

Learning About Your Community

By the Editors

[Editors' note: The following is an adaptation of materials from the following sources: Training Committee of Georgia Legal Services, The "Know Your Service Area" Scavenger Hunt (1998); Robin Bozian et al., Ohio State Legal Services Association and Southeastern Ohio Legal Services, The "Know Your Service Area" Scavenger Hunt (1996); and suggestions from the attorneys of the National Center on Poverty Law.]

Legal services can be involving and perplexing. There is so much to learn about your new client base, and client needs can be hard to meet. Lack of knowledge about the community that your program serves can impede your understanding and your progress. Here we introduce the "Know Your Service Area" scavenger hunt. The hunt is a field training exercise designed to help new staff attorneys become familiar with the community in which they may live and work. By seeking information about the population, organizations, and local officials you can be well equipped to advise and refer clients to effective resources within the community, whether urban or rural. Community information will help you understand your clients' experi-

ence, which in turn will help you better serve clients. The hunt, though not intended to be exhaustive, is designed to ferret out almost everything an attorney would need to know about a new community. Over all the hunt takes you on a journey of learning about your community.

In the hunt there are no rules. Obtaining information and preparing and presenting a final report are entirely up to you. Be creative. Exceptional creativity in obtaining and presenting your results is encouraged. You should develop a resourceful list to be expanded and improved throughout your career. Work smarter, not harder, and keep in mind that the purpose of the hunt is to get out into the service area and talk directly to people who significantly influence your clients' lives. Communicate with others, both in and outside your program. Feel free to consult, and share ideas, methods, and strategies. We suggest that you seek answers to the questions on the checklist below.¹

Welfare Resources

- Where are the local welfare offices located? Is there a local directory in your office?

¹ For further new attorney training material, see also GROUP PROJECT STAFF OF OHIO STATE LEGAL SERVS. ASS'N & SOUTHEASTERN OHIO LEGAL SERVS., NEW ATTORNEY TRAINING PROTOCOLS (2000) (Clearinghouse No. 54,696). Ohio State Legal Services and Southeastern Ohio Legal Services offer a four-day basic lawyering skills training each year.

- Where does a client go for emergency services, such as shelters, food pantries, domestic violence services, utility services, cash, clothing, eviction services, and similar assistance? Obtain an office location, telephone number, and program coordinator's name for each category.
- Which six social workers are available through the state public assistance program?
- What child care services are in the area? Which are considered affordable for low-income families?
- What public transportation services are in the area? What is the cost of an average trip to the field office? What is the cost of a trip downtown?
- Which other attorneys in the office have standard forms for their area of practice? For example, a housing attorney may have the standard tenant-landlord eviction defense handbook on file in the attorney's office. Other legal services providers may have similar handbooks available. Ask around.
- What other community programs are available for adults, teens, seniors, children?

Work-Force Development

- Where is the nearest unemployment office?
- Where is the nearest one-stop center?²
- What employment training centers are available?
- Are there any economic empowerment zones in the community? For example, are any real estate developers being offered tax increment financing to encourage housing and business development in the community?
- Who are the largest employers? Who are the local small-business employers?

- What are the closest community college, adult literacy, or adult training programs?

Community Leadership

- What local social service agencies are in your community?
- Can you name three program directors for each agency? Can you name at least three business leaders on the agencies' boards of directors?
- Can you name at least three leaders of grass-roots organizations in the community? What social issues are they organizing for or against? Introduce yourself to the directors.
- What are the three largest churches in the community? Are they affiliated with any social service programs?
- In what community do the staff in your office live? To which community organizations do they belong? Which community organization, other than your own, serving low-income clients would you like to join?
- What community legal educational materials does your program provide?
- What community services appear to be needed but are lacking?
- What is your office's proudest accomplishment in the last year and its best war story?

Children and Family Resources

- What are the hot-line telephone numbers for teen crisis and crisis counseling service providers?
- Do you have a domestic violence crisis hot-line telephone number in the office? Do you have the rape crisis hot-line telephone number available in the office?
- Do you have court forms for emergency protective orders on file in the office?

² "One-stop centers" are state centralized locations providing work-force development information and services to unemployed and underemployed persons. See Greg Bass, *Adult and Dislocated Worker Job Training Provisions of Title I of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998: Part 1—Federal, State, and Local Work-Force Investment System*, 33 CLEARINGHOUSE REV. 524, 535 (Jan.–Feb. 2000).

