

# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin

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## Bureau looks back on 125 years

By Maria Kantzavelos, Law Bulletin staff writer

What do Clarence Darrow, Jane Addams and Woodrow Wilson have in common?

They all had some association with the organization now known as Legal Aid Bureau of Metropolitan Family Services, the agency's Executive Director Kendra Reinshagen said.

Reinshagen has been delving into the history of the Legal Aid Bureau especially this year, which marks the organization's 125th anniversary.

Leafing through a copy of the bureau's compiled annual reports dating back to its original charter in 1886, Reinshagen pointed out that the Legal Aid Bureau, considered the second-oldest provider of legal services to low-income people in the nation, was born as the Protective Agency for Women and Children. That agency, which was set up by a group of about 20 women in Chicago, set out to protect women and children from domestic violence and trafficking and to assist them with wage claims — only those weren't the words used back in the late 1800s to describe such exploitation, Reinshagen said.

"In the late 1800s there were movements in the major cities looking at poverty and the idea of helping people get out of poverty and this was one of those," Reinshagen said. "The leading female citizens came up with a very creative idea of using the law to help people get out of poverty and protect their legal rights."

Two years later, a group called the Bureau of Justice was formed by a group of men in Chicago, including Darrow, with the idea of protecting people from injustice but also looking at existing laws and suggestions for improvements, Reinshagen said.

Those two groups merged in 1905 to form the Legal Aid Society of Chicago.

By 1919, the Legal Aid Society became the Legal Aid Bureau and started offering clients legal and social services under one roof. That's around the time when Addams served as a "counselor" to the agency. Thanks to her assistance, the Legal Aid Bureau, whose previous incarnation was instrumental in passing the country's first child protection laws, can also say that it had a hand in the creation of one of the nation's first law school clinics. The clinic at Northwestern University School of Law handled criminal cases in connection with the Legal Aid Bureau.

Another of the agency's contributions, Reinshagen pointed out, was its assistance in establishing Chicago's municipal court system.

"It used to be you had to go to the justice of the peace and it was pretty corrupt," she said. "The idea was to set up a system that was fairer, that people who were making these judgments had to have a law degree, that it was more impartial and more public."

To celebrate its 125 years of service, the Legal Aid Bureau — which merged with Metropolitan Family Services in 1919 — throughout this year is planning to play host to a series of special events, including receptions involving its partner law firms and firms it said it hopes will support the group, as well as alumni and former staff members, many of whom now work in law firms but keep their ties with the group by providing pro bono assistance.

Plans are also in the works for athletic events, including sponsoring teams during Chicago's Bike the Drive event and the Chicago Marathon.

And, Reinshagen said, the agency is hoping to gain law firm sponsorships for the making of a video highlighting its history.

"These old reports are great because they have this really antiquated language and they're fun to read," she said.

Take the report dated April 1, 1888, which notes that Mrs. James Buckingham donated \$21 to the agency then known as the Protective Agency for Women and Children, at a time when the organization had a budget of about \$2,000, Reinshagen pointed out.

And there are letters dating back to the early 1900s from Presidents Wilson, Roosevelt and Taft, who served as

honorary vice presidents to the organization then known as the Legal Aid Society.

She shared this quote from Wilson's letter from the White House: "I have made it a principle all my life not to accept honorary connection with an society in the work of which I could not be active, but I have heard so much in praise of the Legal Aid Society of Chicago that I am willing to break my rule and consent to have my name used as one of its honorary vice presidents."

These are just a few of the notable names that surfaced as having some connection to an agency that last year served more than 7,000 low-income clients in Cook County with a staff of 21 as well as 143 volunteer attorneys who donated more than 6,000 hours of legal services, Reinshagen said.

Working with Metropolitan Family Services, which provides social services for its clients, the Legal Aid Bureau today represents victims of domestic violence in obtaining orders of protection, custody, child support and dissolution of marriage. It also works with Metropolitan Family Services' Elder Abuse Unit and it runs a poverty law project that offers residents on Chicago's South Side and in the south suburbs advice and representation on consumer issues.

"When you look at the types of cases that were handled back then [in the days of the LAB's founding], they were handling a lot of the same things," Reinshagen said. "We've also been instrumental in and are still active in working to make sure the system is responsive to poor people and their issues and also that the law is protecting poor people. And that's exactly what they foresaw as their mission."

The 125-year-old LAB has served as a model for agencies existing today with the aim of using the justice system to lift people out of poverty and working to provide equal access to justice, Reinshagen said.

In Cook County today, she said, "we have a legal aid community doing all kinds of work — protecting the disabled, students, immigrants, poor people, victims of domestic violence, the elderly.

"I don't know that [LAB's founders] could have envisioned that there would be over 30 programs in the city providing free legal services to poor people."

Information about upcoming events in celebration of LAB's many years of service will be posted on the agency's website at [metrofamily.org](http://metrofamily.org) and on its Facebook page.

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