

7050-01-P-01-P

LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION

45 CFR Part 1621

Client Grievance Procedures

AGENCY: Legal Services Corporation

ACTION: Final Rule.

SUMMARY: This Final Rule amends the Legal Services Corporation's regulation on client grievance procedures. These changes are intended to improve the utility of the regulation for grantees and their clients and applicants for service in the current operating environment. In particular, the changes clarify what procedures are available to clients and applicants, to emphasize the importance of the grievance procedure for clients and applicants and to add clarity and flexibility in the application of the requirements for hotline and other programs serving large and widely dispersed geographic areas.

DATES: This Final Rule becomes effective on [insert date 30 days from date of publication].

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SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

The Legal Services Corporation's (LSC) regulation on client grievance procedures, 45 CFR Part 1621, adopted in 1977 and not amended since that time, requires that LSC grant recipients establish grievance procedures pursuant to which clients and applicants for service can pursue complaints with recipients related to the denial of legal assistance or dissatisfaction with

the legal assistance provided. The regulation is intended to help “insure that legal services

Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM). LSC convened a Rulemaking Workshop on January 18, 2006, and provided a report to the Committee at its meeting on January 27, 2006. As a result of that Workshop and report the Board directed that LSC convene a second Rulemaking Workshop and report back to the Operations & Regulations Committee prior to the development of any NPRM. LSC convened a second Rulemaking Workshop on March 23, 2006 and provided a report to the Committee at its meeting on April 28, 2006. As a result of the second Workshop and report, the Board directed that a Draft NPRM be prepared. The Committee considered the Draft NPRM at its meeting of July 28, 2006 and the Board approved this NPRM for publication and comment at its meeting of July 29, 2006. LSC published the NPRM on August 21, 2006 (71 Fed. Reg. 48501). LSC received five timely comments on the NPRM.

Summary of the Rulemaking Workshops

LSC convened the first Part 1621 Rulemaking Workshop on January 18, 2006. The following persons participated in the Workshop: Gloria Beaver, South Carolina Centers for Equal Justice Board of Directors (client representative); Steve Bernstein, Director, Legal Services of New York – Brooklyn; Colleen Cotter, Director, The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland; Irene Morales, Director, Inland Counties Legal Services; Linda Perle, Senior Counsel, Center for Law and Social Policy; Melissa Pershing, Director, Legal Services Alabama; Don Saunders, Director, Civil Legal Services, National Legal Aid and Defender Association; Rosita Stanley, National Legal Aid and Defenders Association Client Policy Group (client representative); Chuck Wynder, Acting Vice President, National Legal Aid and Defenders Association; Steven Xanthopoulos, Director, West Tennessee Legal Services; Helaine Barnett, LSC President (welcoming remarks only); Karen Sarjeant, LSC Vice President for Programs and Compliance; Charles Jeffress, LSC Chief Administrative Officer; Mattie Condray, Senior

Assistant General Counsel, LSC Office of Legal Affairs; Bert Thomas, Program Counsel, LSC Office of Compliance and Enforcement; Mike Genz, Director, LSC Office of Program Performance; Mark Freedman, Assistant General Counsel, LSC Office of Legal Affairs; and Karena Dees, Staff Attorney, LSC Office of Inspector General.

The discussion was wide-ranging and open. The participants first discussed the importance of and reason for having a client grievance process. There was general agreement that the client grievance process is important to give a voice to people seeking assistance from legal services programs and to afford them dignity. The client grievance process also helps to keep programs accountable to their clients and community. It was generally agreed that the current regulation captures this purpose well. However, it was noted that the client grievance process also can be an important part of a positive client/applicant relations program and serve as a source of information for programs and boards in assessing service and setting priorities. This potential is not currently reflected in the regulation.

The participants noted that the vast majority of complaints received involve complaints regarding the denial of service, rather than complaints over the manner or quality of service provided. The vast majority of complaints over the manner and quality of service provided are resolved at the staff level (including with the involvement of the Executive Director); complaints which need to come before the governing body's grievance committee(s) are few and far between. It was noted that many recipients have the experience of receiving multiple complaints over time from the same small number of individuals.

