

BASIC LEGAL RESOURCES:
DEVELOPMENT OF A HANDBOOK FOR NON-
PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS SERVING THE
“WORKING POOR”

**Presented by the
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Young Lawyers Division**

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I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

BASIC LEGAL RESOURCES: A GUIDE FOR NONPROFIT AGENCIES IN SERVICE TO THE PUBLIC (“BLR Handbook”) is a handbook developed by the Tennessee Bar Association Young Lawyers Division (“TBA YLD”) for nonprofit agencies who serve the “working poor” (i.e., persons who do not necessarily qualify for legal aid but whose resources are generally inadequate to retain competent legal services). The BLR Handbook is a collection of pamphlets, brochures and original material in reproducible form on topics that were determined to be of interest to the “working poor,” including the court system, mediation, family law, housing, food stamps, health insurance, worker’s rights, and a number of others. The BLR Handbook includes pamphlets in both English and Spanish to accommodate Tennessee’s growing Hispanic population.

II. PROJECT PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

A. IDENTIFICATION OF NEED

During the 2001-2001 bar year, the TBA YLD examined its public service projects and determined that, while many groups of people were being served by the various projects of the YLD, the people who can be classified as the “working poor” were not being served by any of the TBA YLD’s projects. The TBA YLD formed the Task Force on Basic Legal Services (“Task Force”) in order to determine the needs of the “working poor” and examine whether those needs were being met by other organizations.

In order to assess the need, members of the Task Force spoke with various nonprofit organizations to determine what the needs of the “working poor” were with regard to information on basic legal issues and other law-related topics and whether those needs were being met. These nonprofit agencies indicated that many people who could be classified as “working poor” come to them seeking information on basic legal issues and law-related topics because they are unable to afford the services of a lawyer to answer the most basic questions. These agencies indicated that the resources available to assist these persons were limited and often difficult to obtain. As a result, the Task Force determined that there was a need within the target community for information on basic legal issues and law-related topics that was not being met by any other group.

B. DETERMINATION OF PROJECT GOALS AND DESIGN

1. DECISIONS TO BE MADE

After determining that there was a need that was not being met, the Task Force, with the full support of the TBA YLD, was faced with the daunting task of determining how best to meet those needs. The Task Force determined that those needs could be met best with a loose-leaf notebook with brochures and pamphlets that could be easily reproduced and distributed. The Task Force also determined that costs could be contained by having the materials available in printed format, as well as on CD-ROM. The Task Force envisioned a comprehensive notebook that addressed issues such as Tenn Care (Tennessee’s supplement to Medicaid), Medicaid, domestic violence assistance, the food stamp program, divorce and child custody, child support, and the laws that govern the landlord/tenant relationship. The Task Force also determined that

the information should be made available in both English and Spanish in order to serve Tennessee's growing Hispanic population.

The goal of the project was to assist the "working poor" by providing information on relevant legal topics through nonprofit agencies serving this population, as these persons are not likely to qualify for legal aid but generally cannot consult with an attorney to answer basic legal questions because of the cost. The Task Force's intent was to provide this information to the nonprofit agencies serving the "working poor" so that this group of citizens would be better able to understand, utilize and participate in the justice system, as well as learn about assistance that may be available.

Ultimately, the Task Force produced the BLR Handbook, which consists of 250+ pages of loose-leaf material containing information about legal topics relevant to the target audience. The BLR Handbook contains information on the following topics: legal resource agencies, the court system, mediation, family law, children's issues, housing, food stamps and feeding programs, TennCare (Tennessee's supplement to Medicaid), financial issues and consumer protection, workers' rights, homelessness, public benefits, Social Security disability, estate planning and probate, victim compensation, immigration, AIDS issues, and miscellaneous other information. Many of the materials have been reproduced in Spanish as well. In addition to the printed format, the BLR Handbook is being made available on CD-ROM.

The BLR Handbook includes an Evaluation Form for the nonprofit or other agency receiving the materials. It allows the recipient to evaluate the BLR Handbook's content and format, as well as make suggestions as to additional materials that the recipient would like to see included in future printings and in the updates to the handbook. The Evaluation Form has

allowed the Task Force to assess the BLR Handbook's usefulness, as well as evaluate the need for additional printings and updates.

2. DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

The Task Force consisted of and was chaired by Cynthia Richardson Wyrick and Angelia Morie, members of the TBA YLD Board of Governors, and directed by James R. Wheeler, the then-president of the TBA YLD. The Task Force was also assisted by the TBA YLD coordinator. All of the decisions made in planning the project were made by the co-chairs of the Task Force, along with input from both the TBA YLD president and the TBA YLD coordinator.

