



**Legal Services Corporation
Office of Program Performance**

FINAL
**Report from the
Program Quality Visit
to
Southeast Louisiana Legal Services**

Recipient No. 619081

March 16 - 20, 2015

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INTRODUCTION

On March 16 – 20, 2015, the Legal Services Corporation's (LSC) Office of Program Performance (OPP) conducted an on-site program quality visit to Southeast Louisiana Legal Services (SLLS or the program). The purpose of the visit was to assess the quality of SLLS's legal work and its management, administrative, and legal work systems. The LSC team (the visit team or the team) consisted of two LSC program counsels—Willie Abrams and Meredith Horton; an LSC program analyst—Jane Ribadeneyra; three LSC temporary employees—Stephanie Edelstein, Esq., Michael Genz, Esq., and Andrew Scherer, Esq.; and one College of Law Practice Management fellow—William Cobb, CPA.

Through its program quality visits, OPP seeks to assess the extent to which LSC grantees are providing the highest quality legal services to eligible clients. In performing its evaluation of SLLS's delivery system, the visit team relied on the LSC Act and regulations, LSC Performance Criteria, LSC Program Letters, the ABA Standards for the Provision of Civil Legal Aid, SLLS's application documents and narrative submitted in the 2014 competitive grant cycle, the program's 2015 grant renewal narrative and documents, case services reports, and other documents submitted by SLLS to LSC over the past three years. In addition, the team reviewed numerous documents submitted by SLLS in advance of the visit, including a survey of staff and writing samples submitted by the program's advocates.

During the course of the on-site visit, the team visited all six of the program's offices—Baton Rouge, Covington, Hammond, Harvey, Houma, and New Orleans. The team interviewed the program's leadership, management and administrative staff, advocacy staff, and support staff. The team also interviewed members of the board of directors, judges, community partners, state justice partners, and bar representatives. Due to scheduling and time constraints, some interviews were conducted by telephone.

The issuance of this final report follows SLLS's review of a draft of the report and an opportunity to provide comments and identify any significant inaccuracies. SLLS's comment letter (dated August 17, 2015) is attached.

OVERVIEW OF PROGRAM AND SERVICE AREA

SLLS is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation organized to provide free civil legal assistance to low-income and disadvantaged persons in the state of Louisiana. SLLS is the result of a 2003 merger and acquisition of the Baton Rouge service area in 2011.¹ The service area contains 17,677 square miles, an area nearly twice the land mass of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined. The

¹ In 2003 SLLS concluded a merger with New Orleans Legal Assistance (NOLAC) to serve the newly reconfigured service area designated as LA-12 and including 10 of Louisiana's 64 parishes. In 2011 SLLS successfully competed for the additional service area designated LA-1, which had been served by the former LSC grantee Capital Area Legal Services Corporation (CALSC) for over 30 years. The LA-1 service area contained 12 parishes. The newly configured service area is designated LA-13.

service includes 22 of Louisiana's 64 parishes. According to the U.S. Census, the service area contains a total population of 2,340,755 and a poverty population of 424,096 persons--18.12% of the area's total population and one-half the state's poor persons.

Thirteen of the service area's 22 parishes² form a hurricane impact region that recently experienced the largest population displacement in the United States since the Dust Bowl.³ Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and most of the SLLS service area on August 29, 2005 with 145 mph winds. Eighty percent of New Orleans flooded after passage of the hurricane and six of the service area's 10 parishes were devastated. Katrina was the most destructive and costliest natural disaster in the history of the nation. Less than a month after Katrina, the area was hit by Hurricane Rita and portions of SLLS service area were again flooded. Three years later, while the Katrina/Rita clean up was still ongoing, Louisiana was again hit with back-to-back storms in the form of Hurricanes Gustav and Ike.

As if natural disasters were not enough for the Louisiana Gulf Coast, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill (the BP oil spill) began on April 20, 2010 and ended five months later. This man-made disaster compelled SLLS to join with other LSC and non-LSC funded civil legal aid providers in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida to respond to the legal needs of low income residents affected by the economic dislocations caused by the spill.

These disasters left thousands of abandoned homes, commercial and institutional buildings, altered the demographics, and caused or exacerbated enormous economic dislocations that were, in turn, further complicated by the 2008 great recession that has only recently been abated.

Through all of these disasters, SLLS demonstrated a resilience, steadfastness, and perseverance that were noted by the equal justice, civil legal aid, law schools, bar associations, and other legal communities throughout the nation.

SUMMARY of FINDINGS

SLLS is currently led by an executive director and a deputy director who assumed their current positions in May 2014, following an intentional executive leadership transition and succession process. The mission, vision, and core values of the program are known and shared by board, staff, and key external partners. They all express great confidence in the executive and deputy directors and the other program management and administrative staff.

Since 2013, the board of directors has overseen a remarkable strategic planning process that has resulted in written reports and frameworks for several aspects of the program's operation, including resource development, technology, intake, legal work, and professional development.

² Assumption, Jefferson, Lafourche, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. James, St. John, St. Tammany, Tangipahoa, Terrebonne, and Washington.

³See special report by Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, Poverty in Southeast Louisiana Post-Katrina by Allison Plyer and Elaine Ortiz (June 2012).

The overall process was appropriately led by the current executive and deputy directors and the program's previous executive leadership. There was significant staff involvement.

The SLLS leadership, board, and staff are keenly aware that the next steps in the program's planning process include memorializing the emerging strategic goals, objectives, desired outcomes, and strategies in a comprehensive written product, and the development of a written plan of implementation with concrete action steps, timelines, and benchmarks to ensure that articulated goals, objectives, and desired outcomes are accomplished.

The program's legal work is done by specialized practice groups rather than a general practitioner approach, and is overseen by the practice group managing attorneys, the one directing attorney, the litigation director, the deputy director, as well as the executive director. SLLS's litigation and advocacy culture encourages very good brief and memorandum writing. The samples submitted by the program's advocates were of good quality and demonstrated solid communication, advocacy, and research skills.

SLLS's leadership and staff are thoroughly engaged with others in the service area and state whose activities have a significant effect on the low-income people such as the Louisiana Supreme Court, the Louisiana Bar Foundation, the Louisiana State Bar's Access to Justice Committee, law schools, government agencies, social service agencies, and other nonprofits.

The board of directors provides appropriate oversight, support and leadership. Members are committed to further strategic planning and implementation work. In addition, members acknowledge that resource development needs are an essential component of the strategic planning and that they, as a board, need to actively participate and support the program's efforts.

The program's delivery structure is coherent and the program is one of the essential anchors for the Louisiana state justice community.

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

PERFORMANCE AREA ONE. *Effectiveness in identifying the most pressing civil legal needs of low-income people in the service area and targeting resources to address those needs.*

Periodic legal needs assessment

Finding 1: SLLS last completed a comprehensive needs assessment in 2007. A new assessment will be completed by the end of 2015.

SLLS's last legal needs assessment was completed in 2007. The program relied on telephonic, in-person, and written survey responses from present and former clients, social services organizations, the courts, other legal services providers, the private bar, the program's board and staff. The survey instrument asked respondents to rank 58 civil legal problems in terms of how important it is for the program to handle cases related to each problem, how frequently respondents have encountered each problem, and the severity of problems encountered.

A new comprehensive needs assessment will be concluded by the end of 2015 and will be informed to a significant extent by the strategic planning process. Among other things, SLLS plans to use written surveys, focus groups, SurveyMonkey, the latest demographics and employment data for the service area, and the most recent data from the program's case management system.

Recommendation I.1.1.1.⁴ *The final report on the comprehensive needs assessment that is being conducted should highlight important pressing problem areas that will not be directly addressed by SLLS because of resources or other limitations. And, to the extent that it is known, the needs assessment report should identify the partners committed to filling in the gaps and/or the partners that are better situated to address the identified unmet needs.*

Recommendation I.1.1.2. *SLLS should consider using GIS mapping as an additional data source and tool for the comprehensive needs assessment.*

Recommendation I.1.1.3. *Following completion of the needs assessments, SLLS should share the findings from the assessment with its strategic partners for their information and appropriate comments.*

Setting goals and objectives, developing strategies and allocating resources

Finding 2: SLLS is engaged in an ongoing strategic planning process to develop a roadmap for addressing the most critical legal needs of the service area and establishing the priorities that will guide the program's advocacy and legal representation.