In the course of the discussion, the group discussed a variety of other issues related to the client grievance process. The group also considered the fact that some of the issues raised,

although important, may not be easily or most appropriately addressed in the text of the regulation. Some of these issues are summarized as follows:

- Whether programs can be more “proactive” in making clients and applicants aware of their rights under the client grievance procedure, but do so in a positive manner that does not create a negative atmosphere at the formation of the attorney-client relationship. It was noted that while informing clients of their rights can be empowering, suggesting at the outset that they may not like the service they receive is not conducive to a positive experience.
- The appropriate role of the governing body in the client grievance/client relations process;
- Challenges presented in providing proper notice of the client grievance procedure to applicants and clients who are served only over the telephone and/or email/internet interface;
- Application of the process to Limited English Proficiency clients and applicants;
- Whether and to what extent it is appropriate for the composition of a grievance committee to deviate from the approximate proportions of lawyers and clients on the governing body, e.g. by a higher proportion of clients than the governing body has generally;
- Challenges presented by a requirement for an in-person hearing and what other options may be appropriate;
- Whether the limitation of the grievance process related to denials of service to the three enumerated reasons for denial in the current rule is too limited given the wide range of reasons a program may deny someone service;

- Whether the grievance process should include cases handled by non-staff such as PAI attorneys, volunteers, attorneys on assignment to the grantee (often as part of a law firm pro bono program);

Finally, the group was in general agreement that additional opportunity for comment and fact finding would prove useful to both LSC and the legal services community before LSC committed to moving ahead with the development of a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking.

LSC convened its second Part 1621 Rulemaking Workshop March 23, 2006. The following persons participated in the second Workshop: Claudia Colindres Johnson, Hotline Director, Bay Area Legal Aid (CA); Terrence Dicks, Client Representative, Georgia Legal Services; Breckie Hayes-Snow, Supervising Attorney, Legal Advice and Referral Center (NH); Norman Janes, Executive Director, Statewide Legal Services of Connecticut; Harry Johnson, Client Representative, NLADA Client Policy Group; Joan Kleinberg, Managing Attorney, CLEAR, Northwest Justice Project (WA); George Lee, Client Representative, Kentucky Clients Council; Richard McMahon, Executive Director, New Center for Legal Advocacy (MA); Linda Perle, Senior Counsel, Center for Law and Social Policy; Peggy Santos, Client Representative, Massachusetts Legal Aid Corporation; Don Saunders, Director, Civil Legal Services, National Legal Aid and Defender Association; Rosita Stanley, Client Representative, NLADA Client Policy Group; Helaine Barnett, LSC President (welcoming remarks only); Karen Sarjeant, LSC Vice President for Programs and Compliance; Charles Jeffress, LSC Chief Administrative

- All of the programs reported that intake staff will deal with dissatisfied callers by offering to let them talk to a supervisor, sometimes the executive director. They are given the choice of talking to someone or filing a written complaint. They almost always want to talk to someone. Talking with someone higher up almost always resolves the issue and usually entails an explanation of the decision not to provide service.
- Decisions to deny service sometimes involve the priorities of other entities such as pro bono programs that take referrals. Some programs handle intake for themselves and for other organizations. The criteria for intake are not always the same. A program may have to handle complaints about denials of service that involve a different program's priorities.
- In many situations there is nothing more that the program can do, especially when a denial of service decision was correct. There was a concern about creating lots of procedures that would give a grievant false hope. It is important that the applicant get an "honest no" in a timely fashion.
- The oral and written statements to a grievance committee do not require an in person hearing. These can be conveyed by conference call, which may be better in some circumstances. In some cases though, clients or applicants have neither transportation nor access to a phone. Programs may have difficulty providing grievance procedures in those situations.
- Hotlines have a number of callers who never speak to a member of the hotline staff. They include hang ups, disconnected calls, people who got information through the automated system, and people who could not wait long enough. These calls may include frustrated applicants who never got to the denial of service stage.