At the Task Force's initial meeting in 2001, the Task Force discussed the project goals in general and divided the responsibility of contacting various nonprofits to determine if there was a need for a BLR Handbook. The Task Force met again to discuss its findings and develop the goals of the project. After the goals were established and the topics to be covered in the BLR Handbook were ascertained, the Task Force co-chairs contacted various nonprofit organizations, legal aid offices, and government organizations in order to gather pamphlets and other information for the BLR Handbook. In addition to gathering the information, the Task Force obtained written consent to reproduce the materials in the BLR Handbook.

After the materials were gathered, the Task Force met to review the materials and determine which of them were appropriate for the BLR Handbook. Additionally, the Task Force determined which of the materials should be reproduced in Spanish. Because of the cost involved in contracting with a translator, it was determined that a cross-section of the material would be selected for translation rather than attempting to have all of the materials translated. Once this was completed, the Task Force contracted with a translator to translate the English

versions of the pamphlets into Spanish. The BLR Handbook prototype was then completed and sent to the printer for printing.

When the BLR Handbooks were ready for distribution, the Task Force, assisted by the Tennessee Bar Association's Access to Justice coordinator, began the difficult task of distribution. Copies of the BLR Handbook were immediately distributed to those agencies and organizations that had supplied materials for use in the handbook. The BLR Handbook was also distributed to a number of other nonprofits who have been identified and contacted by both the Task Force and the TBA's Access to Justice coordinator. The BLR Handbook was provided to these agencies and organizations free of charge, and the recipients were encouraged to reproduce its contents for persons in the target group.

3. CONSIDERATIONS IN PROJECT PLANNING

a. Community Resources

Much of the information in the BLR Handbook was collected from nonprofit agencies, legal aid societies, and government offices. Those assisting included the Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee, the Tennessee Commission on Aging, West Tennessee Legal Services, Inc., Knoxville Legal Aid Society, Inc., Tennessee Department of Human Services, AARP, Federal Trade Commission, Bureau of Consumer Protection, Office of Consumer and Business Education, National Consumer Law Center, Inc., Consumer Action, Community Partnership Center, Rural Legal Services of Tennessee, U.S. Department of the Treasury, Internal Revenue Service, Senior Citizens Law Project of West Tennessee Legal Services, TennCare Consumer Advocacy Program, Tennessee Health Care Campaign, U.S. Department of Justice, Vietnam Veterans of America Legal Services, Tennessee Alternative Dispute Resolution Committee,

Tennessee Regulatory Authority, Tennessee Association of Legal Services, American Bar Association, Knox County Dismas House, Child and Family Tennessee, YWCA of Oak Ridge, Nashville Bar Association Young Lawyers Division, Tennessee Supreme Court/ Court Improvement Program, Tennessee Department of Children's Services, Early Child Health Outreach, Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Sexual Assault Crisis Center, Quinco Mental Health Centers, Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities, Community Mediation Service, Tennessee Bar Association Pro Se Subcommittee, Administrative Office of the Courts, Department of Human Services, West Tennessee Legal Services, SafeSpace, University of Tennessee at Martin, Huffman Bedford Consulting Group, Tennessee Infant Parent Services (TIPS), Baccalaureate Education System Trust (BEST), Tennessee Justice System, Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Fair Housing Initiatives Project, Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee and the Cumberland, Families First, and TennCare for Children Project. In exchange for permission to reproduce their materials, these organizations were provided with a copy of the BLR Handbook.

b. Revenue Availability

The TBA YLD provided funding for the project. The TBA YLD's funding is received from its CLE courses and from the Tennessee Bar Association. Additionally, the Task Force applied for and received an ABA/YLD Sub Grant in the amount of \$2,000.00, which has been used to help defray the printing and distribution costs associated with the BLR Handbook. With those funds, the Task Force has been able to print and distribute approximately 250 BLR Handbooks. The translation, printing and postage costs were substantial. If your budget is very

limited for this project, we suggest that you use a CD-ROM version only and post the materials on your website.

c. Physical Needs

In order to produce the BLR Handbook, the Task Force contracted with a Spanish translator to translate various materials in the handbook. The Task Force also contracted with a printing company to produce the notebook versions of the BLR Handbook. In order to save costs and because the Tennessee Bar Association has CD-burning capability, CD-ROM versions of the BLR Handbook are currently being produced in-house at the Tennessee Bar Association Bar Center. Because of the size of the BLR Handbook and the number of copies initially printed, the Tennessee Bar Association has dedicated space in its offices for storage of the BLR Handbooks until all of them have been distributed.

III. IMPLEMENTATION: HOW TO REPLICATE THE PROJECT

A. TIMETABLE

Planning for the TBA YLD's BLR Handbook began in 2001 and remains a work in progress. An affiliate desiring to replicate the project should anticipate that the project will take a minimum of two years from implementation to final distribution of the initial printing. The following is a projected timetable from the planning stage through distribution of the initial printing.

