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Organization Provides Free Legal Services to Low-Income Residents

By Aaron Blevins
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The Inner City Law Center (ICLC) had a humble beginning. It started on Skid Row in 1980, when a wet-behind-the-ears UCLA graduate student named Nancy Mintie began providing legal services out of a trailer behind the Los Angeles Catholic Worker Hospitality Kitchen.

Now, the center has 12 advocates and organizers, 19 staff attorneys and a newly-expanded office on East Seventh Street in Los Angeles. While the economy continues to recover, the demand for its services continues to climb, said Greg Spiegel, the center's director of policy and communications. "Poverty is a growth industry, sadly," Spiegel said.

He said ICLC provides free legal services to very low-income residents. The majority of its resources are used to litigate against slumlords and prevent eviction and homelessness, Spiegel said. "We want to help the people who are the most vulnerable," he said.

Spiegel said clients are prioritized based on need. He said some clients suffer from grotesque living conditions, which can include raw sewage leaking into the home or rat infestations.

According to a statement, one family the center is currently representing has the worst cockroach infestation the center staff has ever seen. The family avoids killing spiders in the home, because they know the arachnids kill the bugs.

Most of the center's litigation is against "slumlords" who provide such deplorable living conditions, Spiegel said. He said 30 percent of the center's budget is from the recovery of attorney's fees from landlords.

Spiegel said ICLC also fights unjust evictions, which can wreck a family's eligibility to retain housing. He said the center is launching a "huge" program to serve the 2,000 families and individuals currently facing eviction in L.A.'s Superior Court. Statistically, some 98 to 99 percent of tenants are not represented during eviction hearings, Spiegel said.

"And they always lose," he added. "We're dedicating a lot of resources to represent more people in eviction court." Additionally, ICLC helps homeless veterans, many of whom have disabilities. Spiegel said navigating the Veteran Administration's bureaucracy can be a challenge, and post-traumatic stress disorder is difficult to have diagnosed. He said 7,000 to 8,000 veterans are homeless in L.A.

"As a society, we are not treating those people with dignity," Spiegel said.

To meet the demand for its services, ICLC has been increasing its fundraising efforts.

Interested residents can send donations to 1309 E. 7th St., Los Angeles, CA 90021. For information, call (213)891-2888 or visit www.innercitylaw.org.