

LSC Board Members Visit Chicago Legal Aid Program

*By Jack L. Block and William A. Kolen,
Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago*

On May 20, 2010, LSC Board Chairman John G. Levi and Board Member Laurie Mikva visited the downtown office of the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago (LAF). The visit began with a tour of LAF's newly formed Client Screening Unit (CSU), where Chairman Levi and Ms. Mikva met with Cynthia Sadkin, CSU's supervisor. Ms. Sadkin explained that for many years LAF had a decentralized intake process, relying on one or two intake specialists (and "duty attorneys" who advised them) in each of six different LAF service offices throughout Chicago and suburban Cook County. As part of LAF's strategic planning process, LAF decided to centralize the intake process, and formed the CSU, which began operations late last year.



Left to right: Cynthia Sadkin, Supervisory Attorney of LAF's Client Screening Unit; Laurie Mikva, LSC Board Member; Jack Block, LAF Deputy Director for Special Projects; John G. Levi, LSC Board Chairman. Photo by [Jim Summaria](#).

The CSU has ten intake specialists (eight are bilingual) and two supervising attorneys, all located in the same downtown LAF office. All intake is done by phone. People wait in a queue or enter their phone number and receive a call back when their number reaches the head of the line. Emergency calls are given priority treatment.

Ms. Sadkin demonstrated CSU's state-of-the art technology and case management software, which enable LAF to screen calls efficiently, detect conflicts, make good decisions about which LAF clients to advise and which to set for appointments, and schedule appointments—all before the caller hangs up. CSU now handles more than 100 calls per day, and frees up the time neighborhood attorneys used to spend supervising intake specialists. That time can now be devoted to more cases involving emergencies and extended representation.

Chairman Levi and Ms. Mikva then met with Diana White, LAF's Executive Director, and Alan Alop and Jack Block, its Deputy Directors. They had a lively conversation covering a broad range of topics. Of particular interest was how legal aid organizations such as LAF can meet the challenges of continuing to provide much-needed services when

faced with a shrinking budget, how to tap into more volunteer pro bono assistance, particularly with the impending retirement of significant numbers of Baby-Boomer attorneys, and how to better leverage our services with the use of more paraprofessionals. There was also a discussion of LAF's desire, as part of its strategic plan, to centralize its operations over the next several years (the centralization plan will be presented to LAF's Board of Directors for approval on June 9th). The visit concluded with a tour of LAF's downtown office.



Left to right: LAF Deputy Director for Service Offices Alan Alop, Laurie Mikva, LAF Executive Director Diana White, John G. Levi, Jack Block. Photo by [Jim Summaria](#).

On May 26, Chairman Levi and Board member Mikva visited LAF's North Suburban Office located in Evanston, Illinois. After joining Supervisory Attorney William A. Kolen and volunteer attorney Sheila Kennedy at one of the local Evanston eateries, Chairman Levi and Ms. Mikva toured the office and met the staff.



Left to right: Volunteer attorney John Held, LAF Supervisory Attorney William Kolen, John G. Levi, volunteer attorney Sheila Kennedy, Laurie Mikva. Photo by [Ben Speckmann](#).

Following the tour, Chairman Levi and Ms. Mikva sat in on the office's weekly case acceptance meeting, where new cases are discussed and decisions made about which cases to accept. Both listened to a variety of cases presented by staff and/or volunteer attorneys. Ms. Mikva, relying on her significant experience as a former staff attorney at the Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation, was able to offer valuable insights about one of the family cases discussed at the meeting.



Far left to right (clockwise): John Held, Sheila Kennedy, LAF staff attorney Jamie Flather, John G. Levi, staff attorneys Yeena Yoon-Yoo, Carl Flannigan and Matthew Monahan, and William Kolen. Photo by [Ben Speckmann](#).

During the visit, Chairman Levi sought input from North Suburban Office staff about the strategic plan to centralize LAF's offices. He also inquired about the success the North Suburban Office has had in involving private attorneys like Sheila Kennedy and John Held in the day-to-day delivery of legal services from the office. Both Chairman Levi and Board Member Mikva enjoyed the chance to see the operations of a frontline service office.

Jack Block is deputy director of the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago and William Kolen is the Supervisory Attorney of the North Suburban Office for the Legal Assistance Foundation.