- Websites could provide client grievance information, but that also raises questions about how to make grievance information available only to people with complaints about that program. There is a danger of a generally available form becoming a conduit for a flood of complaints unrelated to a program and its services.
- The grievance process itself should not be intimidating. Often the applicants and clients are already very frustrated and upset before contacting the program.
- There was discussion of what process, if any, a client had for quality concerns with a PAI attorney or a pro bono referral. One program reported informally mediating these disputes. Another program reported surveying clients at the end of PAI cases and following up on any negative comments. One program reported that its separate pro bono program has its own grievance procedures. There was a concern that private attorneys would not volunteer if they felt that they would be subject to a program's grievance process and grievance committee. There was some discussion acknowledging a distinction between paid and unpaid PAI attorneys, but noting that clients do not see a difference.

Section-by- Section Analysis

After considering the discussions from the Workshops and the comments received in response to the NPRM, LSC has determined that

At the outset, we note one comment in which the commenter requested that LSC confirm its understanding of the terms “applicant” and “deny” (or “denial”) as those terms are used throughout this regulation. LSC intends no change to the meaning of the terms “denial” and “deny” as they are used in the current client grievance procedures rule. LSC intends that “applicant” has the same meaning as it does in Part 1611, Financial Eligibility.

Section 1621.1 – Purpose

LSC proposed to amend this section to clarify that the grievance procedures required by this section are intended for the use and benefit of applicants for legal assistance and for clients of recipients and not for the use or benefit of third parties. LSC received one comment supporting and no comments opposing this amendment. Accordingly, LSC adopts this change as proposed.

In addition, LSC proposed to delete the reference to “an effective remedy” because the grievance process is just that, a process and not a guarantee of any specific outcome or “remedy” for the complainant. LSC received two comments specifically supporting this change. Accordingly, LSC adopts the deletion as proposed.

LSC considered including a statement in this section clarifying that the client grievance procedure is not intended to and does not create any entitlement on the part of applicants to legal assistance. LSC specifically invited comment on this issue in the NPRM. One commenter agreed with LSC’s determination that the addition of such a statement would not ultimately be a useful addition to the regulation useful because it seems unlikely that many applicants for legal assistance will have read the regulation prior to applying for legal assistance. However, LSC also received two comments suggesting that LSC should include language in this section making it clear that the existence of a grievance procedure does not mean that an applicant is entitled to

service. These commenters argue that such a statement would be helpful in that, even if applicants do not read the grievance procedures rule, recipients would have something concrete to refer to in talking with applicants unhappy with being denied legal assistance.

LSC acknowledges that there are good arguments to be made in favor of both positions (inclusion of a non-entitlement statement and non-inclusion of such a statement). Upon further reflection, LSC has come to believe the inclusion of such a statement in the regulation would be beneficial as it will clarify that the existence of grievance procedures, particularly a grievance procedure to complain about the denial of legal assistance, in no way guarantees that legal assistance must be provided. Accordingly, LSC is adding a statement to this section providing: “[t]his Part is not intended to and does not create any entitlement to legal assistance.”

Another issue which came up during the Workshops was the ancillary use by recipients of the client grievance procedures as a feedback mechanism to help recipients identify issues such as the need for priorities changes (i.e., because there are increasing numbers of applicants seeking legal assistance for problems not otherwise part of the recipient’s priorities), foreign language assistance, staff trainer,TD-0.0(rkshops was Twinsistance08rocedur)JTJ13.295093TD0.00c8(unt

Section 1621.2 - Grievance Committee

LSC did not propose any changes to this section. There was discussion in one of the Workshops about whether and to what extent it is appropriate for the composition of a grievance committee to deviate from the approximate proportions of lawyers and clients on the governing body, e.g. by a higher proportion of clients than the governing body has generally. It was not clear from the discussion, however, what such a change would accomplish and there was no clear feeling that the current requirement was resulting in ineffective or inappropriate grievance committees. Accordingly, LSC considers the current wording of the regulation, which requires the proportion of clients and lawyer members of the grievance committee to approximate that of the governing body, to be sufficiently flexible for recipients to respond to local conditions. LSC received no comments opposing and two comments expressly supporting LSC's approach to this issue. As such, LSC continues to believe any change to this section to be unwarranted.

