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## **Social Security Disability Advocates Give Back to Support Civil Legal Aid for the Poor**

### ***Montana Justice Foundation receives \$25,000 Donation***

In 1996, two former legal aid attorneys submitted a proposal to the Montana Justice Foundation (MJF) for seed money to open a much needed non-profit whose mission was to provide Social Security Disability advocacy for those who could not afford legal representation. The MJF responded by supporting these pioneers with grant funding and the People's Law Center (PLC) was born. Thirteen years later, the PLC is thriving and giving back to Montana communities including its former benefactor, the MJF.

The MJF is a non-profit organization founded in 1979 by Montana attorneys. The MJF provides funding and support to qualified non-profit organizations dedicated to ensuring that all Montanans, especially the vulnerable and underserved, have meaningful access to the civil justice system. Through a comprehensive grants program, the MJF strategically and objectively allocates its resources to dozens of outstanding legal aid organizations and access to justice initiatives.

People's Law Center is a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit legal organization incorporated in 1996. It came into existence in response to a round of federal funding cuts and restrictions on civil legal aid in the mid-90s. The two original staff members, Russ LaVigne Jr. and Vivian Marie, were former Montana Legal Services Association staff attorneys. PLC was supported, in part, for the first four years by the MJF.

"In the beginning there, it was hand-to-mouth" said Susan Gobbs, Executive Director of the People's Law Center, "Without the financial assistance given by the Montana Justice Foundation it is doubtful that PLC would have survived its first few years and could not have become the organization that it is today."

As recently as 2004, the PLC had only two offices, in Great Falls and Helena, with one full-time attorney and a part-time support staff person in each. In January of 2004 and September of 2006, two additional offices were established in Bozeman and Billings respectively. The PLC currently employs four staff attorneys and four support staff and is completely self-sustained through attorneys' fees.

The PLC's primary practice area is representing individuals who are attempting to get Social Security Disability benefits. Client income is generally at 250% of poverty or less. Cases are taken on a contingency basis with a maximum fee of \$6000 per case. In

most cases the fees are much less. Clients can return to the PLC if they later face losing their benefits and the PLC will represent them again at no additional cost.

In addition, every attorney employed by PLC does a variety of pro bono work including counseling individuals not eligible for standard civil legal services, providing community and legal education classes, and working in clinics or taking individual direct representation. The PLC staff has an average of 20 years experience providing legal services to Montanans, primarily those who are low income.

All of this hard work and dedication has resulted in a new platform for the PLC – which is now in a position to award grants to social services agencies across the state, primarily those working with individuals who have little or no resources to pay for medications, medical equipment, vision and dental care.

And most recently, the PLC board has chosen to give back to the organization that provided them with the means for the PLC's start-up by making a \$25,000 donation to the Montana Justice Foundation.

“We are so grateful for the PLC's donation and it could not have come at a more critical time,” said MJF Executive Director, Amy Sings In The Timber, “We stand in the wake of a 60% drop in overall funding for Montana access to justice programs yet the need for civil legal aid continues to rise.”

The main source of this loss is a historical drop in Interest on Lawyers Trust Account (IOLTA) funding. In an effort to protect the faltering U.S. economy, the Federal Reserve slashed federal fund rates in December of 2008, causing a leveling of IOLTA revenues.

This cut has had a devastating impact on funding for civil legal aid in Montana and throughout the nation. The IOLTA Program, which relies on banking interest rates for success, provides for a significant portion of local legal aid funding. And the MJF, which has administered the IOLTA program for nearly 25 years, faces an unprecedented emergency.

As IOLTA funds are a primary funding source for civil legal aid to the poor in Montana, Dozens of Montana law clinics, legal aid organizations, pro bono programs, self-help law programs, CASAs, community mediation centers, and domestic violence education and service provider programs are in danger of being drastically cut or eliminated.

The MJF continues to work to expand its funding base to meet the growing needs of its grantees. In addition to the IOLTA program, the MJF relies on the financial support of lawyers, law firms, corporations and the greater community to effectuate its mission.

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