

**PENNSYLVANIA LEGAL AID NETWORK
EXCELLENCE AWARD
2012 NOMINATION
(Nominations are due by Wednesday, December 7, 2011)**

I. NAME, ADDRESS, TELEPHONE NUMBER & E-MAIL ADDRESS OF NOMINEE

Please provide name as it should appear on award. Also, include nominee's address, telephone number and e-mail address:

Robert A. Oakley, Esq.
Executive Director
Northwestern Legal Services
1001 State Street, Suite 700
Erie, PA 16509
(814) 452-8123
roakley@nwls.org

II. CATEGORY

Please indicate under which category you are submitting this nomination:

Legal Services Staff

III. NOMINEE'S EXPERIENCE

Please provide an outline of this individual's experience with or on behalf of legal aid programs and its clients. Be as specific as possible:

For nearly 35 years, attorney Robert A. Oakley has devoted his professional life to the mission of legal aid. He has served the civil legal needs of low-income people as a community educator, legal services board member, senior staff attorney and managing attorney for a legal aid organization in Ohio, and as executive director of legal aid programs in both southeastern Wyoming and northwestern Pennsylvania. Along the way he has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to the core values of this mission, while using innovation and technology to significantly enhance service delivery to poverty-level individuals and families who look to legal aid for help.

In addition to his broad range of experience in basic field programs in Ohio, Wyoming and Pennsylvania, Oakley worked to further the goals and objectives of legal aid in his leadership roles within the Project Advisory Group of the National Association of Legal Services Programs. He has also worked with the private bar to expand pro bono representation and counsel for low-income clients, in addition to financial support for the mission of legal aid. Oakley has also been active in a variety of community and civic organizations that serve the needs of low-income people, including his current efforts as board president for the John F Kennedy Center, a neighborhood organization that provides essential services to inner-city residents of Erie, Pennsylvania.

For his dedication and commitment to the ideals of legal services, and his excellence in the performance of his responsibilities throughout his career, attorney Robert A. Oakley is most deserving of an Excellence Award from the Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network.

Oakley began his career in legal aid as a landlord-tenant community educator with the Legal Aid Society of Dayton following his graduation from the University of Akron School of Law in December 1976. In addition to his work conducting seminars in housing law and other poverty law areas, he also published a booklet titled "Landlord-Tenant and Ohio Law" that was revised in both

1983 and 1984. Although he left his work as a community educator to enter private practice in June 1977, he continued to serve the mission of legal services as a board member for the Legal Aid Society of Dayton in 1978 and 1979.

In October 1979 attorney Oakley left the board to accept a position as senior staff attorney for the Legal Aid Society of Dayton, and he was promoted to managing attorney in the organization in January 1982. He continued to work in the Ohio program until he was named executive director of the Legal Services for Southeastern Wyoming in June 1984, one of the three basic field programs providing legal aid to low-income clients in the state.

During his tenure as executive director for the Wyoming program, Oakley not only supervised the day-to-day operations of the organization, he also took an active role with the private bar to further the mission of legal aid. He served as chair of the Legal Aid Services Committee for the Wyoming State Bar from 1985 to 1992, and he worked with private attorneys and the judiciary to expand service to the low-income community through pro bono representation and counsel of poverty-level clients.

While in Wyoming, Oakley was also very active in the Project Advisory Group (PAG) of the National Association of Legal Services Programs. PAG was created in 1967 by the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity to serve as the voice of legal services programs and their clients. Oakley served the group in a variety of leadership roles, including as a member of the executive committee, the steering committee, and as vice-chairperson of the organization. In 1998 PAG merged with the National Legal Aid and Defender Organization (NLADA).

In January 1995, Oakley left southeastern Wyoming to accept his current responsibilities as executive director of Northwestern Legal Services (NWLS). NWLS provides the broad range of civil legal aid to low-income clients throughout 10 counties in northwestern Pennsylvania (a geographic area approximately the size of New Jersey) with staffed offices in Erie, Farrell, Meadville, Franklin, Warren and Bradford Pennsylvania.

