

MAKING THE LAW AN ALLY IN WAR ON POVERTY

DALLAS LEGAL SERVICES PROJECT HELPS THOUSANDS, BUILDS RESPECT FOR
SOCIETY'S RULES

(By Bert Holmes, Associate Editor)

A fast-talking sheetrock salesman made quite an impression on the aged Negro woman living in a three-room shack near the West Dallas levee. She had worked for years as a maid and saved enough to buy her home. Now she survives only on her welfare check.

Barely able to read, the woman signed a contract for installation of the sheetrock. The price was \$1,600, which probably was more than the shanty was worth. When she missed a payment, the owner of the note moved quickly to evict her from her home.

Only minutes before she was dumped into the dusty street, a representative from the Dallas Legal Services Project heard of the problem and intervened. He halted the eviction and had a reputable contractor inspect the sheetrock work. The contractor estimated the work was worth \$200 and the Legal Services attorney negotiated a new contract for that amount.

The elderly woman is paying off the reduced note—and still living in her little home. She is one of 3,500 Dallasites helped last year by the two-year-old service, financed in the main by the federal government through the Office of Economic Opportunity.

Such home repair frauds are only a small part of the cases handled by the Dallas Legal Services Project but they are graphic examples of the effort to make the law work for those in poverty as well as for the more affluent.

This week a circular drafted by the DLSP is being distributed throughout South Dallas, where unscrupulous home improvement salesmen have been attempting to use the news of an impending code enforcement program to persuade residents to buy unnecessary repairs.

Those working in the Legal Services Project have found that the legal problems of the poor are similar to those of society in general—domestic relations, child support, contracts and debts. The only unique problem is in the relationship with welfare agencies.

The Dallas project has been able to work out some modification of rulings, particularly in the area of aid to dependent children. It has not handled a case contesting the residency requirements but a similar project in Connecticut obtained a court ruling holding that the six-months waiting period was a violation of freedom of movement.

In Dallas, eight attorneys headed by Walter Steele and assisted by 150 volunteers from the Dallas Bar Association, provide a wide range of services through five offices. One is downtown, at 301 N. Market. West and East Dallas have one office each and South Dallas has two. A sixth office will open soon in Grand Prairie.

The neighborhood offices vary their hours to suit the needs of their clients. One is open from 9 to 9 and all have one night session and a Saturday morning session. In addition, night meetings are held to educate neighborhood residents on their legal rights.

Finally, to insure that all who need help can find it, the volunteer lawyers man a "circuit rider" program. They take up a station and serve as initial contact with anyone who comes by, either on his own or as a referral from a friend or a social agency.

The community support for the legal services project has been magnificent in Dallas, Steele reports. In some cities there have been complaints of competition with lawyers in private practice but careful screening of cases and good liaison with the Dallas Bar has paid off here with the development of a cooperative atmosphere.

At the recent Texas Bar Association convention in Dallas, a Houston lawyer tried to get approval of a resolution condemning the legal services program's policy of assisting in divorce cases. The resolution died in committee.

Domestic relations cases, including divorces, account for a third of the Dallas project case load but Steele points out that this percentage parallels the general court load. He makes a valid point when he says that it is important to help the poor legalize their domestic relationships.