The SLLS board of directors has continuously reaffirmed the broad set of priorities first adopted by the board in 2007.⁵ The list of priorities are sufficiently broad to address the basic needs of

⁴ In this report, recommendations are numbered as follows: The Roman numeral references the Performance Area followed by the Criterion number, the finding number, and lastly the recommendation number that pertains to the particular finding. There are two levels of recommendations in this report. Recommendations that are indicated with an asterisk are Tier One recommendations and are intended to have a direct and major impact on program quality. In SLLS's 2017 grant renewal and/or competitive grant application, the program will be required to report what actions or activities, if any, SLLS has undertaken in response to Tier One Recommendations instead of submitting a full grant renewal or competitive grant application narrative.

⁵ The broad priorities adopted by the SLLS board following the 2007 needs assessment are:

1. Helping low income people have a decent place to live and protect their housing rights.
2. Obtaining safety and stability for children, parents and families.
3. Maintaining/enhancing economic stability, including protecting the income, assets or rights of low income consumers.
4. Helping low income people gain access to health care and education.
5. Addressing the needs of populations with special vulnerabilities, including the elderly, the homeless, people with disabilities, people not fluent in English and victims of disasters.
6. Increasing the availability of legal resources and services to the low income and improving access to courts, other legal forums and government programs.
7. Providing advice, brief services, community legal education and information about self-representation.
8. Providing other services to meet obligations of non-LSC grants/contracts or that are available from volunteers and other provider

safety, health, shelter, food, education, and work of the service area's low-income residents within the constraints of the program's financial and staffed resources. The priorities are implemented through case acceptance guidelines that, among other things, take into consideration the gap between the pressing needs of the low-income population and program's resources. New and updated priorities will be adopted upon completion of the current needs assessment.

In 2013, SLLS launched a strategic planning process that coincided with the board of directors' succession planning for program's next executive director. The board considered 2013 a time of great change and opportunity for the program to undertake a comprehensive strategic planning process to, among other things, strengthen legal work and advocacy, streamline and enhance intake, support professional development and leadership opportunities among staff, update technology, and grow the resources required to carry out the program's mission. In addition, the SLLS board understands that strategic planning is also a process that helps the program's key partners better understand SLLS's new direction, how it plans to get there, and how both SLLS and they will know when the strategic goals, objectives, and outcomes have been achieved.

The SLLS board retained John A. Tull & Associates, a nationally known consulting firm, to assist with the strategic planning process. Working with the consultant, SLLS formed various board/management/staff strategic planning subcommittees or working groups that were charged with conducting the exploratory work and making recommendations for certain discrete components of the process, including fundraising/resource development, intake, legal work, professional development, and technology. By the time of the on-site visit, all of the working groups had presented written reports to the board of directors that had been approved for inclusion in a final strategic plan document that will be finalized in early 2016.

SLLS has built a sound foundation in its strategic planning work thus far. The program's leadership, board, and staff should note, however, that the implementation process will, by necessity, be more time consuming and resource intensive than the original strategic planning process.

Recommendation 1.2.2.1.* *By mid-2016 SLLS should fully complete the first round of its strategic planning to ensure the continued growth, stability, and viability of the program as a responsive and valued legal institution in the service area and state.*

Recommendation 1.2.2.2. *As an integral part of its ongoing strategic planning, SLLS should continue to evaluate and adjust its detailed case acceptance guidelines to ensure effective implementation of the program's priorities, taking into consideration the gap between community needs and the program's resources.⁶*

⁶ In its comments on the draft of this report, SLLS stated that it developed "revised, detailed case acceptance guidelines after the 2013-2014 strategic planning" and that the guidelines are revised on an ongoing basis. SLLS cited the example of its family law guidelines, which were "updated as recently as March 2015 in response to changes in divorce laws for victims of domestic violence."

Recommendation I.2.2.3. *After completion of the ongoing comprehensive needs assessment, SLLS should adopt new priorities, if warranted by the assessment's results, and widely publicize the program's adopted priorities and case acceptance guidelines to the various client communities, social service agencies, the judiciary, the bar associations, and appropriate government agencies.*

Recommendation I.2.2.4.* *In the context of strategic planning SLLS should develop implementation strategies for its adopted priorities that, in addition to goals and objectives, state measurable or verifiable outcomes for clients and client populations as a whole.*

Implementing, evaluating, and adjusting goals and strategies

Finding 3: SLLS's strategic planning envisions a dynamic process for implementing its priorities, for providing clear guidance to its advocates on addressing choices compelled by limited resources, and for evaluating the effectiveness of its delivery strategies.

To implement its adopted priorities, SLLS provides its advocates with case acceptance guidelines calculated to address the most pressing legal problems identified in the needs assessment.⁷ The restructuring of SLLS's approach to legal work and advocacy, wrought by the strategic planning process, is leading to clearer case acceptance guidelines as advocates and managers embrace the reality that today's demands for assistance far outstrip the program's staffing and fiscal resources, and that this likely will be the case tomorrow and the day after.

Recommendation I.3.3.1.* *After the strategic planning goals, objectives, and outcomes are compiled in a single document, SLLS should take the necessary steps to make the final strategic plan readily accessible to its key strategic partners, low-income persons and their representatives, the legal community, social services organizations, government agencies, and the general public, and to help guide the intake process.*

Recommendation I.4.3.1. *SLLS's internal evaluation of its organizational and legal advocacy goals, objectives and outcomes should include explicit comparisons of "the results actually achieved by the strategies employed with the outcomes originally intended" as a significant element of the program's self-evaluation process.*

PERFORMANCE AREA TWO. Effectiveness in engaging and serving the low-income population throughout the service area.

Dignity and sensitivity, including intake.

⁷ For example, under helping "low-income people have a decent place to live/protect housing rights," SLLS handles cases involving but not limited to landlord-tenant evictions, unlawful lockouts, predatory loans, home foreclosure, bankruptcy, subsidized housing terminations, housing discrimination disability or familial status, housing opportunities for the homeless, housing options for domestic violence victims and welfare-to-work clients, SSI and social security disability benefits for homeless persons, disaster recovery funds and related grant applications, home repairs, probate and successions, and boundary actions.

Finding 4: SLLS conducts its work in a manner that affirms and reinforces the dignity of its clients as well as applicants for the program’s services in general.

The team’s observations and interviews revealed that SLLS’s staff and board members respect the program’s clients, applicants for services, and the client populations and communities in general. They appear to treat all with dignity. Among judges, other state justice partners, community representatives, and board members, the program’s advocates receive high praise for their commitment to the low-income population. The program is viewed as continually striving to identify and implement the most effective and efficient ways to provide high quality services consistent with its goals and priorities, while operating with limited resources.

As a result of its ongoing strategic planning, SLLS is striving to refine its intake and case acceptance processes to provide prompt decisions. The program’s staff and managers all agreed that arriving at a prompt decision denying acceptance of the case, when resources are insufficient to help everyone, is in the long run more respectful of clients than a prolonged process ultimately resulting in a turndown.

Finding 5: In its six offices SLLS provides three types of intake—over the Internet, by telephone, or in person. Improving intake is an ongoing aspect of the program’s strategic planning.

Following a review of intake during the strategic planning process, SLLS decided to provide three types of intake at all six offices - in person, telephone, and over the Internet. The strategic planning staff subcommittee examined every facet of the program’s intake system, conducted a survey of applicants for services and the program’s clients, and reviewed intake systems of civil legal aid programs in other states.

To implement the new approaches to intake, SLLS developed a new intake manual to provide more uniformity throughout the program. The manual advises that “[t]o the extent possible SLLS will use a uniform procedure for intake” and that “[a]djustments may be made with the approval of the executive director when reasonable flexibility is necessary.” The team notes that the transition to new intake approaches is a work in progress. While, at present, each branch office and, in the case of New Orleans, each practice group continues to conduct its own intake, all applicants are generally screened within 48 hours of first contact for non-emergency matters and within 24 hours for emergency matters.

Staff enter an applicant’s screening and intake information directly into the case management system. If an applicant is determined to be financially eligible and within case priorities, they receive a substantive intake interview with an advocate in the appropriate practice group within five days, where the advocate provides advice or decides to accept the case for extended representation. In some cases, the advocate may confer with the practice group’s managing attorney prior to making the case acceptance decision. In some practice groups and offices, the managing attorney reviews the cases and makes the acceptance decision. And, in other instances, case acceptance meetings are held on cases that are not straightforward.