Soon after his arrival at NWLS, Oakley began work on creating a centralized intake unit that still remains a model for legal aid organizations across the nation. The NWLS central intake unit, launched in 1996, has resulted in a significant increase in the number of clients served, an increase in the areas of law in which service is provided, uniformity in screening of client eligibility, program-wide conflict checks, a shorter time frame in scheduling appointments, reduced "no show" numbers, and client empowerment. Staff attorneys assigned to the unit provides telephone advice and/or brief service appropriate to the needs of NWLS clients, while facilitating an efficient system of intake and referral throughout the service region for cases requiring protracted representation and counsel of legal concerns.

In addition to the creation of a true central intake unit for legal services, Oakley has been a leader in integrating technological developments to enhance the mission of his organization, and to improve service delivery to low-income clients. The NWLS website, www.nwls.org, went online April 27, 1998, years before other legal aid organizations recognized the significance of web-based communication for community legal education and outreach. This past September (2011), NWLS implemented an online application for civil legal services developed with funds from a Pennsylvania IOLTA special project grant. The online application enables prospective clients to request legal aid from NWLS at any time of the day or night, and the process integrates with the case management system to avoid unnecessary duplication of data entry and intake requirements.

In 2001, NWLS developed a television series titled “Access to Justice” for broadcast on Erie Community Access Television, Channel 2, to over 35,000 households in the city of Erie. Now in its tenth season on air, the television series is produced, directed and edited in its entirety by NWLS Erie office staff, with Bob Oakley as host of the shows. Over the years the half-hour programs have provided in-depth information on a wide variety of topics important to the low-income community, and guests on the shows have spanned the gamut of legal aid staff, private attorneys, judges, civic leaders, social service personnel, client-eligible board members, and elected leaders such as (then) state attorney general Tom Corbett.

Along with the use of technology to improve service delivery to the client community in northwestern Pennsylvania, Oakley has worked with the private bar to promote the mission of legal aid. He has served for many years on the Law Day and Scholarship Committees of the Erie County Bar Association (ECBA), and he was instrumental in the creation of The Nonprofit Pro Bono Project : Professionals Helping Nonprofits , a collaborative effort of the Erie County Bar Association, NWLS, the Nonprofit Partnership and the Pennsylvania Institute of Certified Public Accountants, Erie Chapter. This project matches eligible nonprofit agencies with local lawyers and certified public accountants to provide free consultation, needs assessment and direct assistance with a variety of civil legal and financial issues.

The Legal Aid Volunteer Attorney (LAVA) Program was created in 1982 as a cooperative effort between the ECBA and NWLS to provide pro bono representation and counsel to eligible clients in civil legal cases, and it remains one of the premier initiatives in the Commonwealth. Oakley has worked over the years to keep LAVA an important component to the NWLS mission, and to expand the types of cases referred to private attorneys as part of the program. Under his leadership as NWLS executive director, the ECBA has increased its annual financial commitment to legal aid, and has assisted with major events such as the NWLS fortieth anniversary celebration in May 2009.

In addition to his ongoing efforts with the private bar, Oakley has invested his time and talents in assisting other non-profits that share in a mission of service to the low-income community. He is currently board president for the JFK Center in Erie, a neighborhood organization providing a wide variety of essential services to inner-city residents. The center offers nutrition programs for both seniors and children; educational classes on topics such as computer literacy; recreational opportunities for school-age children, along with other initiatives such as a Sickle Cell Anemia program and as a site for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). Oakley joined the JFK Center board of directors in 2006. In 2008, he was appointed chair of its Personnel and By-Laws committee and in 2010, was elected board president.

The PLAN Excellence Award is meant to honor those individuals who exhibit dedication and commitment to the ideals of legal aid. For his many years of service to the civil legal needs of the low-income community, and the excellence of his work in furthering the goals of this mission, attorney Robert A. Oakley is most deserving of this honor.

IV. NOMINEE'S EXAMPLES OF EXCELLENCE

Please provide a summary of the reason(s) you feel this individual presents an example of excellence. Outline any unique qualities that make your nominee stand out among the many excellent advocates and friends of legal aid. **The Awards Committee will look for specific examples of excellence, please be thorough in your response to this section.**

1.) Attorney Robert A. Oakley has devoted nearly his entire professional life (35 years) to the ideals of legal aid. He has served the civil legal needs of low-income people as a community educator, legal services board member, senior staff attorney and managing attorney for a legal aid organization in Ohio, and as executive director of legal aid programs in both southeastern Wyoming and northwestern Pennsylvania. Along the way he has remained true to the core values of legal services, while developing innovative strategies to enhance service delivery to the client community.

