

Legal Aid of North Carolina, Inc.

Administrative Office

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Serving low-income clients in all 100 counties of North Carolina

George R. Hausen, Jr., Esq.
Executive Director

May 24, 2017

James Hartmann
Wake County Manager
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www.legalaidnc.org

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WAKE COUNTY
MANAGERS OFFICE

Dear Jim,

At the invitation of Commissioner James West, I am providing you with information about our program. We hope the commission will consider our proposal to fund an attorney who will handle housing and public benefits cases for county residents who live outside of Raleigh. This funding would allow us to reduce homelessness and ameliorate some of the problems faced by residents who rely on public benefits.

Background

Legal Aid of North Carolina (LANC) is a statewide, nonprofit law firm serving the legal needs of the nearly 4 million low-wealth Carolinians (about 37% of the total population). Each year LANC provides high-quality advocacy to 25,000 households to protect basic needs: including housing, education, social security, and other public benefits. We protect families and combat domestic violence, and guard against consumer scams and abuse. The median household income of our clients is approximately \$15,000, which is predominantly income from work.

LANC has approximately 160 lawyers and paralegals in twenty-two offices and serves all 100 counties using a community-based approach. Our mission is not merely to litigate cases: We provide extensive outreach and education in each community that we serve. Moreover, we mediate about 70% of our cases before litigation; but if we are forced to litigate, we win over 90% of the time.

Housing Advocacy

The availability of affordable, safe, and well-maintained rental housing is critical to reducing poverty and creating economic opportunity for low-wealth households. Good housing translates into good schools and better jobs for tenants able to secure it. Stable family housing helps children thrive in school and develop. Unfortunately, affordable and publicly subsidized housing units are in short supply throughout North Carolina. The affordable housing gap in Wake County alone probably exceeds 50,000 units. We devote much of our advocacy to preventing homelessness and protecting against arbitrary and capricious decisions that could erroneously terminate access to decent housing and its benefits. We also devote resources to community education efforts and to public policy issues affecting housing availability, such as gentrification and zoning on the local level, and affordable housing tax credits on the state level.

LANC staff comprises some of the region's most knowledgeable and experienced lawyers in federal housing regulations, landlord-tenant law, fair housing, and foreclosure. Our staff includes both experienced trial attorneys at every level in every jurisdiction, as well as legislative experts on land use



regulations, gentrification, and residential zoning. From preventing unwarranted evictions to building affordable housing, there is almost no area touching on housing or the prevention of homelessness in which LANC advocates have not been engaged.

Wake County

The Wake County courts process thousands of eviction cases from private and public housing each year. Many of those evicted face homelessness. A substantial portion of the tenant-defendants in these cases have meritorious defenses, and should not be evicted and face monetary judgments. An eviction record and a monetary judgment can disqualify an individual from being able to rent in the future. Much is at stake, yet low-wealth persons are forced to proceed in court without a lawyer, where they invariably will lose because they lack the skills necessary to advocate the merits of their cases. Most of these defendants either don't know about Legal Aid or we don't have the capacity to help them.

In nearly every housing case in which it provides representation, LANC obtains for the client a favorable outcome—period. LANC takes an aggressive, comprehensive approach to representing tenants in eviction matters and homeowners in foreclosure. Unfortunately, LANC has resources to assist only about 600 out of the many thousands of tenants involved in evictions in Wake County last year. Clients access our housing staff through a toll-free call center, where they can immediately speak with an attorney about their housing issue. Many of our clients reach us through participation at the housing rights clinics that we regularly present in our offices and throughout each community.

We can have a substantial impact on the stability and economics of low-wealth households for a reasonably small investment. A fulltime attorney costs LANC about \$75,000 per year, but we can place an additional attorney in the field for about \$50,000 and match the other funds. One additional staff attorney can represent or advise over 100 households in a given year about housing matters—and prevent unnecessary evictions. Combining housing work with public benefits advocacy can have a significant impact on poverty in the community. We are very pleased and proud that the County is considering funding our work. Please let me know if I can provide any additional information about our proposal. I can be reached directly by telephone at 919.856.2130 or by email at georgeh@legalaidnc.org. With appreciation, I remain

Sincerely,


George R. Hausen, Jr., Esq.
Executive Director

cc: Commissioner James West