Walk-in applicants undergo intake screening at the time and are given an application form to complete. Information from the application is checked and put into the case management system. Throughout the program, walk-ins are generally screened at whatever office they come to and then transferred to the appropriate office or specialty unit. In New Orleans, most initial intake is done in person. There was an expression of concern by some staff that the wide-spread custom of walk-ins could discourage persons in neighborhoods not close to the office from seeking the program's services. The team considered this expressed concern in conjunction with the view also heard that accessing the program is difficult for potential clients.

In contrast to New Orleans, most intake screening in the Baton Rouge office is by telephone. In the other offices, most intake involves a mix of in-person and telephone screening. Applicants who call one office but live in the geographic area of another office are told to call the other office directly because SLLS lacks the capability to transfer calls between offices. SLLS has multiple telephone systems and providers. Each office has a separate telephone number, including a toll free number. The Baton Rouge office also has a separate intake number. There is some limited recorded information regarding the program on some of the program's telephone systems. For example, the New Orleans' message provides the office location and hours of operation/intake.

SLLS uses the callback system in its Prime case management system to track telephone callbacks. Off-site intake associated with special projects, such as the Delgado Community College Single Stop project, generally involves the collection of the data in hand-written form for entry into the case management system at a later time. SLLS also conducts off-site intake through various councils on aging and other social services agencies.

Significantly, SLLS's executive and deputy directors, staff, and board are committed to ongoing strategic planning in the area of intake, among others. The deputy director is charged with assisting the executive director with the implementation of all the program's strategic planning recommendations and other work plans, including intake. The directors' and board's willingness to continuously refine the program's intake system enhances the team's confidence that SLLS can be transformed into a more highly accessible and effective legal services program.

Finding 6: The program is planning to implement intake-related technology improvements as an essential element of strategic planning that should facilitate client engagement.

As noted above, the efficiency of the intake system is hampered by outdated technology. Telephone calls by applicants and clients to one office cannot be transferred to another office. SLLS has multiple telephone systems and providers and there is no unified Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) to facilitate communication between offices. There are no uniform messages on telephones to aid intake and/or provide general information about the program. Some advocates conducting intake off-site may not have ready access to the CMS on their laptops and may not be able to perform conflict checks in the field. The program does not use GIS mapping or other means to enhance client services and client and community engagement.

During 2015-2016, SLLS plans to make the following intake-related technology improvements and/or acquisitions:

1. Develop a statewide smart Internet application that will route users to the correct office of the correct service provider and have the application communicate with the statewide case management system.
2. Improve telephone intake by implementing retrieval of telephone messages via computer work stations.
3. Replace computers in two offices.
4. Abandon the thin clients system.
5. Implement universal accessibility of user's work documents.
6. Review existing websites (program website, mobile website, lawhelp website and pro bono. net) and redesign all or some sites as warranted.

Recommendation II.1.5.1.* *Within the context of its ongoing strategic planning and implementation, SLLS should continue to evaluate its intake system to promote uniformity and consistency across the program's six offices.*

Recommendation II.1.5.2. *To help facilitate the continuous evaluation and refinement of its intake system, SLLS should consider designating a leader of an intake work group. The SLLS deputy director should oversee any intake work group and intake improvement efforts throughout the program.*

Recommendation II.1.5.3. *SLLS intake staff should meet periodically to discuss intake practices and issues, and to serve in an advisory capacity to the staff person designated to oversee intake program-wide.*

Recommendation II.1.5.4*. *SLLS should explore ways to direct more of its intake to a telephone system for determining eligibility and case screening. All appropriate steps should be taken to minimize the number of applicants required to walk in to offices for routine intake.*

Recommendation II.1.5.5.* *As resources permit, SLLS should take all necessary steps to upgrade its technology to support the smooth and seamless operation of intake throughout the program.*

Recommendation II.1.5.6.* *SLLS should publicize its online intake option so as to provide more access to applicants and to streamline its intake system.*

Recommendation II.1.6.1. *SLLS should explore replacing its phone system with a unified VOIP telephone system that would better connect each office and allow better distribution of intakes throughout the program. This is particularly important now, where smaller offices do the intake for particularly areas of law and transfer the cases to a larger office.*

Engagement with, access and utilization by the low-income population

Finding 7: SLLS is striving to engage effectively with the populations and communities eligible for its services.

SLLS is well-known in communities throughout the service area. Community organizations and groups, social service agency personnel, domestic violence shelters, and state and local governments view the program as an important and critical resource for low-income persons. As part of its strategic planning, and in the context of funding and staffing constraints, SLLS evaluated its outreach and engagement with the populations and communities in the service area. Reluctantly the program concluded that some outreach centers in the New Orleans area could no longer be maintained. Also, staffing reductions over the last two years have resulted in less robust outreach throughout the service area generally. Nevertheless, the team found that significant outreach and community education efforts are continuing, albeit on a smaller scale.

The program is engaged in numerous community partnerships and collaboratives. For example, SLLS has a veterans' services partnership with community organizations where veterans receive advice and representation regarding landlord and tenant, housing discrimination, and benefits problems.

Under a grant from Single Stop, SLLS operates outreach sites at Delgado Community College (New Orleans) and Baton Rouge Community College Rouge to assist students with legal problems that could impede completion of their education or adversely affect their future employment. Legal assistance includes, but is not limited to expungement of criminal convictions, housing problems, and family law matters.

Outreach is conducted at the Housing Authority of New Orleans two days per month. SLLS also collaborates with Unity of Greater New Orleans to serve homeless persons at shelters. Two SLLS attorneys are embedded in the Family Justice Center (FJC) in New Orleans, which serves domestic violence victims by providing access to a comprehensive set of service providers (legal, law enforcement, housing, counseling) at a single location. SLLS reaches new clients through the FJC-based intake and related outreach events.

Partnerships with Mississippi Center for Justice, the Louisiana Civil Justice Center, and the New Orleans-based Pro Bono Project and others are still in place and continue to provide services to victims of the BP oil spill.

Recommendation II.2.7.1. *SLLS is encouraged to continue its efforts, through outreach and other means, to disseminate legal information aimed at those low-income persons who are most isolated or vulnerable or who have been disproportionately underserved.*

Language Access and Cultural Competency

Finding 8: SLLS makes an effort to serve populations with limited English proficiency in a culturally competent manner. Funding cuts and loss of staff have hampered some efforts to engage with the Hispanic community.

The most common languages spoken in the service area, other than English, are Spanish and Vietnamese. In addition, the program reports that many older residents of Isle de Jean Charles, a

narrow ridge of land situated in Terrebonne Parish, speak only Cajun French. SLLS received a new grant from the Greater New Orleans Foundation to serve this area.

SLLS makes an effort to provide services in languages other than English. It has a succinct written LEP policy that addresses how the program will serve persons who are isolated by language, disability, or geography. However, the policy does not include elements such as staff training, or identification of a single individual to be the “point person” on language access issues. SLLS also subscribes to Language Line, although not all intake staff appeared to be aware of this resource. Some staff reported using Catholic Charities interpreters as needed. The program does not post language identification posters or similar materials in reception areas. The SLLS website includes some information in Spanish, and the program has developed multi-lingual resources for the statewide Louisiana LawHelp website, including Spanish and Vietnamese resources.

SLLS staff is reasonably diverse. At the time of the visit, the Hammond, Houma, and Harvey offices did not have Spanish-speaking staff. The Baton Rouge and Covington offices each had one Spanish-speaking staff and New Orleans had three. Overall, there does not appear to be a sufficiently proactive effort of engagement with the Hispanic community. The team was told that funding cuts and staff reductions adversely impacted the program’s efforts in this area. The program relies on Catholic Charities interpreters as needed. A paralegal in the New Orleans office is a native Vietnamese speaker who interprets as needed for other staff, and also engages in significant outreach activities to the Vietnamese community.⁸

Recommendation II.3.8.1. *SLLS is encouraged to review LSC’s language access resources available on LRI, including the 2004 Program Letter, “Guidance to LSC Programs for Serving Client Eligible Individuals with Limited English Capacity,” the language access checklist for legal aid organizations, and links to self-assessment tools, and to use those resources as a guide for revising its own policies.*

Recommendation II.3.8.2. *SLLS should ensure that all of its informational and community education materials are available in English and Spanish.*

Recommendation II.3.8.3. *SLLS should display language identification posters or similar materials in the reception area of all offices.*

Recommendation II.3.8.4.* *SLLS should ensure that all intake staff are aware of and know how to access Language Line, to which the program should continue to subscribe.*

⁸ She attends twice monthly programs at a senior center for Vietnamese elders on the Westbank; conducts an outreach at a Westbank shopping center; writes an article twice a month for a Vietnamese newspaper; and conducts some fundraising events in the Vietnamese community. She conducted a substantial number of outreach events to the Vietnamese community following Hurricane Katrina, during implementation of the Road Home program, and in the aftermath of the BP oil spill.

