

# BRINGING JUSTICE HOME

## MOBILIZING AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS PLAN FOR YOUR LEGAL AID OFFICE: CASE STUDY 2

### **An interview with Bruce Iwasaki, Executive Director, Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles**

As the largest legal aid provider to the poor in Southern California and a regional institution for over seven decades, the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA) credits its communications efforts with spurring part of its new funding growth. It also has improved the Foundation's profile in a crowded and competitive public interest legal market. At the heart of LAFLA's communications efforts are the attorneys and staff whom Executive Director Bruce Iwasaki would like to become a "client-story machine." Every day LAFLA advocates come into contact with people in need. If the stories of how LAFLA helped them are compellingly told, he maintains, the foundation's reputation will improve, its name recognition will increase, and it will become both more influential with decision makers on behalf of its clients and more successful in fundraising.

LAFLA's desire to implement a communications and marketing plan prompted it to hire a communications director this year. While its communications manager will certainly help build its program further, it's the LAFLA staff's dawning recognition that working effectively with the media is key to a successful marketing strategy.

A few office rules help Iwasaki and his managers define LAFLA's public identity in a city with several other legal aid organizations. In media trainings, Iwasaki advises his attorneys "not to talk like lawyers" when speaking with reporters about cases. Articles about LAFLA cases and staff are regularly distributed office-wide to create internal publicity. These internal memos help staff learn about the cases other attorneys are working on, gives them an information boost for thinking about hot topics they might associate with their cases, and creates a positive environment for their often stressful days. The program also circulates studies and data citing statistics relevant to the conditions of the poor in L.A. These might include the number of uninsured children, how many hours of work a minimum wage worker needs in order to afford an average L.A. apartment, and the widening gap between rich and poor. Staff can later use these figures with reporters to provide a context for the concrete cases they are involved with.

"I sometimes encourage our attorneys to research subjects and write op-eds based around their cases and social trends. We've been quite successful in the past with these, particularly with the *Los Angeles Times*," he says, referring to an op-ed by a LAFLA attorney published last year which related housing problems in Southern California to the city's (then) upcoming mayoral election. Though they require a little more time investment than writing a one-page press release on a case, Iwasaki believes op-eds are an especially good forum for legal aid lawyers to comment on poor people's issues *as they see them* and relate them to current events, in this case, an election and its candidates' campaign pledges.

With media training and greater interaction with reporters, LAFLA attorneys have come to appreciate the power of the press when it covers their ongoing cases. In one case, an elderly woman was to be evicted from a home that she had been making mortgage payments on for thirty years. She believed she had paid off her loan, but through a series of complications, the bank foreclosed on the house. By the time she came to Legal Aid, many legal remedies had expired. In strict legal terms it became a difficult case on the merits. In addition to court filings, however, LAFLA pitched the story to an *L.A. Times* reporter who ran a sympathetic article with a photo.

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Local TV news picked up on it, and eventually Senator Diane Feinstein (D-CA) intervened and even offered to pay the relatively small amount of money in dispute. The woman's house was saved. In this case, media coverage helped a client achieve a favorable outcome that would have been difficult to obtain through the legal system alone.

Of course, LAFLA attorneys know that their first constituency is the people they help everyday, not the media. The foundation maintains strong ties to L.A.'s many Asian, Latino, African American and other minority neighborhoods via its community workshops and trainings. These self-empowerment sessions provide citizens with knowledge on "How to Represent Yourself in Court," or, for community leaders, "How to Get Non-Profit Tax Status for Your Community-Based Organization." In addition, over 50% of LAFLA's staff is at least bilingual, with the majority speaking Spanish. With community support and awareness of the foundation high, LAFLA has consequently earned the respect of metro and legal reporters as legal experts on the social conditions of the Los Angeles urban poor.

According to Iwasaki, the LAFLA brand stakes its reputation on its courtroom successes, service to clients, policy advocacy, and on how much the general public—including donors—learns about their causes and their existence from media. Iwasaki likens the competition for donations to any other corporate brand competition, identifying LAFLA in media interactions as "the frontline provider of legal aid."

"We are where poor people are, I always tell reporters," he says. "We understand their problems and the issues most affecting their community."

Pleased with their recent success, Iwasaki nevertheless feels that LAFLA's communications program is evolving as "a work in progress. Making mistakes is part of the process and keeping public relations in perspective helps. We don't want to be entirely media-driven." He cites the LAFLA Web site ([www.lafla.org](http://www.lafla.org)) as one vehicle for better outreach to media, and has plans to make it more accessible and informative to journalists online.