



SILICON VALLEY CAMPAIGN FOR LEGAL SERVICES

A Baby Boomer Turns 60 Every 8 Seconds – Putting Increased Strain On Limited Senior Resources

An excerpt from the "2007 Silicon Valley Campaign for Legal Services Annual Report"

Most older Americans are active members of their families and communities. Others, however, are at risk of losing their independence and are increasingly vulnerable to abuse, neglect, or exploitation as they age. Many low-income elders live alone, some with physical or mental impairments. Numerous elders have problems accessing affordable health services; and many are concerned about planning for health care or personal care decisions at the end of life.

Scores of seniors fall prey to financially unscrupulous caregivers, con artists, or even family members. Still others find themselves in danger of becoming institutionalized, homeless, or conserved. Because the cost of living in Silicon Valley is higher than the national average, a Council on Aging Needs Assessment concluded that "the true prevalence of poverty among older adults is likely far greater than that reported in the 2000 Census. Elders are especially vulnerable to economic downturns because many rely upon low, fixed incomes."

Addressing the legal needs of low-income elderly people is a growing concern as our community's population ages. Today, one in six Americans is age 60 or older. By 2020, the number of seniors in Silicon Valley is expected to have nearly doubled, according to Santa Clara County's Office of Adult Protective Services. The growing need for services is reflected in Santa Clara County statistics indicating that elder abuse rose by 25 percent each year over the three-year period of 2003 to 2006. Today, elder abuse cases in the County average 2600 each year.

Elders living in poverty or with limited financial means have the same need for legal assistance as low-income people of all ages. They also have unique health, income, and social problems. More than any other age group, elders rely upon government benefits or programs for their health care, income, nutrition, and housing. Loss of any one of these government benefits could create a crisis in their lives.

Legal services attorneys help elder clients in a number of ways including:

- Cutting through the red tape and bureaucracy that their clients encounter with Social Security, Medicare, and subsidized housing programs;
- Assisting with nursing home issues or alternatives to institutionalization;
- Obtaining Elder Abuse or Domestic Violence Restraining Orders to prevent physical abuse of elders by family members (usually children or grandchildren), live-in caregivers, or boarders taken in to help defray costs;
- Intervening to prevent fiduciary abuse of the elderly or consumer scams targeted at elders; and
- Planning for end of life, to prevent conservatorship or premature institutionalization, and to ensure that elders' health and personal care desires will be followed.

All of the eight legal services agencies funded by SVCLS assist seniors within their annual case load, with 21 percent of all cases in 2007 involving a senior. The federal Older American's Act mandates focused attention on the specific needs of this client population, and particularly seniors who are in great economic or social need.



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This is why one agency, Senior Adults Legal Assistance (SALA), specializes solely in the legal needs of such elders, and provides services through appointments at more than 20 senior centers and other sites in Santa Clara County. Despite this mandate, public funding is woefully insufficient to address the need; and cutbacks in funding by other traditional funding sources, such as United Way Silicon Valley, further exacerbate this situation.

SALA reports that, at any given time, there is a waiting time of one to two months at many of its senior center appointment locations. The agency is able to respond more quickly through its telephone Hotline only in life-threatening situations, such as elder abuse incidents. Furthermore, all legal services agencies report that they are turning away two of every three eligible low-income clients with meritorious cases, seniors included, due to lack of adequate resources.

It is obvious that increased donations are critical if we hope to keep pace with the growing needs of this vulnerable population. The Silicon Valley Campaign for Legal Services aims to narrow and close this gap.