

Southern Arizona Legal Aid shut down in SCC

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Between them, Alma Barajas and Patricia Peralta have invested nearly half a century in the Santa Cruz County office of the Southern Arizona Legal Aid program, or SALA. On Tuesday, they were told to pack it in and close the office effective immediately.

Clients will have to travel to the SALA headquarters in Tucson for services said Executive Director Anthony Young. In the meantime, the organization is looking for free office space locally to provide services to those who cannot make the 60-mile trip north.

However, Barajas, who opened the office 25 years ago and Peralta who has 23 years under her belt, no longer are in the picture as SALA struggles with a shrinking budget, Young said. "This is a consolidation measure and most of our costs are in personnel," where the bulk of savings will be realized, he said.

County Attorney George Silva said, "This is a huge loss to the community. We refer a large number of cases such as landlord-tenant disputes, divorces, custody issues. It's for people who can least afford to hire attorneys – the ones that are easiest to forget about.

"Many of them can't afford to go or don't have vehicles to travel to Tucson," he said.

Some clients are undocumented and cannot go through the Interstate 19 Border Patrol checkpoint, Silva said. "Granted, they are here illegally, but they are still entitled to know the law and inform themselves," a basic services of the legal aid office.

Barajas and Peralta regularly respond and work with county attorney staffers on domestic violence and sex-assault cases, he said. Referring to Barajas, he said, "Her motivation is the clients – the underprivileged in the community. She understands their needs."

Silva plans to reach out to her about providing free office space to possibly keep the service local, he said.

Reached for comment, Barajas declined to comment for this story. Peralta could not be reached by press time.

Plummeting revenue

A large portion of funding for SALA comes from the Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts, which has been slashed about 50 percent, Young explained. The revenues have plummeted due to record-low interest rates.

Legal Services Corporation, a non-profit group, provides the majority of the funding, Young said, but those funds have been frozen for the first quarter of 2011 "and we expect them to remain frozen the rest of the year," he said.

"We can't rely on the Legal Services Corporation to make up for the shortfall," he added.

The LSC currently funds 136 such programs with approximately 900 offices serving every county, state and Congressional District in the United States and its territories. Formed in 1974 with

bipartisan Congressional support, it was created to ensure that all Americans have access to a lawyer and the justice system for civil legal issues regardless of their ability to pay.

According to the American Bar Association, The FY 2010 Consolidated Appropriations Act provided the LSC with \$420 million, a much-needed \$30 million increase over the FY 2009 level of \$390 million. But inflation has taken a toll on the overall budget.

In fiscal year 1995, the LSC got \$400 million from Congress. Had the funding level kept up with inflation, the organization would have received \$568 million. The \$321 million appropriated in 1981 would be about \$765 million in today's dollars, according to the bar.

For more information about SALA or to request services, call 1-800-640-9465.