The comments supporting LSC's position on this issue did, however, suggest that LSC add a discussion to the preamble to note that although there is a role for each recipient's governing body on the grievance process, it is also important to recognize the limited role of the governing body in the day-to-day operations of the recipient. Further, it is incumbent on all parties to recognize that governing body members have fiduciary duties to their organization and must be careful, when engaging in any grievance committee activities they must safeguard these duties and avoid any potential conflicts of interest. LSC agrees that these are important

about the denial of legal assistance. Consistent with the proposed changes in the purpose section, LSC believes these changes will help clarify that the grievance procedure is available to applicants and not to third parties wishing to complain about denial of service to applicants who are not themselves complaining. LSC notes that for applicants who are underage or mentally incompetent, the applicant him or herself is not likely to be directly applying for legal assistance and LSC does not intend this change to impede the ability of any person (parent, guardian or other representative) to act on that applicant's behalf. Rather, LSC intends the proposed clarification to apply to situations in which a neighbor, friend, relative or other third party would seek to complain in a situation in which the applicant is otherwise capable of complaining personally. LSC received two comments expressly supporting these changes and no comments opposing them. Accordingly, LSC adopts these changes as proposed.

Second, LSC proposed to delete the language which limits complaints about the denial of legal assistance to situations in which the denial was related to the financial ineligibility of the applicant, the fact that legal assistance sought is prohibited by the LSC Act or regulations or lies outside the recipient's prio

not agree that the phrase “to the extent practicable” is substantively preferable to “as practicable.” LSC believes that “to the extent practicable” suggests that that if a recipient decides it is not practicable, the recipient is not required to provide notice at all, whereas LSC believes that that the phrase “as practicable” suggests that adequate notice will always be provided, but recognizes the significant leeway recipients need in determining the particular time and manner in which that notice is to be provided. However, LSC does agree that the language it proposed in section 1621.4 is clearer than the language in proposed 1621.3, Accordingly, LSC is adopting language that provides that the

LSC received two comments specifically addressing this change. One commenter suggested that this statement should not be mandatory because the requirement necessitates a subjective judgment as to what is effective. Although LSC agrees that regulations should generally set forth clear, objective standards, there are situations in which some level of discretion and judgment are appropriately incorporated into a rule. An example of this is the “adequate” notice requirement discussed above. One could argue that “adequate” is a subjective term, yet LSC believes that there is no appropriate “one size fits all” approach and that recipients may provide notice in a variety of ways, any of which is adequate to inform the applicant as to the existence of a complaint procedure and what they are such that the applicant can meaningfully exert his or her rights under that procedure. Similarly, LSC believes that *requiring* the procedures to be designed to foster effective communication signals the seriousness with which LSC takes this element of the complaint procedure process (based on the importance which both applicant and recipients place on it), yet provides for a necessary level of recipient discretion in achieving the desired results. Accordingly, LSC declines to substitute the word “should” for “must” as suggested. LSC does believe a change in this paragraph, however, is warranted. Another commenter suggested the use of the word “shall” for “must” to be consistent with the use of the word “shall” throughout the remainder of the regulation. LSC agrees that “shall” is more appropriate in this context and adopts this suggestion.

LSC considered proposing to add a statement that the required procedure must be designed to treat complaining applicants with dignity, as this was another recurring refrain LSC heard throughout the Workshops. Because treating applicants with dignity is such a basic duty, LSC preliminarily determined that it is neither necessary nor appropriate to make it a specific regulatory requirement in this context and invited comment on this issue. LSC received one

comment specifically supporting LSC's determination in this respect and none in opposition.

simple procedure for review of a decision that a person is financially ineligible, or that assistance is prohibited by the Act or Corporation Regulations, or by priorities established by the recipient pursuant to section [sic] 1620.” As such, LSC does not agree that the proposed revised language (that a recipient “shall establish a simple procedure for review of decisions to deny legal assistance to applicants”) implies any more or less than the current language does about whether the review is applicable to all decisions or only those which become a subject of a complaint. Moreover, to the extent that any decision to deny an applicant legal assistance is potentially subject to a complaint, all decisions must be subject to review. Nonetheless, neither the current regulation nor the proposed revisions are intended to require recipients to create a procedure for internal review of decisions to deny legal assistance outside of and apart from the client grievance procedure. LSC believes that the language of section 1621.3 can be clarified on this point. Accordingly, LSC is changing the language of proposed section 1621.3 to read “[a] recipient shall establish a simple procedure for review of complaints by applicants about decisions to deny legal assistance to the applicant.” This language is also more consistent with the similar language in section 1621.4.

