

October 26, 2022

Note to: HCCBG Advisory Committee
From: Suzanne Booth
Subject: Pisgah Legal 'Meet and Greet' Visit
Tuesday October 18, 2022

Pisgah Legal:
Valerie True, Grants Manager
Casey Steen, Elder Law Practice Head

HCCBG Advisory Committee:
Suzanne Booth
Billie Breeden

The mission of Pisgah Legal Services as summarized on its Form 990 reads as follows: "To provide civil legal services for economically disadvantaged persons in the Appalachian Mountains of Western North Carolina." It describes its Elder Law program as follows: "Helps seniors live independently in their homes for as long as possible. Protects seniors from financial or physical abuse or harassment and assists with end-of-life planning."

- With a lack of affordable housing in the area, housing insecurity is significant across all demographic groups within the population of low income individuals. Assisting elderly clients avoid evictions and address problems created by incompetent or dishonest landlords is the largest practice area.
- After housing assistance, consumer protections is the second most in demand area for legal assistance. Pisgah Legal helps seniors to: deal with creditors (e.g., cease-and-desist letters); prevent seizure of protected assets like houses and cars; manage debt; connect to services like housing subsidies, food vouchers and other types of financial assistance; and access the court system when required to maintain state law consumer protection coverage.
- Assistance to victims of domestic violence in all age groups is another significant practice area.
- The WNC Health and Economic Opportunity Program (HEOP) Community Partner Referrals help seniors file income taxes and / or access subsidized health care plans authorized by the Affordable Care Act (ACA). The HEOP team employs IRS-certified tax preparers and trained ACA Navigators for these purposes.
- Retired attorney volunteers assist elders with Wills, Powers of Attorneys and Health Care Proxies through Pisgah Legal's Eagle Program.
- The Medicaid Ombudsman Program, a new practice offering, assists clients with healthcare cases, primarily involving Medicaid and the managed care system.

Pisgah Legal employs a dedicated staff of about 85, of which roughly 36 are attorneys. The organization also has access to an active group of about 300 volunteer attorneys (numbers sourced from the Pisgah Legal website).

- For practice areas not covered by employee or volunteer attorneys (e.g., bankruptcy), Pisgah Legal refers cases to private attorneys who offer services on either a sliding scale according to income or pro bono.
- Through the Mountain Area Volunteer Lawyer Program (MAVL), a partnership between Pisgah Legal Services and the local bar, private attorneys provide pro bono services in a variety of practice areas.
- Pisgah Legal cross refers cases with the Legal Aid of North Carolina.

Pisgah Legal shares with other non-profit agencies the challenges imposed by, among others, limited revenue and funding sources, a transient workforce (due to salary constraints), an economically stressed client base, and COVID interruptions.

- Turnover among staff attorneys is high due to their ability to earn twice the compensation in the private sector; a third of the staff has been employed by Pisgah Legal for less than two years.
- Attorneys working with domestic violence victims experience a sort of post-traumatic stress disorder by association, and experience higher than average rates of burn-out. Note: The organization's sabbatical program was designed in part to address this.
- There is a particular need for benefits attorneys.
- Attorneys average about 150 cases per year.
- There is significant unmet need in the community.

Pisgah Legal has a diverse source of funding, which includes: individual donors; faith-based organizations; private and community based foundations; United Way; and various federal, state and local entities.

- 30-40% of the annual budget is sourced from its annual funding campaign.

Finally, when we asked Valerie and Casey what they wanted the HCCBG Committee to know, Valerie made the point that the application process for grant funding is very complicated.