Office Locations, Access, and Conditions

Findings 9: SLLS's offices are strategically located to encourage access and utilization by low-income persons throughout the service area.

SLLS operates six staffed offices: Baton Rouge, Covington, Hammond, Harvey, Houma, and New Orleans. The offices are located in population centers near available transportation routes and near courts. They are well-maintained and professional in appearance, and exterior signage is clear. All offices provide meeting space that is accessible to persons with disabilities.

The team noticed that offices varied in the amount of reading material or other legal and resource information available for people waiting in reception areas. In addition, with the exception of some books in New Orleans, the team did not uniformly observe age appropriate items for children in reception areas.

While there is uniform agreement that the geographic locations of SLLS offices are reasonable and strategic, the team heard a number of observations from staff and others that the program's clients are concentrated in the parishes where offices are located. The team is not aware of the program having systematically examined the distribution of cases by parish and proximity to the offices.

Recommendation II.3.9.1. *SLLS should ensure that the content and quantity of materials available for applicants and clients in the program's reception areas include toys and child appropriate books for children who are waiting with their parents and custodians.*

Recommendation II.3.9.2. *SLLS should use GIS mapping or some other means to assess whether the services provided by the program, and particularly its branch offices, are fairly accessible to the client eligible population throughout the service area. To the extent there is a significant disparity in the services provided to persons within close geographic proximity to offices and persons residing distant from the offices, then SLLS should explore strategies to address such disparity.*

PERFORMANCE AREA THREE. *Effectiveness of legal representation and other program activities intended to benefit the low-income population in its service area.*

Legal Representation

Finding 10: SLLS employs a high-quality advocate staff with significant experience and expertise to implement the goals, objectives, and strategies adopted for the program's legal work.

SLLS's diverse staff possesses the experience and expertise to effectively carry out the program's work. Experience levels among attorneys range from one to thirty-eight years. The seasoned group of managing and directing attorneys has an average of 21 years of experience in the legal profession and an average of 11 years with SLLS. All but three of the managers are

women; ten are black; and six are white. The 27 staff attorneys have an average of 11 years of experience in the legal profession and an average of nearly six years with SLLS. Twenty-two (81%) are white; four are black; and one is Hispanic. Two-thirds are women.

Several staff members who are specialists have reputations for significant expertise in their specialties. For example, the director of litigation has a national reputation as a leader in Medicaid law and public benefits generally, and civil procedure. SLLS's advocates received high praise from judges, state justice partners and community organizations across the service area. The program has a strong reputation for the dedication, creativity, and diligence of its staff, as well as, for its work in the areas of housing and domestic violence, where SLLS is regarded as a key partner and expert in the service area.

Finding 11: The managing attorneys, the directing attorney in the Baton Rouge office, and the program's deputy director, as well as the executive director, supervise the programs's legal work and advocacy.

Managing attorneys supervise staff attorneys, paralegals, and other clerical staff in either their practice group or their program office. While some attorneys are assigned to a single practice area, a few, particularly outside of New Orleans and Baton Rouge, are members of multiple practice groups. In some instances, funding sources determine attorneys' areas of focus, such as for Children in Need of Care (CINC) or those conducting foreclosure work.

There is no uniform guidance for managers on supervision of their case handlers' legal work, and managers' practices vary. Some offices have periodic meetings to discuss significant cases, and in others, supervisors conduct periodic case reviews or review the case management system to gauge staff performance and workload. Several managing attorneys do not engage in any formal case review or casework oversight other than open-door discussions with their staff on cases. Despite few written supervision guidelines for the practice group managing attorneys, the program adheres to practices and procedures that produce effective and high quality advocacy and representation of clients.

There is no formal set of procedures for orienting⁹ and mentoring new attorneys. Managing attorneys typically assess the needs of new hires and proceed accordingly. Managing attorneys are expected to, and do, help their new attorneys and make themselves available to answer questions and discuss challenging issues when they arise. The team was told of junior attorneys being afforded the opportunity to sit in on trials, as well. Most junior attorneys and attorneys new to particular specialty areas reported feeling supported in their work and generally found their managers to be accessible and knowledgeable.

⁹ In its comments on the draft of this report, SLLS explained that "All new attorneys are provided with information at the outset of employment regarding program policies, manuals, and LSC regulations. An LSC TIG grant has allowed SLLS to create orientation resources which can be accessed online at any time for employees, volunteer law students, and pro bono attorneys. An in person orientation with the Director is usually scheduled within 30 days of employment for new staff."

The program has an advocacy manual that is based on the ABA Standards and that provides appropriate guidance for case handling. It does not, however, address appropriate supervisory oversight procedures. The team was advised that the advocacy manual is under review and that new sections are planned. While managing attorneys are typically experts in their subject matter areas, they are not necessarily experts in legal work management. Some of the newer managing attorneys expressed a desire for management training.

Formal evaluations do not occur on a consistent schedule across the program and some attorneys were not sure that a formal evaluation process existed. Some staff members were evaluated by the executive director in the fall of 2014, and others did not recall having an evaluation over the past one or two years. For those who received them, evaluations consisted of a review of a random sample of cases,¹⁰ completion of a related form, and discussion with a supervising managing attorney, if appropriate.

Finding 12: The executive director, the deputy director, and the director of litigation share oversight responsibility over the advocacy and legal supervision work of the the program’s managing attorneys, the directing attorney, and substantive law practice group leaders.

The executive director oversees the work of the deputy director, the litigation director, the directing attorney of the Baton Rouge office, and the managing attorneys in the New Orleans office. The deputy director is responsible for supervising the program’s managing attorneys except those for whom the litigation director is the designated supervisor, which designation is made either by the executive director or the management committee of the board. At the time of the visit, the litigation director was the designated supervisor for three managing attorneys in the New Orleans office—those leading the foreclosure, public benefits, and homeless practice groups. The directing attorney supervises the Baton Rouge managing attorneys as well as the staff attorneys in that office.

At the time of the visit, SLLS had just begun to develop written policies and procedures to gauge the effectiveness of the directors and managers’ supervisory work as well as the effectiveness of the legal work and advocacy they undertake. The litigation director is in the process of revising the program’s advocacy manual to memorialize the supervisory policies and procedures that are adopted.

Even though there was no formal written supervisory guidance for directors and managers, we note that the on-site visit did not reveal, and we did not hear of any instances of actual lapses. Nonetheless, the lack of written standards for legal work supervision is a notable weakness, albeit the program is in the process of fixing it.

¹⁰ SLLS’s comments on the draft of this report explain that “Managers review at least 10 files for a substantive review of the quantity and quality of staff performance—5 randomly selected by the computer and 5 selected by the staff member.”

Quantity of Legal Work

Finding 13: The overall quantity of SLLS’s legal work is in line with the national median for LSC grantees, and the program continues to excel at providing a significant amount of extended service representation.

SLLS closed 7,263 LSC eligible cases in 2014, representing approximately 173 cases per 10,000 poor persons. Though in line with the national median of 172 cases per 10,000 poor persons, the 2014 figure reflects a 13.7% decline for SLLS from 2013 and marks the end of an upward trend in cases closed since the 2011 merger of LA-12 and LA-1. SLLS’s reductions in staffing and funding over the past two years contributed to this decline. Despite a smaller staff, SLLS has maintained its commitment to extended representation, which is evidenced by its 2014 case data. In 2014, SLLS closed 73 extended representation cases per 10,000 poor persons, significantly surpassing the national median of 39 cases. Moreover, an impressive 42% of its 2014 cases involved extended work, which markedly exceeded the national average of 23.7%. Since the 2011 merger, SLLS has exceeded the national average each year for the portion of extended cases closed.

In 2014, SLLS closed the most cases in the areas of family law (42.0%), housing (16.6%), income maintenance (11.2%), and consumer/finance (11.1%).

Quality of Legal Work

Finding 14: SLLS’s advocates perform high-quality legal work, with an emphasis on extended representation.

SLLS has a reputation for zealous and significant representation that it is striving to maintain in the face of funding cuts from several different sources and a transition in leadership. Judges and fellow professionals that the team interviewed praised SLLS’s advocates for their preparation, respect for clients and persistence. One judge indicated that the advocates he encounters are “uniformly excellent” compared with other attorneys in all respects, from development of their cases to their written work and oral presentations. Another commended two SLLS attorneys for being among the few using the Louisiana Post Separation Family Violence Relief Act to obtain comprehensive relief for their clients who are victims of domestic violence. Similarly, an attorney who frequently works with SLLS staff described the program’s work for domestic violence victims as “outstanding.”