- Where are the domestic violence shelters in the county? Who is your contact person? Do you know the names of the program directors?
- Are there any public-funded or sliding-scale individual or family counseling agencies beyond the local mental health clinic?
- Have you introduced yourself to at least four family law practitioners who are on a volunteer attorney list of a pro bono program or committee?
- Can you name at least four social workers in the state child welfare protection agency? In which local office do they work? With what government-subsidized social service agencies are they affiliated?
- Which social service agencies in your community offer parenting classes, individual or family counseling, teen parenting programs?
- Have you introduced yourself to at least three of each of the following: assistant public defenders assigned to the child welfare division, public guardian, and court-appointed child welfare attorney?

Housing Resources

- What is the housing situation for the community?
- What public housing developments are in the area?
- Where is Section 8 housing located in your area?
- Where are the affordable-housing neighborhoods?
- What senior housing is available? What senior home care or medical and social support services are available?
- How long is the waiting list for subsidized housing? Are there any separate lists for seniors and the disabled?
- What homeless shelters are in the area? Where are they located? Who is the program director? Do you have a homeless shelter hot-line telephone number?
- Can you name at least four housing law attorneys working in your area?

Health Care

- What are the closest hospitals and medical clinics? Which ones accept Medicaid?
- Where is the closest and affordable pharmacy?
- Where are the neighborhood drug treatment programs?
- Where are the closest mental health clinics? What is the state law on involuntary commitment? Are there any regulations? Do you have any forms for involuntary or voluntary commitment on file in your office?

Consumer Resources

- How does a client obtain energy assistance?
- Who is the largest utility provider in the community? What is the emergency phone number for restoring cutoff services?
- Which community organizations sponsor financial literacy programs?
- What is the largest banking institution in the community? Does it maintain a financial literacy program for low-income persons? What other banking institutions are in the community? Which local banks offer free checking and the lowest return-check fees?
- Where do most clients bank?
- Where is the largest department store?
- Which appliance stores have the highest interest rates?
- Where is the largest car dealership? Which dealerships have the worst rating from the Better Business Bureau?
- What are the three largest and closest grocery stores?
- Where do most clients get loans? Where do they buy cars, appliances?
- Can you name at least two credit counseling programs? Can you name the program directors?

Criminal Law Resources

- Does your county maintain a jail check or inmate inquiry hot-line telephone number?
- Does your community have an arrested or detainee hot-line telephone number? For example, Chicago has a program that maintains a hot-line telephone number for recently arrested persons. The First Defense Legal Aid is a one-of-a-kind program sponsored by the Chicago-Kent College of Law. The program protects a detainee's right to counsel during police interrogations. Other communities may have only the public defender's office.
- Have you introduced yourself to at least four of each of the following: prosecutors, public defenders, and criminal defense attorneys? Do you have their telephone numbers?

Web Access and Community Information

- What is the information network in the community?
- Where are the computer literacy programs for low-income persons?
- Which Web sites offer *pro se* help?
- What community centers or public libraries offer computer training programs, community bulletin boards? Which offer newsletters, public access to computers?
- Which local neighborhood newspapers are the most circulated? What is in them?

Government Officials

Have you learned the names of each of the office holders listed below and introduced yourself to at least a dozen you have not met previously?

- State and federal judges, magistrates of the county, and appellate courts serving your area.
- All the state and federal representatives to the state legislature or the U.S. Congress.
- All county commissioners. (Note the date and time of their regular meetings.)

- The mayors and aldermen of the two largest cities in your county.

- The chief deputy clerk and assignment commissioner in the lower courts that your offices most use in the county.

- The county sheriff, chief of police, and police district commander for your service area. Introduce yourself to at least four assistant city attorneys in your service area.

Referrals

- Who is the president of the local bar association? Does the bar association have a pro bono program, a sliding-fee program? What is the bar association referral telephone number?

- Can you identify the best lawyer referrals for social security disability cases, foreclosures, personal injury and property damage claims, probate, bankruptcy, and criminal and other common cases that your program may not handle?

- Can you name at least three public interest law firms? What practice areas do they cover? Introduce yourself to the managing attorneys.

- What other legal aid programs are in your area? What practice areas do they cover? Do you have a local directory in your office?

- Where are the local law schools? Do they maintain legal clinic programs?

Client Demographics

For the county in your service area, obtain the following information:

- What is the total population of the county, including the population of the largest city or town? Where can you obtain census data on the community?

- What is the percentage of residents in the county who receive (1) food stamps, (2) unemployment compensation, (3) Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, (4) Medicaid, (5) high school diplomas, (6) postsecondary degrees?

- What is the percentage of local residents whose native language is not English?

- What are the predominant languages, other than English, spoken in the community and the local schools?
- Where can you obtain interpreter services?
- What is the percentage of local residents who are members of a racial or ethnic minority?
- Which city in your service area has the highest percentage of the largest such minority?
- Which are the three largest employers? What is the nature of their business?
- What is the county median income?
- How many persons' or families' income fell below 100 percent of the federal poverty level in 2001?