

## Remarks for Sarah Megan

Thank you Bernie for such a kind introduction. I have to say that I was **completely shocked** by this wonderful award. Thank you so much to the NLADA and the selection committee; I am grateful for your consideration. Thanks also to my friends and colleagues over the years at Prairie State Legal Services, including those here today. They know how much of a team effort our work is. You guys should all be up here.

I have been at Prairie State Legal Services for 34 years. It doesn't seem possible. I started in 1982, just after the first big Reagan era budget cuts. Joe Dailing, the founding director of our program, asked for a 2 year commitment, but said he had to be honest and couldn't say whether I would still have a job by the end of the year. That didn't sound too promising, but I took the job anyway.

And I am so glad I did. I've worked on so many great cases for such great clients. In my first few months on the job, I interviewed a grandmother raising two grandkids. Her welfare benefits—cash, food stamps and Medicaid—were cut off because she arrived 15 minutes late to a required job search meeting at the public aid office. She was late because she lived out in a rural area, had no car and had to walk 7 miles with 2 little grandkids to the welfare office. Similar stories started to stream into offices across our program. That was the start of a class action against the state agency that continued for many years, up to the 7<sup>th</sup> circuit and back. It ultimately resulted in a favorable consent decree for the class of welfare recipients who had lost benefits and a transformation in Illinois' punitive work program.

From those early days I have just been hooked. Our cases do not include class actions any more, but our individual and group advocacy efforts can have lots of impact. Our cases generally involve interesting legal or factual issues where we feverishly strategize to achieve our clients' goals. At a party recently a woman I met told me "It must be so depressing to be a legal aid lawyer, seeing an unending parade of misery." I told her, are you kidding, I have the best job. I get to work on interesting cases and legal issues with great co-workers helping people who really need the help." Like all of you, I am lucky in my work. Thank you again for this genuinely surprising award.