The writing samples submitted to the team were generally clear and well-written. They reflected the program’s advocacy on a range of priority areas and in a diversity of venues, including justices of the peace, local and state courts, and administrative entities, such as the Deepwater Horizon Economic Claims Center established after the 2010 BP Oil Spill in the Gulf Coast region. While some writing samples were routine pleadings or simple memoranda, several that represented particularly outstanding work included creative arguments, addressed complex legal issues, and demonstrated the potential to favorably impact other cases.

Finding 15: SLLS advocates, led by the director of litigation, are encouraged to engage in big-picture, creative thinking about systemic challenges facing their clients, and staff attorneys are eager to participate in this type of work.

Impact advocacy continues to be a strength and priority for SLLS, reflecting the program's commitment to identifying broad-based solutions to the challenges facing its client population. As noted above, SLLS has a portfolio of impact cases that surpasses that of most LSC-funded grantees. Interviews and materials reviewed in connection with the team's visit supported this. For example, in 2013, SLLS won an appeal to the Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit on abstention issues related to a Medicaid termination. As a result of this decision, the Fifth Circuit joined other circuits in holding that federal--not just state--courts can enforce Medicaid's eligibility provisions. This established favorable precedent (on which SLLS has since relied) related to the state's duties when reviewing an applicant's eligibility for benefits. In addition, several state appellate cases have successfully challenged improper eviction standards by public housing and subsidized housing authorities, and SLLS's advocacy before courts and administrative agencies has resulted in revisions to improper practices and procedures that have limited clients' rights to public benefits, including food stamps, Medicaid, and unemployment compensation.

Notably, SLLS is actively involved in advocating for the right of litigants to secure *in forma pauperis* status and to protect the rights of *in forma pauperis* litigants to obtain judgments in their cases without paying court fees. In several instances, SLLS has succeeded in changing improper practices by working directly with courts and clerks' offices, and the program is considering filing litigation to challenge practices in venues where these obstacles remain. The family law practice group's 2015 advocacy plan includes a focus on *in forma pauperis* issues.

SLLS's impact and systemic advocacy work is coordinated and largely conducted by the director of litigation, whose written job description includes responsibility for initiating and overseeing development of the program's "major/complex litigation and law reform advocacy." He reviews all appeals, directs litigation, and supports attorneys on their work in this area. The director of litigation does excellent impact work and is widely regarded by other SLLS attorneys as a valuable resource. There do not appear to be many other managers or experienced attorneys who are consistently engaged in impact work or in mentoring or assisting less experienced attorneys. Interviews revealed that there is interest among staff attorneys in pursuing work that has a broader impact. Some have been able to identify such opportunities on their own and have worked with the director of litigation to develop their initiatives, while serving in a supporting role. However, presently, very few staff attorneys throughout the program are actively involved in such advocacy.

Through its strategic planning process, SLLS recently established practice area groups that operate program-wide: children in need of care (CINC), consumer/bankruptcy, education, employment/unemployment benefits, family, foreclosure, landlord-tenant, public benefits, successions/wills/powers of attorney, and taxation. The groups are designed, in part, to identify

systemic issues the program can address.¹¹ The practice groups provide a collaborative forum for subject-matter specialists and offer informal training opportunities. Some of the groups appear to be quite active. In others, the director of litigation seems to be providing the primary energy and direction. Due to the varying size of branch offices, some offices are not represented in particular practice groups. A few advocates in smaller branch offices are in as many as three or four practice groups.

Training and support for legal work

Finding 16: SLLS provides its advocates adequate opportunities for substantive training, including through its newly developed practice area groups.

Advocate staff members interviewed by the team indicated that they receive training in various ways. They attend the annual statewide conference, and many have pursued relevant CLE training. Others have been sent to relevant training regionally or nationally, including MIE trainings for management skills and NCLC Fair Debt Collection Practices training in Washington DC.

The practice area groups develop annual work plans to guide their work. They meet periodically and can communicate regularly through listservs designated for each group. Staff have responded positively to this new tool and reported to the team that it has helped foster inter-office communication and facilitate the sharing of expertise across program offices. The level of activity varies by group. Each group decides how frequently to meet and has varying degrees of formality and structure. For example, bankruptcy/consumer and housing meet twice a month, while the family law group meets four times a year.

The director of litigation uses the meetings and the listservs as opportunities for training when new topics or legal developments arise. Most practice area groups have not yet started using the listservs for seeking and giving feedback in individual cases, however members of some groups mentioned that they discuss particularly challenging or novel case issues during their meetings.

All advocates have access to computer-assisted research through Lexis to appropriate legal manuals and law library resources, and to hard copy research resources, including the Louisiana Legal Services and Pro Bono Desk Manual. The program's intranet has pleadings and other resources for case handlers. The executive director and the litigation director review the materials before they are added to the intranet.

Recommendation III.1.11.1.* SLLS should develop written legal work/advocacy supervision standards that go beyond the guidance contained in the program's current advocacy manual. The recommended standards should ensure adequate initial and ongoing supervision and training to maintain and enhance effective advocacy skills and practices.

¹¹ We note that legal work and advocacy in SLLS's New Orleans office has always been organized by specialty units.

Recommendation III.1.11.2. *SLLS should implement more robust yearly advocate performance evaluations that address topics beyond case review. Written evaluations have the advantage of providing managers the opportunity to address issues that they might otherwise avoid; they also provide documentation of performance challenges that warrant monitoring throughout the year. Evaluations also can provide the opportunity for a manager and a case handler to craft a professional development plan for the coming year, and, on a larger scale, help the program identify areas for additional staff training.*

Recommendation III.1.11.3. *SLLS should continue to actively promote its organizational culture that emphasizes systemic and impact work. The program's executive and advocacy leadership should emphasize that such work is essential to the program's mission and that actively participating in practice groups and working to develop and implement advocacy plans is the responsibility of all case handlers. Mentoring, co-counseling and other opportunities for less experienced advocates should be part of this effort.*

Private Attorney Involvement

Finding 17: SLLS uses a range of approaches to involve private attorneys in its work.

SLLS has a private attorney involvement (PAI) plan that sets forth the various mechanisms for involving private attorneys in its work. The plan was circulated to bar associations in the service area, but no comments were received. Overall oversight of the program's PAI efforts is the responsibility of the deputy director.

SLLS involves private attorneys and law students in its work in a variety of ways, including through subgrants in New Orleans and Baton Rouge, referrals to the Louis A. Martinet Society in Baton Rouge, an in-house pro bono project, in-house and external reduced fee arrangements, a new incubator project for newly-licensed attorneys, a tax panel, and in-house volunteer opportunities for law students.

SLLS subgrants to the Pro Bono Project in New Orleans (covering Orleans, Jefferson, and St. Bernard Parishes) and to the Baton Rouge Bar Foundation (covering East and West Baton Rouge and Livingston and Ascension Parishes). SLLS performs the intake screening and transfers appropriate cases to the subgrantees. The Pro Bono Project accepts referrals of uncontested divorces and some Child in Need of Care (CINC) cases and conducts legal education clinics on successions, wills, and powers of attorney. The Pro Bono Project also hosts a weekly successions clinic at SLLS's New Orleans office to help clear up titles. The Baton Rouge Bar Foundation accepts a full range of cases within SLLS's priorities. Subgrantees are responsible for recruiting, supporting, and recognizing participating attorneys, and for following up on cases. Both subgrants appear to be operating smoothly and effectively. SLLS attorneys serve on the boards of both organizations.

SLLS also maintains an in-house pro bono project operated out of the Covington office that serves the 22nd Judicial District (St. Tammany and Washington Parishes). An experienced staff attorney with strong connections to the local legal community staffs the project. She recruits volunteers, matches clients who have been screened for eligibility and merit with volunteer

attorneys, and provides support to those attorneys. That support includes sample pleadings, research and practice materials, and an office to meet with clients. SLLS recognizes the participating attorneys at bar events and in publications. It should be noted that at the time of the 2010 PQV, SLLS was trying to expand the types of cases referred beyond uncontested divorces. In 2010, there was also a waiting list for those services. Since that visit, the waiting list has been eliminated and the types of cases that can be referred to the private bar have broadened considerably. Some clients needing a divorce are represented by private attorneys under SLLS's compensated PAI (reduced fee) system.

