

Futures Strategic Plan (Summary)
Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services, Inc.
March 1, 2005

(Portions approved by SMRLS Board in August and December of 2003 and August of 2004)

Futures (Strategic Planning) Timetable, Principles, Criteria, and Process:

Board-driven: August 2001: Futures Process launched.

Factual setting: Combined SMRLS' funding losses 2002-2005, 18% or \$1.2 million in federal, state, and local cuts; significant increases to salary and compensation plans approved in 2001; growing client need; rapidly rising health care costs; and technology expenses present major law firm financial challenges. SMRLS staff positions reduced from 120 to 94.

Mission: The primary criteria to guide the Board in making decisions to re-engineer SMRLS and allocate resources is the mission; core critical legal need identified by priority setting; grant requirements; and the mission-relatedness and effectiveness of SMRLS' law-firm-wide work.

Mission-relatedness of legal work closely examined: All eight practice areas and administrative areas scrutinized on a program-wide basis.

Client, community, and staff input: Rely on 2001 comprehensive needs assessment study and data; include staff, Board and leadership on various Futures committees; area-wide meetings; uniform data gathering techniques.

Build on program traditions and strengths and 1993 Futures reports implementation and successes:

- 1) Continue to address the access needs of persons of color, refugees, and other access barriers;
- 2) Continue to emphasize culturally appropriate community, pro bono, and public collaborations;
- 3) Continue priority to retain experienced, hard-working, diverse, and outstanding staff;
- 4) Build on accountability system, e.g., peer review, practice standards, and new evaluation system;
- 5) Build on SMRLS' history of community lawyering, diversity emphasis, and systemic legal work;
- 6) Build on PIKA and progress with respect to use of technology; and
- 7) Continue to further refine focus with respect to critical needs and preventative law work.

Program-wide Values, General Findings, and New Directions That Were Reaffirmed or Emerged from Futures Process:

- ✓ **Equal access to services:** Keep all rural offices open, stress language access and outreach;
- ✓ **Work as one law firm,** not semi-autonomous offices;
- ✓ **Address emerging legal problems and newer populations:** Strengthen refugee, immigrant, and equal opportunity representation and services by expanding "entrepreneurial" or "community lawyering" approaches;
- ✓ **Make the private bar a full partner in the delivery of legal services:** Reorganize rural PAI into one program, encourage innovative PAI projects, and more recruitment;
- ✓ **Improve accountability, efficiency, and standardize services:** Consistent types/levels of legal services, fair distribution of workload, clear and uniform work expectations, and accountability systems throughout SMRLS;
- ✓ **Consistent expectations of staff:** Implement Practice Standards, Norms, and comprehensive evaluations;
- ✓ **Flexibility:** Respond to changing client needs, funding opportunities, best practices, ideas, etc.;
- ✓ **Keep level of client access high while reducing costs:** Implement program hotline, reduce meeting and administrative time, adopt personnel manual; better control health benefits costs;
- ✓ **Promote diversity and clarify leadership roles:** Reorganization of leadership team in 2004 and recruit and retain a hardworking, outstanding, and diverse staff; continue diversity training;
- ✓ **Less resources require major changes:** Better coordinate fund raising, search for new and collaborative funding sources, and recognize that public dollars will likely remain flat.

Planned Actions to Implement Futures Values, Findings, and New Directions:

Better focus legal work: Less Tier #2, Tier #3, and brief service by staff (Hotline to handle); measure impact on clients.

Community lawyering: Systemic work in collaboration with client, public, and community groups (building on domestic abuse, public benefits, and ethnic community lawyering successes), and expand into Project HALO and other areas.

Tightened and uniform priorities: Emphasize effective legal representation, advice, preventative law, education, and empowerment activities which “maintain freedom from hunger, homelessness, sickness, and abuse and empower persons and “assures equal opportunity,” consistent with the mission and priority legal needs.

