

[Legal Aid](#)

Legal Aid Services for the Homeless Serves Unique Role in Community

Story and Photo by Stacey Frank

Legal Aid Services for the Homeless is a very different type of program compared to many of the other organizations in Austin working to provide services to the homeless. Although other services work to give housing, support services, and employment advice to those in need, Legal Aid for the Homeless focuses more on providing legal assistance for them. Richard Troxell, Director of Legal Aid for the Homeless, sat down and explained how the organization began, what challenges are faced, and the services that they provide.



In 1977, Richard Nixon decided to initiate a corporation that would be able to support any person that needed to find legal services dealing with non-criminal matters. This organization became the Legal Services Corporation. There were many branches to the corporation, and Troxell worked at the organization in Philadelphia for a decade. In 1989, Troxell moved to Austin and figured out that there needed to be a more specific service for the people experiencing homelessness. With that in mind, he created what is now Legal Aid for the

Homeless. Troxell actualized an outreach project to provide non-criminal legal assistance to indigent people suffering civil legal problems. Legal Services Corporation consolidated and is now known as Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid. The purpose of this new corporation is to try and serve more clients via the telephone. Rather than trying to conduct telephone services for Legal Aid for the Homeless, Troxell felt that they needed to serve their clients through direct services.

The principal goal at this point is helping disabled people get through “the bureaucratic process of applying for disability benefits”. With this goal, the focus of the Legal Aid for the Homeless Project is to assist poor, disabled people in securing supplemental security insurance (SSI). Basically it is welfare for people who are unable to record that they have worked, but have now become disabled (for example, a housewife). The Federal Government says that people who have not been able to record earnings, but who have become disabled should still be provided with financial assistance.

Texas Rio Grande also provides evening clinics. There is a family domestic violence clinic on Monday’s at Martin Middle School and Wednesday’s at Webb Middle School. The clinics are held in the evenings from 6:00 pm until 7:00 pm. To see if a particular clinic is scheduled, call 512-447-7707, extension 301.

Troxell explained that there are many different challenges that impact delivery of services. One challenge, of course, is money. Another major concern is the continued need for collaboration with other services. Troxell feels that Legal Aid for the Homeless need to find a way to collaborate better with other organizations to ensure that all needs are met, not just legal ones.

Legal Aid for the Homeless and House the Homeless worked together to find a solution. Troxell stated that they needed to look at the problem in terms of finding a broad based, pragmatic solution, based on a business perspective. To this end, Troxell created Project Fresh Start. The project was made up of 23 separate organizations to provide a continuum of care for this particular faction of people experiencing homelessness. Troxell displayed a diagram of the path that the dually diagnosed people were to take. The individual starts out abjectly homeless and enters a single point of entry. The individual passes through a series of prioritized needs such as detoxification, treatment, residential treatment, job readiness, job training, etc. until the person is housed and either stabilized with this disabled condition or housed with a job. Attached to those needs, Troxell has identified the cost of each service. In doing so, fund raising is streamlined. Additionally, the “community” is able to decide how many people it can afford to put through this “recovery process.” The whole operation is overseen by a managed service organization or a coordinator who monitors the process and ensures that the required levels of service are available when the individual reaches that level of success. The idea is to then replicate this format for each faction of people experiencing homelessnessâ□”single women, single women with children, etc. This model project received the Community Legacy Award from the Austin Chamber of Commerce and the United Way Capital Area in 1998.

Troxell recognizes that these services do not exist in adequate supply. Moreover, Troxell recognizes that the disability award for SSI is only \$564.00 per month and that the federal minimum wage is only \$5.15 per hour and not enough for anyone to get into and keep housing--not only in Austin, but anywhere throughout the U.S. As a result, he has asked House the Homeless to come up with a solution. House the Homeless launched the www.UniversalLivingWage.org Campaign to fix the federal minimum wage and ensure that anyone working a forty-hour week can afford basic housing wherever that work is done throughout the U.S. Troxell contends that once this is resolved, instead of the city, county and federal governments just stirring this pot and expending unfruitful tax dollars, Project Fresh Start and other approaches like it will achieve success.

All of these goals, challenges, and programs have made Legal Aid for the Homeless into what it is today. Many people have been helped with their legal needs and later may have been given the chance to work with other services to resolve other needs. Troxell stated that they would love to have more project volunteers and if possible, any funding would be greatly appreciated. If you would like to help Legal Aid for the Homeless, please click [here](#) to find contact information.