The Martinet Law Society in Baton Rouge is working with SLLS and the Baton Rouge Bar Foundation to encourage pro bono by its members. SLLS staff members refer eligible clients to the president of the Martinet Society, who identifies a volunteer attorney to take the case. Volunteers take referrals for contested custody, bankruptcy, and expungement cases and are open to other areas, as well. Martinet attorneys will also take cases located outside of the Baton Rouge Bar Foundation's service area, allowing SLLS to expand its reach into additional parishes.

In addition to pro bono arrangements, SLLS also relies on compensated PAI (reduced fee) panels for family law conflicts. SLLS pays a few private attorneys a reduced rate of \$25-50/hour. Contract attorneys also work in some SLLS offices at a reduced hourly rate, handling family law cases and conducting intake. SLLS, in collaboration with the Family Justice Center in New Orleans and the Louisiana Civil Justice Center, works with attorneys in a new incubator program, Legal Innovators for Tomorrow (LIFT), for newly licensed attorneys in solo or small practice. Through this two-year pilot project SLLS mentors and trains the attorneys to handle family violence cases on a pro bono basis. The project started in December 2014 and helps address a lack of attorneys equipped to handle family violence matters in New Orleans. At the time of the team's visit, four LIFT attorneys were participating in the program.

SLLS collaborates with partners to run self-help desks in a number of parishes. For example, the program operates a Self-Help Desk in rural Washington Parish. In addition, SLLS collaborates with the court run self-help desk in Baton Rouge and often helps staff it.”

The executive director, deputy director, Covington pro bono coordinator, and several other attorneys in the program are active in state and local bar associations, and specialty bars; some hold leadership positions (e.g., one Baton Rouge attorney is vice-president of Baton Rouge's Martinet Society and the Covington pro bono coordinator is vice-president of the Slidell Bar Association). SLLS pays local bar dues for attorneys to encourage their participation. This involvement raises the profile of the program in the legal community and can encourage pro bono involvement.

SLLS also involves law students in its work by providing in-house opportunities such as assistance on cases or work on specific projects under the supervision of program attorneys. Students volunteer during vacations, or throughout the year. Responsibilities for coordinating volunteers are handled by a staff attorney in New Orleans. Law students are also used to provide LiveHelp assistance for the statewide website.

A new Louisiana Supreme Court Rule, adopted February 25, 2015 and effective in May 2015, is designed to encourage pro bono by awarding attorneys one hour of CLE credit for every five hours of pro bono representation performed through an organization designated in the rule, including SLLS. Attorneys may earn up to three hours of CLE credit each year.

In 2014, 867 (11.9%) of SLLS's closed cases involved private attorneys. The total number of closed PAI cases represents a slight decrease from 2013 (930 cases closed), but an increase in the portion of overall cases the program closed last year (10.9%). The program's 2014 performance amounted to 21 PAI cases per 10,000 poor persons and exceeded the national median of 16 cases per poor persons. Consistent with its performance for overall cases closed in 2014, SLLS's extended representation PAI cases--16 per 10,000 poor persons--surpassed the national median in this category of 6 cases per 10,000 poor persons. The percentage of family law handled by private attorneys in 2014 (65.7%), while still high, reflects a continuing decline in such cases since 2012.

Other services and activities to and on behalf of the eligible client population

Finding: 18 The program's staff members are engaged and connected to the low-income community throughout their service area through collaborations with community organizations, libraries, social services agencies, and service on task forces and committees.

SLLS provides community legal education and trainings throughout the service area, often at the request of community organizations and agencies. Staff have also conducted training sessions for judges and presented at the annual statewide access to justice conference.

Trainings have covered landlord-tenant laws, Section 8 housing issues, and new legal developments in the state.

In addition to the self-help desks described above, SLLS coordinates with partner organizations to sponsor community education events in locations where potential clients congregate, including senior centers, libraries, and in the case of the Vietnamese community, at a local shopping center. SLLS staff members have presented at the state librarians' conference, as well.

The state's louisianalawhelp.org website has excellent community education and self-help materials. SLLS employs the statewide website coordinator and plays a leadership role in contributing to and managing the site. The site offers videos and other multimedia materials that explain legal issues in plain language. There are self-help materials, including A2J and other automated documents that visitors can use to create letters and forms. The statewide website is optimized for mobile devices and is also available as a mirrored Spanish language site.

SLLS attorneys are further involved in their communities through service on substantive law and policy-related committees. At the parish level, for example, one attorney participates on a domestic liaison committee, where judges, lawyers, hearing officers and others meet on a quarterly basis to discuss family law practice and client service in the parish. SLLS attorneys are engaged at the state and national level, as well. Program attorneys serve on state bar association diversity and access to justice committees and the ABA's disaster relief committee. The

statewide website coordinator is also involved with a variety of self-represented litigant (SRL) groups, including the Louisiana District Judges Association’s SRL Committee, and the state bar association’s Access to Justice Technology and SRL Committees.

Recommendation III.3.18.1. *In order to expand the audience for the statewide website, intake staff members and attorneys should be reminded of this resource and encouraged to refer applicants and clients to the website.*

PERFORMANCE AREA FOUR. *Effectiveness of governance, leadership, and administration.*

Board Governance

Finding 19: The SLLS board of directors provides appropriate oversight and shares the mission of the program.

SLLS is governed by an 18-member board of directors composed of 12 attorneys and six client members. The size of the board was increased from 15 to 18 members following SLLS’s assumption of the enlarged service area. Expansion of the board was accomplished smoothly and the current members are diverse in terms of race and gender.

There is no limitation on the number of terms board members can serve.¹² A core group of members are highly engaged in their roles, deeply committed to the organization and well informed about the work of the organization. Overall, board meeting attendance is good and attorney members generally travel to meetings, which alternate between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. A quorum of members has attended each scheduled board meeting within the last 24 months. While client members who attend meetings are active participants, client members in general are less likely to attend in person meetings that are not near where they live.¹³ In addition, we were informed that, in recent years, SLLS has had difficulty getting designated community organizations to appoint client board members and difficulty attracting some attorneys with certain experiences and contacts.

The minutes of full board and committee meetings reflect appropriate oversight and engagement. The board plans to evaluate the executive director annually. The executive director and deputy attend all board meetings and make regular reports. Monthly financial reports are provided to the board treasurer and quarterly financial reports are provided to the board as a whole. The board has a finance and audit committee, as well as personnel, client grievance, and nominating committees. A few board members have some significant experience with finance matters and

¹² There appears to be a de facto limitation on the term of some client members. The SLLS bylaws state: “Upon the expiration of a term for a client board member from Orleans, Jefferson, St. Bernard, Plaquemines or St. Charles Parish, the board will review whether the vacancy should be refilled by the appointing organization or if a different organization should be selected. *Selecting a different organization pursuant to this part does not constitute a change to the bylaws of the organization.* (emphasis added).

¹³ SLLS’s comments on the draft of this report explain that board members may also attend meetings by telephone or by proxy.

use their expertise. The board is beginning to develop its own fundraising role. The bylaws contain a policy on conflicts of interest.

It does not appear that the board provides time for reports at meetings from the director of litigation or other advocates on an interesting project or cases.

Recommendation IV.1.19.1.* *The board should obtain appropriate training regarding leadership succession that should include a leadership development and succession planning process for major leadership positions in program and in the board. SLLS should develop a leadership succession plan for the board.*

Recommendation IV.1.19.2. *Board members should become actively engaged in resource development for the program through, among other things, personal contributions, solicitation of contributions from their colleagues, and using their relationships with businesses and philanthropic organizations within and beyond the state of Louisiana.*

Recommendation IV.1.19.3. *With assistance from the executive and deputy directors, the board should explore appropriate ways to obtain the appointment of individuals with particular skills or experience to the SLLS board from the designated appointing organizations who have experience, skills, and contacts that could be useful to the program.¹⁴*

Recommendation IV.1.19.4. *The board should include in its regular agenda the receipt of reports from the program's director of litigation and other advocates regarding interesting, noteworthy, or innovative projects and cases.*

Leadership

Finding 20: SLLS has effective programmatic and managerial leadership in its executive and deputy directors.

In 2013, the SLLS board and the executive director at the time undertook a significant leadership search for a new executive director and deputy director.¹⁵ The transition to new leadership was

¹⁴ In a further section of this report below, the team urges SLLS to undertake a public relations/education campaign and a series of board appreciation events directed at the legal community to change the perception of the importance of SLLS board membership. The team shares the sentiment of the SLLS board and program leadership that membership on the SLLS board should be a coveted role in the legal community and that candidates should view such membership as an honor more than an obligation.

