

**SENATE JUDICIARY HEARING
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Testimony of Elaine Strokoff, Executive Director, Downtown Daily Bread

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the important topic of civil legal services in Pennsylvania. My name is Elaine Strokoff. I am the Executive Director of the Downtown Daily Bread (DDB), a soup kitchen located just down the street that provides a nourishing, hot meal for the poor and homeless of downtown Harrisburg. This is done at no cost to the recipient.

DDB operates under the philosophical belief that **all human beings are created equally**. Men, women, and children of all races, religions, ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic levels deserve to have their basic human needs met and to be treated equally. All human beings should have access to food, shelter, and clothing.

In recent years, DDB has grown to include a wide range of services for the poor, including offering personal hygiene services, clothing, and information and referral services to other resources. We have a counselor on staff who works directly with clients and offers referrals to other human and social service agencies in the community, including legal services.

We also collaborate with many other community organizations to offer holistic services to our homeless and at risk clients at our own facility. For example, we bring in an employment counselor from the YWCA once per week to help our clients work on resumes and obtain employment. We also have a mental health professional from Dauphin County Mental Health who provides homeless outreach services at DDB one day a week.

Student nurses from Messiah College and Harrisburg Area Community College as well as Hershey Medical Center students also come to our facility to help.

We also collaborate with the Dauphin County Bar Association and their Homeless Outreach Project. Through this program, attorneys volunteer their time to come to our facility once a month to answer legal questions for DDB clients, help them understand legal issues, and refer them to legal services agencies if needed.

I am here to talk about what civil legal services can achieve for clients and the urgent need to expand access to civil legal assistance in the community we serve. Many of the homeless clients we serve at DDB have suffered because they have not had access to legal services. MidPenn Legal Services provides high quality legal services. However, the sad fact is that many more clients in our community need legal help than we are able to refer to legal services programs whose resources are stretched beyond the breaking point.

As community advocates, we see, every day, the difficulty low-income people face when they confront the legal system on their own, without the aid of a trained legal advocate.

Some of our clients became homeless after an unfortunate family breakdown. These clients may face family law and domestic violence related issues often without the assistance of counsel or even the chance to talk to an attorney for some advice. Some of our clients became homeless after encountering a financial crisis that led to eviction and loss of housing. Many people end up in a financial crisis after they or one of their loved ones fought a life-threatening disease which resulted in a loss of employment and insurmountable medical bills. When the choice is paying for the medicine or paying for rent, there are no good answers.

Increased foreclosures and the economic downturn have contributed to a significant increase in homelessness and the risk of homelessness for individuals and families in our community. Increased rates of foreclosures are

leading to homelessness for low-income homeowners and renters of foreclosed properties, while prolonged unemployment is leading to a widespread inability to afford mortgage or rent payments.

To further exacerbate the situation, a person's lack of a permanent place to live may also give rise to other legal problems (in addition to the family and financial issues they already have) including criminal victimization (physical, sexual and emotional abuse of children, women and seniors), discrimination (based on race, class, sexual orientation, and gender, for instance), and failure to respond in a timely fashion to important legal deadlines. Tragically, a homeless person may have several legal issues and their homelessness may place them at further risk of additional legal problems.

Many homeless people have more than one legal issue affecting them at any one time. Furthermore, homeless people face more legal events than those of us who were not homeless. Thus, the people least able to afford a lawyer have a much greater need for a

lawyer.<http://www.lawfoundation.net.au/report/homeless/542FFB245EA2D68BCA25707500829078.html> -
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Civil legal problems that impact our homeless clients include a variety of legal issues that preserve the "essentials of life":

- Evaluations of claims for government benefits such as public assistance or Social Security Disability benefits;
- Unemployment insurance appeals,
- Housing and homelessness issues such as foreclosures, evictions, tenant/landlord disputes, and housing discrimination;
- Family law, including divorces, child custody, child support, and domestic violence;
- Consumer protection issues, debt collection, and bankruptcy;
- Elder law, such as concerns of nursing home residents;

- Mental health and disability issues, especially where benefits are denied; and,
- Other non-criminal legal problems.

