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Transforming Legal Aid Into a Truly Community-Based Program in California

Irene Morales has served as executive director of Inland Counties Legal Services (ICLS) for two decades. In that time, the program has grown five-fold, driven by a population explosion in Riverside and San Bernardino counties that brought more formula-based funding from LSC, and by the launch of new funding streams for legal aid in the 1980s and 1990s such as IOLTA and California's state-legislated Equal Access Fund (EAF). From \$800,000 in total funding in 1983, ICLS has grown to a \$4 million program in 2003.

But the funding has been far from enough. Between 1990 and 2000, the program's poverty population increased 48 percent while the LSC and IOLTA funding formulas remained fixed on the 1990 census figures. To deal with the onslaught of clients, Irene Morales launched new delivery mechanisms and engaged the community in new projects. These included a telephone intake and advice system, expanded outreach and community legal education initiatives and new pro se assistance projects, supplementing the program's core emphasis on direct legal representation and impact work.

Today the program stands as a model of modern legal aid practice emphasizing a mixed delivery system and collaborative projects with the courts and other community partners. It also has become a model of using program-owned evaluation as a way of demonstrating that its innovative projects are working. This has led to new opportunities and profound changes in the way ICLS sees itself as a player in the community.

The evolution from traditional legal aid to community-based mixed delivery

Irene Morales has spent her entire professional career at ICLS. During that time she has witnessed — and been a major player in — the evolution of legal aid from a program of neighborhood law offices funded primarily with federal grants to a community-based organization interacting closely with the courts, shelters, other community organizations and the private bar.

Irene entered legal aid in 1971 as a first-year law student at UCLA by working as an intern for ICLS on a major case that used testers to identify patterns of housing discrimination. After graduation, she was hired by ICLS as a Reginald Heber Smith fellow. "I didn't really want to get into immigration work, but I was immediately handed 15 immigration cases," she says, explaining this was the assumed role for an Hispanic lawyer in the 1970s. In spite of this beginning, she found the work to be rewarding. "There weren't a lot of Spanish-speaking lawyers," she says. "People came to trust you. You had to stick with it."

She also did a lot of family and housing work. “I handled a lot of domestic violence cases. You see the changes in the women,” she says. “You see them get into classes and change their situation.

“I just love legal services work. You are on the right side, you work with fine people... attorneys, support staff...They really care for their clients,” she says. When she was offered a job by a private firm at twice her legal aid salary, she turned it down.

Three months into her job, her boss, Ron Taylor, asked her to be a managing attorney. “At first I refused,” she says. “I didn’t know anything.” But Taylor kept after her, and she finally took the job. “He became my mentor,” she says. “Ron Taylor was a mentor to a lot of folks.”

Seven years later, when Taylor was appointed to the Superior Court bench by governor Jerry Brown, the board asked Irene Morales to take over as interim executive director, an appointment which later was made permanent.

As an executive director, Irene is both a visionary and a delegator. “You have to have the vision and the leadership,” she says. “Over the years, I have come to see that you have to be inclusive. The staff are stakeholders. If people want to take the lead on something, that’s fine with me.”

She spends a lot of her time in meetings, planning, conferring with her managers, coaching. She also spends a lot of time being a leader in California and national legal aid initiatives. She is active in the California/Nevada Project Directors Association, which is a committee of the Legal Aid Association of California, and serves on LSC’s Diversity Committee.

Under her leadership, ICLS has become a truly community-based program. “We network very well with community-based organizations and the courts, everyone who works with our clients,” she says. “I’ve sent the message out over time that it’s important to be connected in the community. It’s part and parcel in our program culture, to involve the community wherever you can. Whenever we work on something, we try to partner with a community-based organization.”

The emphasis on collaboration has paid off. One benefit has been overwhelming community support for keeping the program local. When LSC visited the area in the late 1990s as part of its drive for program mergers, the LSC team met with more than 20 judges and with providers of other services. “Every meeting was packed with supporters who wanted to make sure Washington heard we were a viable program,” says Irene Morales. “If the people hadn’t come, we’d be merged by now.”

It also led to new opportunities for expanding legal services. In 1999, after the California legislature created the \$10 million Equal Access Fund and allocated \$1 million of that amount for court-based *pro per* assistance projects, ICLS partnered with the Superior Court in Riverside County to submit a successful application for a Partnership Grant to launch the Family Law Access Partnership Project (FLAPP).

This in turn led ICLS directly into collaborative strategic planning and program-owned evaluation.

Evaluating a court-based *pro se* assistance project

The FLAPP project serves a target group of “monolingual Spanish speaking *pro se* litigants” as well as other self-represented low income people. Legal assistance is provided by an ICLS attorney to low income *pro per* litigants at “Family Law Assistance Centers” already established at two of the court’s Family Law Facilitator locations. Services include advice, brief services, assistance in preparation of forms, referrals and community legal education. Because of the language barriers and low literacy levels of the target population, the project offers more intensive legal assistance than a typical court-based *pro se* project, and a client-attorney relationship is established with each client.