¹⁵ The high priority roles and responsibilities the board set for the next SLLS executive director included:

- To articulate a clear strategic vision for SLLS' future, including its legal work
- To safeguard its focus on clients
- To strengthen relationships throughout the community as the leader and public face of SLLS
- To implement the recommendations of the strategic planning process
- To develop leadership throughout SLLS
- To bring offices and staff together to a shared vision and full potential
- To develop and expand the resources of SLLS

accomplished smoothly in May 2014, when the current executive and deputy directors assumed leadership of the program. The on-site visit confirmed that they have the trust and respect of the staff and the board and have developed open communications and good working relationships within the organization as well as with other organizations and entities in the service area.

The new SLLS executive director has 28 years of experience in the legal profession and the deputy director has 21 years of experience. Both have significant civil legal aid experience. Their areas of responsibility and job duties provide a sound and reasonable division of labor. The executive director oversees the program's financial and administrative operations, grant writing, fundraising, resource development, media, strategic planning, regulatory compliance, and, in the broadest sense, oversees the program's advocacy and serves as the regional executive for the program's five south shore parishes served by the New Orleans office.

The deputy director is responsible for "managing attorney oversight and supervision of staff." In addition, she oversees the program's private attorney involvement efforts, including contracts with the area's pro bono programs, the program's internal pro bono project, and the program has compensated PAI (reduced fee) contracts. She serves on the management committee, "which is responsible for overseeing the general day-to-day operations of the [program] as well as engaging in long-range planning and firm development." The executive director and the deputy director share broad responsibility for oversight of the program's advocacy work and regulatory compliance for funding grants.

Staff, board members, and state justice partners interviewed all agree the executive and deputy directors are effective leaders. The directors try to create space where the program's advocates feel valued and have the opportunity to unlock their potential. The board, staff, and outside partners also agree that SLLS is a cohesive law firm.

In the aftermath of strategic planning, SLLS now conducts monthly leadership team meetings with key staff (the executive and deputy directors, the litigation director, managing attorneys in charge of branch offices, and the financial administrator)¹⁶ and separate quarterly managers' meetings. These meetings are highly praised and are seen as an effective way for communication and input. The strategic planning efforts, which gave rise to the structures and changes discussed above, have been instrumental in making the program more cohesive as a law firm with more uniformity in the way it offers client services, (intake modalities are the same throughout; case handling guidelines are the same also), and while continuing to emphasize impact work (practice groups, actions of director of litigation).

Recommendation IV.2.20.1.* *SLLS should consider relieving the executive director of responsibility for managing the New Orleans office and appointing a separate manager.*

¹⁶ Our report on the December 2010 program quality visit recommended that SLLS consider "holding quarterly management meetings that are attended by the litigation director, the managing/senior attorneys, and any central administrative office staff (e.g., human resources manager, the information technology manager, and the program administrator)." While the adopted practice does not go as far as recommended, it appears adequate to the current realities faced by the program.

Overall management and administration, including financial administration

Findings 21: SLLS's overall management and administration are good.

In addition to the executive director and the deputy director, SLLS's leadership team consists of the managers of each office, the program administrator, and the director of litigation. The leadership team meets monthly by telephone. In addition to the leadership team, SLLS has a more extensive group of key staffers called the "management group," comprised of the members of the leadership team as well as the legal work practice group managers. The group serves as a vehicle for leadership development in addition to an effective way to facilitate coordination and communication. The management group holds quarterly meetings. While members may participate by telephone, there is a strong preference for face-to-face meetings.

SLLS's financial administration¹⁷—accounting, reporting, budget development, and other finance related tasks—appeared well organized. The program administrator performs this aspect of the program's operation, under the direct supervision of the executive director. The program outsources its payroll function. Finance reports are provided to the board on a quarterly basis and budget variance reports are provided to the board treasurer and executive director on a monthly basis. The program administrator, the executive director, and the deputy director work closely together on budget development and monitoring as well as on developing budgets to support grant applications. The program only projects a single year budget.

Recommendation IV.3.21.1. *As an integral part of the implementation of the strategic plan, SLLS should consider whether it should use separate titles for different management/supervisory/lead positions that would make it easier to differentiate between the roles and responsibilities of the current managing attorneys.*

Recommendation IV.4.21.2. *The program should consider developing budget projections for a two or three year horizon rather than for a single year. While projections for the out years will change with changing circumstances, more long-term projections will help keep the program better focused on the evolving financial outlook and better able to plan.*

Technology

Finding 22: SLLS's technology planning, acquisitions, and upgrades are a potential significant weakness that needs to be addressed.

SLLS's technology is inconsistent throughout the program. Computer systems range from very old desktops with Windows XP operating systems to newer computers using Windows 7. Some staff use 'thin clients' to connect to a local server, where all the software programs and files are

¹⁷ This visit was conducted by the Office of Program Performance (OPP) for the purposes set forth in the Introduction. OPP findings and recommendations under this criterion are limited to staffing, organization, and general functions. Assessment of fiscal operations is conducted by other offices at LSC.

accessed and stored. Windows XP has not been supported by Microsoft for almost a year, leaving these machines more vulnerable to malware. The program indicates it is abandoning the thin clients, but only as they break and need replacement. Staff using thin clients are unable to participate in webinars for training or meetings, or to watch videos. There is a mixture of desktops and laptops depending on the staff person's preference. Many staff also appear to be using personal laptops and mobile devices.

Technology support is provided by an outside computer services company, RAM Computer Systems (RAMCS), which has been supporting SLLS since 2006. RAMCS provides remote helpdesk assistance, manages the local networks in each office, including local and offline daily backups, and monitors the network, including providing some assistance troubleshooting with Internet and telephone vendors when needed.

The team heard complaints that Internet connections are unreliable in some offices, which experience outages periodically each month. These outages affect both the Internet and telephones in some offices.

During the course of its strategic planning, SLLS formed a technology work group to explore ways the program can make better use of technology for, among other things, the production of legal work, communication within the program, assistance to clients, and marketing and resource development. The work group considered the program's technology needs in terms of technology staff, budgeting and planning

The Kemp's PRIME case management system, which is hosted by the Louisiana state bar, was upgraded in late 2014 from PRIME 8 to PRIME 14, in order to accommodate the Technology Initiative Grant (TIG) to implement statewide online intake using an A2J Author interview integrated into the case management system. A webinar training was conducted to show staff the updated user interface.

SLLS is working on a number of TIGs in addition to the online intake project. Other projects include making the statewide website mobile optimized and adding more Spanish resources; development of automated forms to be used in conjunction with the Louisiana State Bar's LEAP effort to bring more self help resources and training to public libraries; and development of online interactive training resources for new staff, law student workers and pro bono attorneys.

The program has launched a Facebook page and has a newsletter to send to its supporters and friends.

Recommendation IV.4.22.1. *SLLS should identify outside expertise, potentially on a pro bono basis, to conduct an overall audit of its technology infrastructure and to help develop a comprehensive technology plan. Such a plan would help guide the program in using its limited resources to strategically implement technology and train staff in using it effectively.*

Recommendation IV.4.22.2. *As an integral part of the implementation of the strategic plan, the SLLS technology work group should meet periodically to review the program’s use of technology, generate ideas for training staff, and to provide guidance for the ongoing implementation and refinement of the technology plan.*

Recommendation IV.4.22.3.* *SLLS should regularly evaluate and adjust its technology plan to ensure that the program is making the highest and best use of affordable technology, including but not limited to computers, printers, copiers and scanners.*

Recommendation IV.4.22.4. *SLLS should engage a telephone system consultant to assess how it might best connect the six offices of the program on a unified VOIP telephone system.¹⁸*

Recommendation IV.4.22.5. *SLLS should continue its technology collaboration and coordination with state justice partners; take advantage of available outside expertise and resources to assist its technology planning and implementation efforts; ensure that technology decisions are made strategically and will accomplish desired goals and outcomes; and strive to ensure that changes to technology are implemented in a coordinated manner.*

Human resources administration

Findings 23: SLLS’s overall human resources administration is good.

The program administrator is also responsible for human resources and overall administration. SLLS employees are provided very generous vacation, sick leave, and flex time policies—including 30 vacation days for long-term employees and an up to five hours per week work at home option for attorney staff. Attorneys and support staff can take comp time within the same pay period when they work more than the required 7.5 hours per day.