Emphasize a wide range of legal service, consistent with LSC regulations and appropriate to clients’ legal problems and objectives, include a review of LSAP and Coalition coordination, cost savings, and priorities.

Access to SMRLS’ services: Improve, innovate, and make more efficient and effective:

Hotline intake: Consistent advice, immediate answers, increase access (language), efficiency (less staff), reorganize East Metro intake services for more consistency; consider statewide-centralized intake;

Access points: (Build on CADA, UCAM, Ain Dah Yung, and IMAA successes.) Targeted intake at and outreach to organizations where potential clients seek services to overcome culture, language, and other access barriers;

Refugee and immigrant services to be expanded: Plan and implement RIMS law-firm-wide, focus priorities, increase attorney staff, and coordinate statewide with other providers to ensure more equitable access.

Reorganization: “One law firm” approach:

- ▶ 4 regions: SW, SE, Metro, RIMS, program-wide HELP, education law, and farm law;
- ▶ Program-wide budget: Limited office/regional budgets;
- ▶ Organized by substantive areas, rather than by offices: Family/Housing & Benefits/Seniors in rural areas; greater coordination of urban housing work and rural public benefits work and outreach;

Case acceptance increasingly done by lead attorneys, reducing staff meeting time and eventually paperwork, rely on PIKA case management;

Job responsibilities change:

- ▶ Match responsibilities under Futures Plan with qualifications in retention and hiring;
- ▶ Less support staff;
- ▶ Job responsibilities shift rapidly;
- ▶ Regional VAP coordinators;
- ▶ Attorneys work more to develop, maintain, and “coach” effective volunteer resources;
- ▶ More leadership by region, including resource development work.

Increase volunteers to help meet the unmet need: Capitalize on good will of the bar to build the PAI program:

Place more Tier 1 with volunteers and less Tier 2 & 3: Use VAP matrix (less family, no-kid divorces) and include Tier 1 up to 187%, experiment with limited client charges in some cases which take a disproportionate amount of time:

- ◆ **Train volunteers and emphasize:** OFPs, HALO cases, immigration, expungement matters, predatory lending, unemployment and seniors, hotline panels; and other innovations;
- ◆ **More Will Clinics** using volunteers and community education for seniors;
- ◆ **Experiment - new delivery systems with courts:** Pro se clinics, unbundled services, technology, PAI;
- ◆ **More co-counsel and reduced-fee contracts:** Housing, discrimination, appellate, other complex cases
- ◆ **Integrate Campaign recruitment** with volunteer recruitment;
- ◆ **Create special projects for law firms,** expand corporate pro bono, e.g., Project HALO, unemployment appeals, seniors, contested family law, immigration, education law, predatory lending, etc.

More accountable, efficient, and retention of outstanding staff:

- Begin to fully implement comprehensive evaluations;
- More systematically complete annual evaluations; better timekeeping compliance;
- More consistently integrate Practice Standards and Norms in daily practice in SMRLS;
- Participate in peer review process, clarify leadership roles and build future leadership;
- Emphasize increased use of technology in case management and SMRLS financial department;
- Ensure benefits are uniform program-wide, self-insurance, look for savings;
- Complete new personnel manual to help reduce administrative time, to streamline evaluations, and to reduce leadership time spent on non-client service matters;
- Annual review of Futures implementation and continued review of all elements of the SMRLS law firm to make sure SMRLS is working as efficiently and effectively, as possible, in furthering its mission.

Work closely with the new civil legal services statewide planning commission, under the auspices of the Supreme Court: Seek increased state funding; implement major changes recommended by the Supreme Court Commission report, with particular emphasis on innovation and new practices to overcome barriers to access for under-served populations and identifying emerging and changing critical legal needs; continue coordination with Coalition and non-Coalition programs and look for new areas of regionwide and statewide collaboration, increased client access, and reduced costs; and otherwise seek new ways and “best practices” to ensure that Minnesota’s statewide delivery system is as efficient, effective, and client-centered as possible.