Two Years Prior to Projected Distribution

1. Form a task force to identify the target audience and assess the need for the project. Choose at least one person to chair the task force and direct the work on the project.

2. Assign each task force member a number of agencies to contact to determine the need for the project and the needs, if any, of the target audience which are not being met by other sources.

Twenty-One Months Prior to Projected Distribution

1. Have each task force member report his or her findings. If it is determined that there are needs that are not being met, formulate a plan to meet those needs.
2. Develop a timetable in which to develop the project. Prepare a budget and begin looking for sources for funding if necessary.
3. Develop a Table of Contents for your handbook. Determine, based on the conversations with the agencies, what information should be included in the handbook.
4. Give each task force member a list of agencies and organizations to contact to solicit information for the handbook. Request that each task force member have his or her information for the book available for review within ninety (90) days.

Eighteen Months Prior to Projected Distribution

1. Review all of the information collected for the handbook, and determine which information will be included in the handbook. (You will likely have multiple pamphlets on each topic and will probably want to choose the most well-written and “easy to understand.”)
2. Draft and send a letter and form allowing consent to reproduce materials to each information provider or publisher requesting permission to reprint the materials. Be sure the letter adequately describes your project and its goals.
3. Begin seeking grant opportunities and other sources of funding.

Fifteen Months Prior to Projected Distribution

1. Compile the handbook using the information for which permission to reprint has been obtained.
2. In the event your affiliate desires to print information in languages other than English, contract with a translator to translate the materials into the other language or languages.
3. Prepare an Evaluation Form so that your materials can be evaluated by the agencies receiving them.

4. Finalize funding for the project and review the budget to be sure it adequately meets the need of the project.

Twelve Months Prior to Projected Completion

1. Prepare the materials, including any non-English translations, to send to the printer.
2. Send materials to be printed.
3. Prepare any alternative versions of the handbook (i.e., DVD, CD-ROM, or internet versions).
4. Begin compiling the names and addresses of agencies and nonprofit organizations who may benefit from your handbook. Get contact information for a specific individual at the agency or organization so that the handbook will be sent to the person in the best position to see that it is used.

Nine Months Prior to Completion

1. Begin distribution of your handbook. Contact all agencies and nonprofit organizations on your distribution list. Seek the names of other organizations that may benefit from the handbook.
2. Request that each agency or organization receiving a copy of your handbook fill out an evaluation form and return it to you. Begin collecting the evaluation forms.

Three Months Prior to Completion

1. Have your task force meet again to discuss the evaluations received and determine whether additional printings are needed.
2. Discuss and identify any other organizations that may benefit from the materials who may have been overlooked.

Completion

1. Conduct a final review of the evaluations.
2. If recipients have indicated that the information in the handbook was useful, determine whether or not your affiliate desires to continue with the updates of the handbook.
3. If updates are desired, formulate a plan to be sure that the materials are updated regularly and that updates are distributed to all of the recipients of the handbook.

4. If updates are not desired or are not feasible, thank all of the agencies who have received the materials and provided evaluations. Advise them that they should not expect the materials to be updated and advise them that the laws may change, which may make the materials “stale” and unreliable.

B. RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING OF VOLUNTEERS

No volunteers or specialized training is needed for this project. The TBA YLD initially formed a task force comprised of two TBA YLD members and the TBA YLD president. The Task Force was assisted by the TBA YLD director. Several TBA YLD Board Members assisted in gathering information from agencies and non profits for use in the BLR Handbook. Once the information was collected, the Task Force was primarily responsible for compiling the handbook prototype and getting it ready to be copied.

C. DAY-TO-DAY OPERATIONS

This project is on-going and requires work on an on-going basis. The Task Force, together with the Tennessee Bar Association’s Access to Justice coordinator, continues to distribute the BLR Handbooks and collect evaluations. Because the feedback has been so positive, the TBA YLD intends to continue printing the BLR Handbook and updating the materials contained therein.

IV. EVALUATION AND IMPACT

The TBA YLD’s BLR Handbook has been well-received by nonprofit organizations and agencies that serve the “working poor.” Because of its user-friendly format, these groups have indicated that they have been able to copy various materials from the BLR Handbook to

distribute to those persons they serve. Based on the feedback received thus far, the BLR Handbook is accomplishing the goal of assisting the “working poor” by providing information on relevant legal topics.

The formal evaluation through the Evaluation Forms in the front cover of the BLR Handbook has been of great benefit in assessing the success of the project. Be sure to stress to recipients the importance of returning the evaluation forms. Through the information obtained from the Evaluation Form, the TBA YLD has determined that this project should be continued and that the BLR Handbook should be continually updated and distributed.

V. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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