The professional development component of the SLLS strategic plan commits the program to meeting the essential training needs of employees in all classifications, including advocates, support staff, and managers. Nevertheless, during the course of the visit, some managers and support staff expressed a desire for more sufficient training opportunities, either in person or through webinars. While managers and advocates meet frequently as a group (albeit by practice area for advocates), support staff throughout the program do not meet together on any regular basis.

SLLS has an adequate disaster plan. All staff are familiar with the plan and have a hard copy of the manual, which was updated in January of 2015. The disaster plan is also available on the program’s Intranet that is accessible to all. The plan provides a wealth of information and instructions to staff, such as securing the office, preparing the computer equipment, making

¹⁸ There are many new possibilities, including hosted systems, that SLLS could explore which could result in increased efficiency, a more robust and connected communication system between offices, and ultimately might reduce bandwidth and telecommunications costs.

sure that all essential documents are backed up, having contact information, resuming service delivery, reaching Kemp's Prime and other services remotely, and coordinating with the disaster recovery center.

Recommendation IV.5.23.1. *SLLS should ensure that the professional development component of the strategic plan is fully applicable to the program's managers and support staff in terms of training and mentoring opportunities. A relatively small investment can yield significant gains in better-supported and more satisfied managers and staff members.*

Internal Communication

Finding 24: Internal program communication appears to be good. SLLS's executive director and deputy director readily share information with staff.

Our interviews confirmed that SLLS maintains effective intra-staff and staff management communications and relations. The executive director strives to visit each of the six offices at least twice a year. Staff in the various offices had high praise for the executive director's visits and her overall efforts to communicate with staff throughout the program. This is also aided by the two main configurations of management-type meetings—the leadership team and the separate management group—that provide opportunities for sharing information about program developments and conveying information from leadership to the line staff. Those who attend these meetings view them as opportunities to expand communication and for providing input to the executive director and the deputy director.

In addition, SLLS has a new intranet that allows staff to access program documents that assist them in addressing administrative matters as well as support for their advocacy. The intranet also contains staff profiles with photos. In addition, a program newsletter keeps staff informed of advocacy efforts throughout the program. Recently, SLLS held an all staff meeting that provided a face-to-face opportunity for staff to share information about their work and achievements on behalf of clients.

Intra-staff communications and relations are facilitated by, among other things, the practice group structures for legal work and advocacy. Staff interviewed explained that listservs in the substantive practice areas provide a vehicle for them to consult with one another within and across practice areas. We note that the program-wide practice group structure is new and not yet uniformly taken advantage of by all staff members.

Facilitating regular and effective communication with intake staff and administrative staff is one area in which the team noted a need for improvement.

Recommendation IV.6.24.1. *SLLS is encouraged to consider creating a group or listserv for intake and administrative staff in addition to the existing substantive listservs to provide a tool for non-attorney staff to consult with each other and share information relevant to their work.*

Resource Development

Finding 25: Consistent with its mission, SLLS is seeking to maintain and expand its base of funding to more effectively implement its mission, goals and objectives.

For calendar year 2015, SLLS projects that LSC funding will comprise approximately 45.3% of SLLS's total annual budget compared to an average of 49.9% over the three-year period 2012 – 2014. In calendar year 2014, SLLS's total revenue was \$6,212,185. Of this total, \$2,844,297 (45.8%) was LSC basic field funding and \$3,367,888 (54.2%) was from non-LSC sources. In calendar year 2012, prior to implementation of the census adjustment, out of a total of \$7,381,076, the program's LSC revenue was \$3,940,289 (53.4%) compared to non-LSC revenue of \$3,440,787 (46.6%). SLLS experienced approximately a 25% decrease in its LSC basic field funding between 2012 and 2014, primarily due to the census adjustment.

The executive director has principal responsibility for the program's fundraising and resource development. The program seeks out grant opportunities and regularly pursues them. At present, SLLS does not have anyone on staff with expertise in private fundraising. The next two years are likely to be very challenging for SLLS in the aftermath of its reduced LSC funding and the prospect of expiration of grants for Mortgage Services Settlement and Violence Against Women Act for 2016. The private bar-related and pro bono organizations have a history of private fundraising, and SLLS is sensitive to the local and state politics of private fundraising, and wishes to avoid fundraising turf battles groups and organizations that are considered the program's partners.

In 2013 SLLS began developing a comprehensive resource development plan as an integral part of its strategic planning process. The program's fundraising mission is to "develop and sustain diverse funding for [SLLS's] core services and special projects [to fulfill the programs] mission and meet its short and long-term goals." According to its fundraising vision statement, SLLS aims "to develop a strong legal aid program with the diverse and robust resources that allow [the program] to respond to high priority legal needs and emerging legal needs in all areas of advocacy." Historically, SLLS has avoided mission drift in pursuit of programmatic funding. Today, the program remains focused on its established mission and vision.

The resource development plan explores a range of approaches to securing more resources, including, but not limited to court filing fees, local and state government funding, cy pres, fellowships from various sources, attorney's fees generated by the program's litigation, and private donations from law firms, corporations and individuals. The SLLS board was solicited to make donations to the program for the first time last year. However, going forward, there is not yet a clear expectation that each attorney board member will make financial contributions to the program.

SLLS's initial fund raising objectives under the resource development plan included, among other things, raising "an additional \$500,000 in non-LSC revenues...by the end of 2014...[and] raise an additional \$250,000 in non-LSC funding in the [Capital Area region of the service area] by the end of 2014." While these ambitious goals were not reached last year, they represent the

the kind of bold thinking that SLLS needs to pursue. It is noteworthy that SLLS created a board fundraising committee.

Recommendation IV.7.25.1. *As an integral part of implementing the resource development component of its strategic plan, SLLS should continuously review, update and refine its resource development plan and proceed with developing its private fundraising capacity.*

Recommendation IV.7.25.2.* *SLLS should devote resources to hiring either a development consultant or a development director to build the program's capacity to raise private funds.*

Recommendation IV.7.25.3. *SLLS, along with its strategic partners, should strive to develop and maintain an overall media strategy tied to the strategies, goals, and objectives of its resource development.*

Recommendation IV.7.25.4. *SLLS should build on its initial board fundraising campaign, and aspire to contributions from all members.*

Participation in an integrated legal services delivery system

Finding 26: SLLS actively collaborates with state justice partners and others to expand and improve the delivery systems throughout the state to achieve equal access to justice and to meet the civil legal needs for low-income persons in Louisiana.

SLLS has a local, state, and national reputation for being very responsive to the needs of low-income individuals and families. Historically, and at present, the program has demonstrated an affinity for change and experimentation. SLLS's strong legal work and advocacy on access to justice issues are well known among state and federal judges. The program has been involved in key discussions with the state bar association, bar foundation, and the Louisiana Supreme Court regarding new initiatives in the area of civil legal aid, including those related to increasing the numbers of new attorneys entering legal services organizations and pro se projects.

SLLS plays a significant role in the Louisiana state justice community. The executive director and other staff participate in statewide "project directors" meetings, comprised of the directors of the three LSC grantees and the leadership of the state bar's Access to Justice Committee. With the other LSC grantees in Louisiana, SLLS supports and participates in the state bar foundation's statewide fundraising effort -- the "Campaign to Preserve Civil Legal Aid."

There is a high level of SLLS staff and board members involvement in access to justice and related efforts in the state. Some SLLS attorneys are active in in state bar association, one attorney is on the Access to Justice Committee, and an SLLS board member is on the Louisiana Bar Foundation fundraising committee.

SLLS also has a TIG for a statewide online "Smart" intake system, which will benefit not only SLLS clients, but also all legal services clients in the state when it is complete. The program will evaluate the data after two more years to see if further changes should be made.

CONCLUSION

SLLS is a well-run organization with the staff capacity to provide high quality, effective and efficient legal services to the eligible low-income populations in southeast Louisiana. The program, its staff, and board enjoy very good reputations throughout the service area, and the state justice and legal communities. The onsite visit did not reveal any significant supervisory, managerial, administrative, or organizational challenges. There are no troubling divided responsibilities within the program. SLLS's greatest challenge—insufficient financial resources—is, in great part, the result of the stubborn and seemingly intractable political and economic circumstances prevailing in the state of Louisiana. The SLLS leadership, board, and broader justice community are keenly aware of these realities and are committed to redoubling their efforts to craft bold plans of action to overcome them. The executive director, board, and staff acknowledge the program's challenges and demonstrate a willingness to address them.