uses it to develop strategies that address the root cause of these issues to create lasting community wide change.

This last year, The Barriers to Employment Project assisted 140 CalWORKS participants in addressing legal barriers to employment so that they can successfully move from public assistance dependence to self-sufficiency. In the last five months alone, The Consumer Project saved its clients over \$100,000! It has also educated thousands of community members on how to protect themselves against consumer fraud through public service announcements and presentations. The Agricultural Workers' Access to Health Project has helped 240 injured or ill farm workers who were denied access to medical care and benefits gain access, as well as educated hundreds more about their legal rights under the workers' compensation system.

This year we are proud to announce the development of the Economic Justice Project. This project, collaboratively with La Manzanita Community Resources, The Santa Cruz County Community Credit Union and Applied Survey Research addresses legal issues that affect an individual's ability to

obtain or maintain income while providing social service intervention, teaching financial literacy and providing savings incentives.

The success of the WLC is due to its exceptional staff members and an outstanding volunteer all attorney Advisory Board. These individuals provide leadership and guidance to the law center while exemplifying excellence in the legal field and commitment to public interest law. The WLC also benefits from the ongoing direction and support of Community Bridges and its dedicated Board of Directors. We also depend upon the assistance of over fifty student interns and volunteers, as well as the collaboration of our community partners, California Rural Legal Assistance, Salud Para La Gente, Applied Survey Research, The Santa Cruz Community Credit Union and La Manzanita Community Resources, to mention just a few. Without these partnerships such accomplishments would not have been possible.

The WLC is also extremely grateful to its funders. Please see the appreciation list on Page 5 of this newsletter for the names of the generous individuals, businesses and foundations that support us.

It continues to be a privilege to work with and among such dedicated people towards such noble ends. I thank you all for your interest in the law center's work and I look forward to updating you on the many new accomplishments of WLC in the coming year!

Best wishes for the holiday season and very warm regards-

Dori Rose Inda, Center Director

On the Web

Visit the WLC online at: www.communitybridges.org/watsonvillelaw

Interested in supporting the Watsonville Law Center? Send your tax-deductible donation in the enclosed envelope or contact us at (831) 722-2845.



Recent Successes

2003/2004 Notable Success Stories

Ms. M is a single mother who also cares for her elderly parent on a very limited income. She was injured while working in a daycare center and suffered severe, chronic back pain as a result. She was awarded vocational rehabilitation.

Vocational rehabilitation is awarded to injured workers when they are unable to return to their previous employment as a result of the injuries they suffer. Workers are assigned a vocational counselor who assists in creating a “return to work plan” for the client.

When Ms. M went to speak with her counselor, she was already enrolled at a community college and had completed half of a certificate program that would enable her to obtain employment as an office or administrative assistant. This new job would limit the likelihood of aggravating her back injury through heavy lifting. Even though a worker has a right to a self-directed vocational plan the counselor refused to accept Ms. M's ideas.

Ms. M came to the WLC seeking help with this matter. With the aid of Ms. Vanessa Alvarado, Staff Attorney with The Agricultural Workers' Access to Health Project, Ms. M formulated a formal plan. After unsuccessfully proposing this plan to the vocational counselor, Ms. Alvarado was able to reach a \$9,000 negotiated settlement with the insurance company for vocational rehabilitation. Ms. M was able to pursue her career goal to obtain office employment. ❖❖

When Mr. J separated from his wife, he had a steady job and his children were living with their mother. Based on his income and the fact that his children were living with their mother, he was assessed \$471 a month in child support.

Shortly afterwards, Mr. J lost his job and his two children came to live with him. Mr. J received governmental assistance to provide the bare necessities for his children and himself. He struggled to send his children to school and maintain a roof over their heads with only \$540 a month. To accomplish this, Mr. J could not afford a telephone or a car.

Even though Mr. J's children lived with him and he struggled to make ends meet, he was still billed \$471 a month for child support. Mr. J repeatedly contacted the Department of Child Support Services, but was unable to resolve the matter himself. He didn't understand why he continued to receive these bills when he had custody of his children. Mr. J sought assistance from the WLC. By that time, DCSS claimed Mr. J owed nearly \$60,000 in back child support.

Barriers to Employment Project, Staff Attorney **Sarah Kern** sent a letter to the Director of the Department outlining Mr. J's situation and requesting assistance with Mr. J's case. The Department responded quickly and proceeded to work cooperatively with the Law Center. Based on the information provided by the Law Center, the Department filed a motion with the court to modify Mr. J's original child support order and agreed to a reduction in Mr. J's monthly payments to zero each month. The Department also agreed to specially appear on Mr. J's behalf at a court hearing located hundreds of miles from Santa Cruz. This meant that Mr. J would not suffer the hardship of taking a bus and sleeping in the bus station the night before the hearing.

Sarah helped Mr. J to modify the child support order that incorrectly charged him for the support of children in his custody. His monthly payments were reduced from \$471 to \$0/ month and a \$60,000 debt for back child support was adjusted accordingly. These efforts have resulted in thousands of dollars of savings and have ensured Mr. J's limited resources are reserved for the benefit of his children. ❖❖



A Year in Review

(Continued from page 1)

Project Manager/attorney Vanessa Alvarado and Project Coordinator Rafael Albarrán have worked diligently to expand services into the Monterey County area. Since January 2004, four of the eight clinics have been held in Salinas. AWAHP projects it will serve 100 Monterey County residents within the next year. AWAHP continues to collaborate with the Department of Insurance for employer fraud enforcement, and to expand its services into San Benito County.

The Consumer Fraud Project

The Consumer Fraud Project provides advice, education, referrals and representation to victims of automobile fraud and telecommunications fraud. Since late spring, Consumer Fraud Project Manager/attorney, **Balám Letona**, counseled 45 clients who sought advice on automobile purchases and related matters. Additionally, Balám worked with 46 new clients as part of the Telecommunications Fraud Project. That project is a statewide effort to address telecommunications fraud through education, outreach, and advocacy, as well as through tracking and enforcing patterns of abuses.

Balám has settled six auto fraud cases since April, saving clients roughly \$100,000. Balám, with co-counsel Rosner, Law and Mansfield, also obtained relief for telecommunications consumers in Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties against AT&T in the amount of \$130,000. He has also convinced many telephone and cellular companies to return money wrongfully taken from consumers.



What's New

WLC is pleased to introduce new staff attorney, **Sara Lipowitz**. Sara will be managing the Barriers to Employment and Economic Justice Projects. She will be developing **Expungement Clinics** to address one of the most prevalent barriers to employment, past criminal records. Frequently, clients who are in recovery from drug and alcohol addictions face criminal convictions on their records that pose a barrier to finding gainful employment. Sometimes these convictions are ten or even fifteen years old. The Clinics will assist these low-income residents with clearing their criminal record so they can obtain employment and achieve financial self-sufficiency.

WLC is also pleased to announce **The Economic Justice Project**, a collaborative with La Manzana Community Resources, The Santa Cruz County Community Credit Union and Applied Survey Research addresses legal issues that affect an individual's ability to obtain or maintain income while providing social service intervention, teaching financial literacy and providing savings incentives.

Agricultural Workers' Access to Health Advisory Board

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Our Sincere Thanks

The Watsonville Law Center would like to thank its many donors. Support from contributors allows the WLC to continue its current projects and expand its services.

Government Agencies

Human Resources Agency, Santa Cruz County

Foundations

The California Endowment

The California Wellness Foundation

The California Consumer Protection Foundation

The Community Foundation of Santa Cruz County

The S.H. Cowell Foundation

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Kemnitzer, Anderson, Barron & Ogilvie, LLP

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