One of the requirements of the partnership grant was for recipients to carry out an outcomes-based project evaluation. Guidelines were provided for how to define the questions to be addressed and to how to develop measures for answering them.

For the 2001 grant year, Irene and her partners set outcome-based objectives for the project, then ICLS staff collected data throughout the year to evaluate the extent to which those were achieved. The objectives included “improvement in the *pro se* litigant’s situation” as well as increased “trust and confidence in the judicial system” from clients resulting from “getting their day in court” and getting “an opportunity to be heard.” The report, “*Family Law Access Partnership Project (FLAPP): Outcomes Evaluation Report for 2001 Grant Year,*” outlines the objectives that were set, the measures used to evaluate success and the results that were achieved.

The evaluation that ICLS decided to carry out had four elements:

1. *Client and case service analysis.* Intake and case service statistics were collected to track the numbers of clients served, client demographics and services provided.
2. *Client satisfaction survey.* Every client accepted for service was given a brief questionnaire indicating the services received, promptness of service and satisfaction with the services. Project staff followed up with every client that expressed dissatisfaction to determine the cause, and if possible, rectify it.
3. *Random case outcome reviews of sample of cases.* Irene and the managing attorneys at the two locations of the project conducted a detailed review of a random sample of 30 cases that had been completed by the project, using a formal review protocol and standardized “Case Outcomes Review” form to capture the case outcome, the elapsed time between several milestones in the case, the orders obtained in the case, the documents that were prepared and number of people affected.
4. *Judicial review of sample of cases.* Ten cases were selected at random and reviewed by a family law judge, using a standardized “Judicial Case File Review” form to capture the judge’s assessment of the quality of documents prepared and clarity of facts stated. (The results of that review were not available at the time the evaluation report was prepared.)

Evaluation Results

The case file review data were especially powerful. They revealed that:

- A high percentage of clients (80 percent) obtained the outcome they sought -- a court order for a divorce, child custody, support or other requested decision.
- Significant dollar benefits (child support) were documented in a high percentage of the child support cases. In several of these, the additional support raised the family income above the poverty level.
- A high percentage of clients served (63 percent) were from targeted group of monolingual Spanish speakers.
- Case stories were obtained from project attorneys illustrating the human impact of the outcomes that were achieved.

Overall, the evaluation report concluded that “the data presented clearly show the success of this innovative program.”

The FLAPP evaluation provides a good example of a low-cost, multifaceted, program-owned evaluation.

Irene Morales feels that the planning that was done for this project and the evaluation process really paid off. It got ICLS started in a process of strategic planning and self-evaluation that has since been applied to other projects. Not only did it improve the results being achieved for clients, but it has provided solid proof to the court partners that the innovation is working.

1. Improving results for clients. Three of the tools used in the evaluation provided information that managers used to improve the project’s performance. First, the mid-year review of the client and case service data led to changes in the project’s design. Finding that service levels were below expectations, Irene and her staff streamlined screening procedures and put in place a new intake process. Those adjustments were successful in increasing the numbers of clients the project could serve at its current level of resources.

In addition, staff follow-up on the client satisfaction information in the few cases of client *dissatisfaction* led to a change in the referral procedure to ensure that each referral would be confirmed with the agency to whom clients are referred to ensure that clients did not fall through the cracks.

The outcomes data showed the project model was working for the target population (monolingual Spanish speakers), giving Irene and her staff confidence to apply the model in other projects

2. Telling the story of the project. “We were able to show that the project is working, that it’s doing what it was supposed to do,” says Irene. “The data showed that people are getting their day in court. People are getting their court orders.”

Irene explains that court personnel, in particular, had been skeptical that this innovation would work. The most powerful aspect of the evaluation was the formal case file review procedure, a simple, low-cost and powerful method for documenting the outcomes of each case. The data made it clear that the target population was coming in, they were getting served and, in a large percentage of cases, they were getting the results they were seeking.

As a result, ICLS's partner, the Riverside County Court, asked ICLS to set up a similar project in a third location. In addition, the Superior Court in San Bernardino County asked the program to help it set up a similar project in that county.

ICLS has had several other opportunities to enter into collaborative projects. Irene feels that those invitations were directly related to the documented success of FLAPP. "We have a track record of being successful with these kinds of collaborative projects," she says. Without the data provided by the evaluation, this result might not have been so clear.

The planning and evaluation experience gained in launching the FLAPP project created a new capacity for enrolling partners, planning new projects and managing them for success and sustainability. It positioned the program for making the best possible use of \$1.1 million in new funding coming now from LSC as a result of the 2000 census data finally being reflected in the funding formula.

Irene sums it up. "FLAPP has changed the way the community thinks about us. It's changed the way we think about ourselves."