

# Managing Poverty Law and Policy Information

by Rita A. McLennon



## Inside the National Center on Poverty Law

*As one of those originally involved with the National Center on Poverty Law, I am pleased to see that the Clearinghouse Review has evolved into such a sophisticated journal on poverty law issues.*

— Justice Earl Johnson, California Court of Appeals

The National Center on Poverty Law has been referred to as the “jewel” in the challenging world of poverty law. As the nation’s premier manager of legal and policy information for advocates and others representing low-income clients in civil law matters, the Center offers valuable nuggets of “informational gold” to help balance the scales of justice and preserve our nation’s commitment to equal justice for all.

R. Sargent Shriver established the Center in 1967 as part of the War on Poverty effort. Its purpose, then and now, is to promote social and economic justice by ensuring that persons in poverty have effective representation in policymaking, lawmaking,

and at every level of the American justice system. Focusing on the use of information and communication to add value to the very limited resources allocated for the legal representation of people in poverty, the Center is a communications, research, and advocacy hub that helps lawyers, judges, and others more efficiently and effectively share information, ideas, and strategies to ensure equal opportunity for low-income clients to participate in the American justice system.

The Center holds the collective expertise of the nation’s leading poverty law experts from the past 35 years by collecting, organizing, and disseminating reliable, comprehensive information on law and policy matters. This expertise is available to others through various media that include a national law journal

and other publications, a case pleadings bank known as the Poverty Law Library, and a Web site ([www.povertylaw.org](http://www.povertylaw.org)) dedicated to poverty law issues.

*Clearinghouse Review* is the flagship of the Center’s work and is the nation’s leading journal on poverty law. Now in its 33rd year, the *Review* serves as an important resource for poverty attorneys, policy analysts, lawmakers, and advocates representing low-income clients in civil law and social policy matters. Consistently presenting high-quality research and writing, the *Review* is a fountain of creative ideas on both traditional and emerging legal and policy issues affecting people in poverty. It connects, inspires, and informs advocates by combining academic analyses of legal issues and developments with practical strategies and advice on representing low-income clients. The *Review* also serves as a guide to and organizer of information, introducing new ideas and directing readers to additional sources for targeted information about particular subjects. It serves as a case reporter, abstracting and organizing (by substantive topic) recently filed case pleadings and decisions. Readers look to the journal as a comprehensive source for innovative ideas to improve current or proposed policy changes.



Staff Attorney Rose Jagust reviews documents in the NCPL Brief Bank.

Annually, the Center publishes one major issue of the *Review* that focuses on a particular theme, five issues that include substantive analytical articles, and about 50 case reports per issue. Topics covered by the *Review* have included, for example, serving the “hard-to-serve” in welfare reform, using reasonable



The NCPL Brief Bank, which contains over 500,000 poverty law pleadings, organized by case. The more recent materials are also in electronic form and available on the Web site.

accommodations to preserve rights of tenants with disabilities, SSI and the family law attorney, information management for the 21st century, the *Community Reinvestment Act*, checking accounts for low-income clients, and the annual public housing plan.

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The *Review* is circulated nationwide to a broad readership, including state and federal courts, legal services programs, law school libraries and clinics, Protection and Advocacy programs, programs funded by the Administration on Aging, private bar groups working on *pro bono* cases, social service organizations, policy think tanks, and other public interest groups.

William H. Gates, co-chair of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, recently wrote in the *Review*, "The poverty law attorney is challenged to incorporate the benefits of technological advances into his or her practice to maintain the tradition of quality and efficiency. This is an important part of 'equal justice for all.'" Serving as a gateway to poverty law information on the World Wide Web, the Center's Web site provides lawyers and others with quick and easy access to information pertinent to representing low-income clients. Linked to over 700 other relevant Web sites, users can begin in the Center's Web site and surf the Internet for poverty law and policy information with tremendous speed and ease.

The most significant of the many features on the Center's Web site is the electronic version of the Poverty Law Library. This unique library holds more than 500,000 poverty law documents, publications, and case files from all levels of the legal system and the U.S. Supreme Court. Its collection is the only one of its kind in the country and is not available on LEXIS or WESTLAW. Subscribers to the Center's Web site can download full text copies of recent cases submitted to the Library.

The other major substantive features on the Center's Web site include:

- Full-text *Clearinghouse Review* articles dating back to 1990 (allowing users to do quick and easy searches);
- *Poverty Law News*, an online newsletter that is updated weekly, which highlights recent developments and links to source documents relevant to advocates representing low-income clients;
- Over 700 research links that are continuously updated. These links include national and state support legal services programs, government agencies, nonprofits addressing poverty issues, *pro bono* programs, federal and state court systems, and myriad subject matters relevant to the poverty law community;
- *Practice Areas* that monitor poverty law developments in food programs, health, housing, immigration, and welfare;
- *Illinois Welfare News* (the Center's monthly newsletter on welfare reform issues) and other Illinois resources;

- *WomanView* (the Center's broadcast fax/e-mail newsletter on welfare issues affecting low-income women);
- A Legal Hotline Technical Assistance Library; and
- Discussion forums based on the Center's areas of substantive expertise (housing, welfare, financial services, and technology for the delivery of legal services to low-income people).

With many resources, formatted to meet different working styles, the National Center on Poverty Law plays a leadership role in providing legal support to advocates and decision-makers committed to a legal system that is open to the needs of low-income people. By providing timely, reliable, comprehensive, and well-organized information, the Center helps to ensure that low-income people have an equal voice in our American justice system.

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