2.) As executive director of Northwestern Legal Services (NWLS), he provides leadership and supervision for a basic field program covering 10 counties in northwestern Pennsylvania (an area approximately the size of New Jersey) through six staffed offices in Erie, Farrell, Meadville, Franklin, Warren and Bradford Pennsylvania. Despite the economic downturn that confronts non-profit agencies across the Commonwealth and nation, Oakley has been able to navigate his organization through these turbulent times without reductions in staff or program services.

3.) As NWLS executive director, he developed a centralized intake unit that remains a model for legal services organizations across the country. The NWLS central intake unit, launched in 1996, has resulted in a significant increase in the number of clients served, an increase in the areas of law in which service is provided, uniformity in screening of client eligibility, program-wide conflict checks, a shorter time frame in scheduling appointments, reduced "no show" numbers, and client empowerment. Attorneys assigned to the intake unit provide telephone advice and/or brief service appropriate to the needs of certain NWLS clients, while facilitating an efficient system of intake and referral throughout the service region for cases requiring protracted representation and counsel from staff attorneys and paralegals.

4.) Under Oakley's guidance, NWLS has been a leader in using technology to enhance service delivery to the low-income community. NWLS went online with its website in April 1998, years before other legal aid organizations realized the importance of web-based resources for community legal education and outreach. A recent example (September 2011) of this commitment to innovation is the NWLS online application that enables prospective clients to request services at any time over the Internet. The online application process integrates with the NWLS case management system to avoid unnecessary duplication of data entry and intake requirements.

5.) Attorney Oakley has worked with the private bar to promote pro bono representation and counsel for low-income clients with civil legal concerns, and to offer financial support to the mission of legal aid. The Legal Aid Volunteer Attorney (LAVA) Program, a partnership between NWLS and the Erie County Bar Association, was awarded the Louis J. Goffman Award from the Pennsylvania Bar Foundation in 2002 as an organization whose commitments to pro bono have enhanced the delivery of legal services to Pennsylvania's poor or disadvantaged, making a critical difference in the lives of those in need of legal representation.

6.) In addition to his ongoing service to the legal profession, attorney Oakley has devoted his time and talents to the administrative needs of other non-profits that share in a mission of service to low-income people. He is currently the board president for the JFK Center in Erie, a neighborhood organization providing a wide variety of essential services to inner-city residents.

7.) Amid the challenges and changes confronting legal services, attorney Oakley has approached his organization's mission with a singular purpose: How can NWLS say "yes" to more low-income individuals and families who look to us for help with civil legal concerns? In many ways, this focus lies at the heart of his commitment to legal aid, and is reason for his selection as a 2012 Excellence Award recipient from PLAN.

V. NOMINATOR

Please provide your name, address, daytime phone number and e-mail address:

Thomas M. Lent, Esq.
Board President, Northwestern Legal Services
c/o Marshall Dennehey Warner Coleman & Goggin
717 State Street, Suite 701
Erie, PA 16501
(814) 480-7800
tmlent@mdwgcg.com

VI. REFERENCES

Please provide contact information for others who are familiar with this nominee's examples of excellence. The Awards Committee may contact these individuals for additional supporting testimonials and, if this nominee is selected, the individuals may be asked to provide content for the award video.

(See Attachments)

Sandy Brydon Smith
Executive Director
Erie County Bar Association
302 West Ninth Street
Erie, PA 16502-1427
(814) 459-3111

Thomas A. Tupitza, Esq.
PLAN Treasurer
c/o Knox Firm
120 West Tenth Street
Erie, PA 16501
(814) 459-2800, ext. 223

Samella Hudson-Brewton
Executive Director
John F Kennedy Center, Inc.
2021 East 20th Street
Erie, PA 16510
(814) 898-0400

NOTE: Supporting documentation should be included with this nomination form. The Awards Committee will look for specific examples of excellence, and will take into consideration commendation letters, relevant news clippings, or other documents that strengthen the nomination.