Section 1621.4 – Complaints by clients about manner or quality of legal assistance

As noted above, LSC proposed to reorganize the regulation to move the current section dealing with complaints about legal assistance provided to clients after the section on complaints by applicants about denial of legal assistance. For a discussion of the reasons for this proposed change, see the discussion at section 1621.3, above. LSC received two comment specifically supporting the proposed reorganization. LSC continues to believe the proposed reorganization will clarify this matter and make the regulation easier for recipients and LSC to use. Accordingly, LSC adopts the change in organization as proposed.

LSC also proposed some minor substantive changes. First, LSC proposed to add language to the title of this section and the text of the regulation to clarify that this section refers to complaints by clients about the manner or quality of legal assistance provided. LSC received two comments expressly supporting these changes and no comments opposing them. Consistent with the proposed changes in the purpose section, LSC continues to believe these changes will help clarify that the grievance procedure is available to clients and not to third parties wishing to complain about the legal assistance provided to clients who are not themselves complaining. Accordingly, LSC adopts these changes as proposed. As with

As with proposed section 1621.3, LSC considered also proposing to add a statement that the required procedure must be designed to treat complaining clients with dignity, but chose not to for the same reasons articulated in that proposed section, above. As noted above, LSC received one comment expressly supporting LSC's position on this issue.

LSC also proposed to amend the time specified in the rule regarding when the client must be informed of the complaint procedures available to clients. Currently, clients must be informed "at the time of the initial visit." This is typically accomplished in one of several different ways, such as through the posting of the complaint procedures in the office, by providing an information sheet to clients or by including information about the grievance procedure in the retainer agreement, etc. However, the phrase "at the time of the initial visit" tends to imply an in-person initial contact – a situation which is increasingly uncommon for many recipients and clients. Also, a client may not actually be accepted as a client at the time of the initial contact (whether in person or not). LSC believes that what is important is that when the person being accepted as client be informed of the available complaint procedure at that time because that is when the information appears to be most useful and meaningful for the client. Accordingly, LSC proposed that clients be informed of the grievance procedures available to them to complain about the manner or quality of .3(m)8.6(a)-0.post 0.-0.4(nnener ig(a)-0e3t29.085 -2.3 TDu0.5

LSC received two comments addressing this proposed change. Both comments generally supported the proposed change as helpful as appropriate, but suggested substituting the word “practical” for “possible” as it appears in proposed section 1621.4(b)(1). However, the word “possible” is not used in that subsection. Rather, LSC used the word “practicable” in that proposed subsection. LSC believes that the language as proposed already meets the intent of the comments, but LSC does not believe the use of the word

LSC stated in the preamble to the NPRM, it intends that a recipient's existing complaint procedures for clients who are dissatisfied with the manner or quality of legal assistance provided which would meet the proposed revised requirements may continue to be used and would be considered to be sufficient to meet their obligations under this section. 71 Fed. Reg. at 48505 (August 21, 2006).

The last change LSC proposed to this section was to include an explicit requirement that the grievance procedures provide some method of reviewing complaints by clients about the manner or quality of service provided by private attorneys pursuant to the recipient's private attorney involvement (PAI) program under 45 CFR Part 1614. The regulation has previously been silent on this matter and LSC has not required recipients to apply the client grievance procedure to private attorneys. LSC notes, however, that from the clients' standpoint it is immaterial whether legal assistance happens to be provided directly by the recipient or by a private attorney pursuant to the PAI program. In both cases, the client remains a client of the recipient and should be afforded some avenue to complain about legal assistance provided. At the same time, subjecting private attorneys to the same grievance procedure that applies to the recipient would likely be administratively burdensome and likely impede recipients' ability to recruit private attorneys for the PAI program.

state bar's grievance procedures and should be prepared to refer clients to the state bar's grievance procedures (or possibly to independent counsel) when such referral would be appropriate. We agree that this is an important consideration and so note it herein.

The other commenter suggested that this provision might prove difficult for recipients in private attorney recruitment efforts and urged LSC to refrain from adopting such a provision without first soliciting input from the ABA and state and local bar associations. The comment does not address with any specificity how recruitment efforts might be impeded in light of the fact noted in the preamble to the NPRM (and restated above) that

Complaints received from clients about the manner or quality of legal assistance that has been rendered by a private attorney pursuant to the recipient's private attorney involvement program under 45 CFR Part 1614 shall be processed in a manner consistent with its responsibilities under 45 CFR §1614.3(d)(3) and with applicable state or local rules of professional responsibility.

