

Legal Aid Paralegal Dodges Budget Cut

Alaska officials seek to save small office from proposed cutbacks.

By Janet Roberts

Strong community support for the hard work of one part-time paralegal has virtually ensured the Ketchikan office of Alaska Legal Service Corp. will not become an endangered species, as threatened in the wake of a proposed 2005 state budget that would cut a \$125,000 grant to the nonprofit organization providing legal aid to the poor.

The one-person office in Ketchikan, overseen for the past two years by paralegal, Pat Muzzano, and for 18 years before that by another part-time paralegal, often is the first contact for the area's poor, indigent people in need of legal services.

"The work is rewarding and, at times, frustrating," explained Muzzano. "But most often, I have the sense of having done something to help someone in their life."

Muzzano speaks with potential clients, follows up by sending applications for legal services to them, and then forwards the completed applications to the ALSC office in Juneau to be reviewed by attorneys there. Because ALSC only provides certain civil legal services to residents, many legal applications are rejected. However, Muzzano subsequently sends *pro se* forms, instructions and Internet self-help contact sites to the applicants ALSC can't help, encouraging them along the path to self-representation.

Although logic would lead one to believe a small office with one part-time employee would be the first eliminated during a massive state budget cut, the strength of local support for the Ketchikan office and Muzzano make it unlikely to close, according to Andy Harrington, ALSC executive director.

"We are working to get the proposed cuts back into the budget," said Harrington. "If the cuts go through it's possible an ALSC office will be closed, but Ketchikan has such strong local support, and we are so pleased with Pat's work that the office will probably remain open."

Despite a recommendation this year from the City Manager of Ketchikan to cut all city grants by 30 percent, the City Council voted to keep the ALSC grant intact.

According to Muzzano, city officials, members of the local legal community and Ketchikan judges have written to both Alaska Governor Frank Murkowski and the ALSC home office, requesting support for the Ketchikan office. Muzzano, who said she saw a 30 to 50 percent increase in the ALSC client base during the past year, said clients regularly tell her how much

the ALSC services mean to them and how grateful they are the office is open.

Although the Ketchikan Web site boasts of the world's largest collection of totems, the

ability to eagle watch and the excitement of sea kayaking, the reality is when the town's only industrial center, its pulp mill, closed in 1997, Ketchikan's economy stalled, and locals like Muzzano, who worked as a security guard at the pulp mill, have said the local economy has yet to revive.

Muzzano obtained a paralegal certificate through a correspondence course. When the University of Juneau offered a degree course at the Ketchikan Community College, she

returned to school to earn her paralegal degree. From there she went to work for ALSC, helping the very people she worked with at the mill, along with Native Americans and many

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other residents of Ketchikan's surrounding areas.

Only accessible by water or air, Ketchikan is 600 to 700 miles from Juneau and approximately 3,000 miles from Anchorage.

Closing the ALSC office would create an enormous hardship for people already facing the challenges of job loss, poverty and debt, forcing them to seek assistance through the already overburdened Office of Public Advocacy or to seek *pro bono* legal assistance from bar association members.

Since the mill closed, Muzzano has seen an increase in cases involving debt problems and domestic violence. ALSC in Ketchikan handles family law, elder law, property transfers and simple debt collection.

Drafting and filing of pleadings, service on parties, *pro se* advice and letters of advice are all handled by Muzzano with supervision from an ALSC attorney in Juneau. Bankruptcies and applications for more complex matters are forwarded to Anchorage where ALSC attorneys search for *pro bono* representation for the clients.

"Legal aid work allows me to help people," said Muzzano. "The job offers lots of diversity and human contact, which I like." ■

