



Young Legal Aid Lawyers

Legal Aid: Pass Notes ***What it is, its history and...why bother?***

www.younglegalaidlawyers.org

Many aspiring lawyers want to use their legal skills for the greater good but are simply not sure how to go about this. The rewards of working within the Legal Aid system are not widely marketed - despite the fact that working in legal aid can be a rewarding way to use your legal skills to help ordinary people all day, every day.

Since its inception legal aid has helped to assist people in a vast range of difficult circumstances - from mental health patients kept in detention without review through to residents affected by toxic waste sites. It is critical in protecting the rights of the vulnerable who would otherwise be unable to afford professional advice and representation.

A Potted History

Founded in 1945 as a key part of the welfare state alongside health and education, Legal Aid was designed to provide legal advice for those of "slender" means so that no one would be barred from making a just and reasonable claim or defend a legal right, and to allow lawyers to be paid for their services. Initially, services were provided by private firms - any practitioner could take on work that came under the remit of the legal aid scheme and claim payment from the state.

By the late 1980s, the Government sought to curb the growth in the legal aid budget. In 2000 the Government introduced a contracting system for legal aid work. Firms had to apply for a franchise to undertake legal aid work for each area of law. This change essentially marked a decline in legal aid that continues to this day. Solicitors suddenly found that they could no longer provide a comprehensive community service to clients. At this time, the Legal Services Commission, a government funded body, was established to take responsibility for the funding of certain areas of work.

Continuing cuts and increasing administrative hurdles has made legal aid work frustrating for lawyers. Rates of pay for legal aid work have increased marginally over the last ten years while the costs of running a solicitor's practice have increased by significantly higher amounts. Many firms have given up legal aid work which has created "advice deserts" - large areas of the country where there is simply no provision for legal aid services for certain types of

work. Shocking anecdotes, such as the story of one London solicitor whose Welsh client had been unable to find help for his housing problem any nearer to home, are becoming depressingly common.

The government has recently launched a "Fundamental Review of the Legal Aid System," which is a policy review aimed at overhauling the entire system. Government's message is clear - we need an efficient and fair legal aid system but the government is not prepared to invest in it. There have already been devastating proposals to open parts of this vital service to the market.

So why bother?

All this is deeply depressing for those considering going into legal aid work. But it is not a reason to dismiss it out of hand. Many legal aid clients are from poor backgrounds and suffer from mental and physical disabilities. They invariably come to the legal aid lawyer at an all time low in their lives, with their liberty, their homes or their safety at stake. Being able to assist legal aid clients is incredibly rewarding - especially with the knowledge that without such a system made up of committed lawyers, these people would be left totally in the lurch and dependent on the off chance that they could be assisted by charity.

There are many young legal aid lawyers who are committed to working in the field as they can see the intrinsic value of devoting their legal skills to helping ordinary people who could otherwise not afford it. YLAL was formed in April 2005 for such people and includes students, solicitors and barristers. Its aim is to campaign against all the cuts and fight to maintain a system within which young lawyers can envisage a rewarding future. Membership is free and open to all those concerned about or committed to legal aid up to 10 years qualification or call.

If you would like to join Young Legal Aid Lawyers, please email us at

members@younglegalaidlawyers.org providing your name, address, telephone, stage (Student/Trainee/Pupil/Qualified -including year of qualification), and place of work/study