Had a free attorney been available to assist a low-income person with limited English facing an illegal eviction, one less client may need our help. Had a free attorney been available to help that person negotiate additional time to relocate, one less client may need our help.

Had a free attorney been available to help a young unemployed spouse divide the marital assets in an equitable fashion, one less client may need our help. Had a free attorney been available to help establish a fair child support order, one less client may need our help.

Had a free attorney been available to go to the District Justice with a working adult with unpaid credit cards debt, a young man may have avoided the repossession of his car and the resulting loss of his job, and one less client may have needed our help. Had a free attorney been available to help an Iraq war veteran appeal his denial of Veterans Benefits, one less client may need our help. For example, many veterans are denied the financial benefits that could allow them to pay rent, because a simple error is made in the medical review. Yet, without a lawyer, this soldier just figures he is out of luck once again.

Legal Aid lawyers and/or pro bono attorneys provide invaluable legal assistance to allow low income people to maintain the bare minimum essentials of life and may be help a person avoid homelessness in the first place and, thus, reduce the need for programs like ours. If I can provide you with any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me. Thank you.

Biographical sketch of Elaine Strokoff, Executive Director, Downtown Daily Bread

Elaine Strokoff has been with Downtown Daily Bread (DDB) for the past 18 years. She was hired as a volunteer coordinator and expanded her role to become the Executive Director. DDB is a soup kitchen located in the Boyd Building of The Pine Street Presbyterian Church in downtown Harrisburg. We provide hot, nutritious meals for the needy and the homeless of the city. The meals are served daily between the hours of 12:30 p.m. and 1:30 p.m. The soup kitchen was opened in March of 1983 out of concern for local hunger needs. There is no cost to the recipient and no questions are asked.

During her time at DDB, she has expanded the program to include 19 participating churches and synagogues. She is also responsible for starting the "Lunch Plus" program. This program provides an extensive range of services for the needy and homeless clients free of charge. It is a program unique to Harrisburg in that all of the services are provided in one location.

The Lunch Plus component of the kitchen offers phone, mail service, and lockers as well as clothing for men and women. Showers are also available and haircuts are offered monthly. There is no charge for these services. In addition, a counselor is present to help clients access DDB services and the services of other social agencies. DDB has collaborations in place with many organizations in the area. An employment counselor from the YWCA meets with DDB clients once per week to help them work on resumes and work toward employment goals. A mental health professional from Dauphin County Mental Health serves as a homeless outreach professional at DDB one day a week. In acknowledgement of these collaboration efforts, DDB was awarded the 2003 Non-Profit Innovation Award in the area of Collaboration by the "Central Penn Business Journal."

Elaine is also active in city and county organizations which deal with hunger and homelessness. She represents Downtown Daily Bread at the Dauphin County Poverty Forum, Dauphin County Diversity Networking Group, and is a founding member of CACH (Capital Area Coalition Against Homelessness) where she serves on the Service Delivery committee. Elaine was a member of the Board of PROBE for 4 years. She is also a member of the President's Advisory Board of Central Pennsylvania College.

Before coming to DDB, Elaine was an assistant legislative liaison for the Department of Community Affairs, a staff assistant at the PA Jewish Coalition, and a secondary education teacher. She has spent many years volunteering, including serving as President and National Board representative for the Harrisburg Chapter of Women's American ORT (Organization for Rehabilitation through Training.) She also served on the East Pennsboro Superintendent's Advisory Board and the East Pennsboro High School Principals Advisory Board.

Professional awards include: Greater Harrisburg YWCA President's Award; Soroptimist International Making a Difference Award; the Non-profit Innovation Award for Leadership Excellence; The Kathryn Towns Founders' Award from P.R.O.B.E (Potential Re-entry Opportunities in Business and Education), and the Open Stage Women Who Care Award. Elaine resides in Camp Hill with her husband, and has four grown children.