LSC believes this language does not create a substantive change in the policy proposed in the NPRM but, instead, states that policy in a clearer, more appropriate manner. Accordingly, LSC adopts the PAI-related provision as described herein. LSC reiterates, that is it not requiring recipients to afford the same procedure as provided to clients being provided service directly by the recipient. LSC also reiterates that it intends that existing formal and informal methods for review of complaints about PAI attorneys currently meeting recipients' obligations under Part 1614 continue to be used and would be considered to be sufficient to meet their obligations under this section.

LSC received two other comments addressing proposed section 1621.4. Both of these comments ask LSC to clarify that the requirement in proposed section 1621.4(d) that recipients maintain files of complaints and their disposition applies only to complaints by clients about the manner or quality of legal assistance provided and not to complaints by applicants about the denial of legal assistance. As a matter of basic regulatory interpretation, LSC believes that it is clear that a requirement contained in one paragraph of a section applies only to that section and not to any other section in the regulation, absent a statement in the regulation itself to the contrary. This is the reason that, for example, the proposed sections 1621.3 and 1621.4 contain parallel requirements that the grievance procedures be designed to foster effective communications; if having the requirement in one section were sufficient to have it apply in the

other, it would not be necessary to have similar requirements in both sections. LSC does not believe that any modification of the regulation is necessary and anticipates that this discussion will remove any possible ambiguity.

One of these commenters further suggested that either the rule or preamble should make clear that files are required only for complaints that are not resolved informally by staff, the executive director or the executive director's designee and that the requirement should, instead, apply only to complaints that have been considered by the Board's grievance committee. The current requirement found in section 1621.3(c) is not limited in the manner suggested by the commenter. Rather, the current language provides that in cases of complaints by clients about the manner of quality of legal assistance provided "a file containing *every* complaint and a statement of its disposition shall be preserved for examination by the Corporation" (emphasis added). The proposed provision is exactly the same as the current one (except for substitution of "LSC" for "Corporation"). For LSC to adopt the position urged by the commenter in the preamble would result in a preambular statement directly at odds with the clear language of the regulation. For LSC to change the regulation would result in a significant substantive change for which no rationale has been articulated. LSC declines to adopt this suggestion.

For reasons set forth above, and under the authority of 42 U.S.C. 2996g(e), LSC revises 45

CFR Part 1621 as follows:

PART 1621—CLIENT GRIEVANCE PROCEDURES

Sec.

1621.1 Purpose.

1621.2 Grievance Committee.

1621.3 Complaints by applicants about denial legal assistance.

1621.4 Complaints by clients about manner or quality of legal assistance.

AUTHORITY: Sec. 1006(b)(1), 42 U.S.C. 2996e(b)(1); sec. 1006(b)(3), 42 U.S.C. 2996e(b)(3); sec. 1007(a)(1), 42 U.S.C. 2996f(a) (1).

§ 1621.1 Purpose.

The part is intended to help ensure that recipients provide the highest quality legal assistance to clients as required by the LSC Act and are accountable to clients and applicants for legal assistance by requiring recipients to establish grievance procedures to process complaints by applicants about the denial of legal assistance and clients about the manner or quality of legal assistance provided. This Part is not intended to and does not create any entitlement to legal assistance.

§ 1621.2 Grievance Committee.

The governing body of a recipient shall establish a grievance committee or committees, composed of lawyer and client members of the governing body, in approximately the same proportion in which they are on the governing body.

§ 1621.3 Complaints by applicants about denial of legal assistance.

A recipient shall establish a si

program under 45 CFR Part 1614 shall be processed in a manner consistent with its responsibilities under 45 CFR §1614.3(d)(3) and with applicable state or local rules of professional responsibility.

- (d) A file containing every complaint and a statement of its disposition shall be preserved for examination by LSC. The file shall include any written statement submitted by the complainant or transcribed by the recipient from a complainant's oral statement.

Victor M. Fortuno

Vice President and General Counsel