

The Cyrus R. Vance Center for International Justice Initiatives

“A Profession Supportive of Democracy”

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Community Legal Support Center

Argentina

Program Description

The “Community Legal Support Center” Program forms part of the project named “Building Legal Skills to Carry Out Civil Rights” developed jointly by the Civil Association for Equality and Justice (ACIJ), the Chaco Advocate Foundation and the Public Policy Implementation Center for Equity and Growth (CIPECC). The Community Legal Support Center (the Center or the Program) is located in the community of Moreno, in the Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The Center’s primary objective is to provide, through legal resources available in the community, free counsel and community legal defense in situations and cases that affect a group of people (or the community in general) and is related to the access of public services such as transportation, drinking water, electricity, gas, sewerage, etc. The Center organizes its work through an intense organization and coordination of actions and initiatives with neighbors, organizations and social institutions, adding legal tools and resources to its work, to contribute to resolving problems that neighbors and organizations identify as important to community life. The Center also functions as a meeting place where community training activities are organized and local problems linked to the access of basic services are discussed and covered.

The Program relies on two key components: The *Free Counsel and Legal Defense Center* and the *Legal Clinic*.

1. *The Community Legal Support Center* coordinates with neighbors and communal organizations and functions as a link between these groups and legal resources existing today (such as pro-bono lawyers, clinics, NGO’s and other institutional parties). Appropriate legal responses are sought for each problem or case that comes up. Although the Center attends to legal inquiries made at its offices, its work is fundamentally proactive, including approaching organizations and neighbors. The greatest part of its relationship and organizational work is done through visits by its staff (in charge lawyer and members of the project's legal team) to organizations.

The Center also conducts legal education initiatives for local lawyers (diffusing pro bono work and public interest advocacy), and basic legal literacy for community leaders and members of local social organizations.

2. *Legal Clinic of Law and Poverty*: trains advanced law students and residents in the project’s work area in community advocacy, giving special attention to socioeconomic disadvantaged populations.

The Program’s promoters believe that the success of the Program will be based on five points: (i) Argentina now has the formal legal standards that assure access to public services for the entire society, this is why the potential to improve the supply of such services now exists, (ii) an enormous legal resource base exists, law professors orientated toward social service and law students that are in the position to

direct and participate in the Program, (iii) ACIJ has important experience establishing and managing legal clinics, (iv) an enormous demand exists for the services offered by the Program in the community of Moreno, and (v) the resources necessary for the development of the Program now exist, and it is only a matter of training and coordinating them so that they begin to give results.

Program Associates

Civil Association for Equality and Justice (ACIJ) is in charge of managing the Project, coordinating CALC and managing the Legal Clinic.

The Public Policy Implementation Center for Equity and Growth (*CIPECC*) conducted the initial investigations with respect to the unsatisfied legal needs and free legal resources available in the community. The coordination of local needs is conducted by the Counsel Center.

The *Chaco Advocate Foundation* contributes a physical place to develop the Center's activities and builds trusts and alliances using its experience and knowledge of the community and the people benefiting from the Program.

The Program's innovative character

The Program is the first that seeks to bring legal rights to socioeconomic disadvantaged communities giving a new approach perspective to the legal resources available but generally inaccessible and to community legal work dedicated to strengthening the skills of community organizations to act on an institutional level.

It is also a pioneering education project of the community in general and in relation to law students (through the literacy activities of CAL and the Legal Clinic of Law and Poverty).

The Program is also innovative since its efforts are directed from the most unprotected sector of the community to its highest stratum, giving the community the skills to act so that it can affect, at an institutional level, that related to protecting its rights and interests. The goal is to promote a qualitative change in the dynamics of interrelating and dialogue, on an institutional level, between the government and the most disadvantaged communities. This differentiates it from the typical legal assistance programs, which are marked by a typical assistance dynamic.

The Program's current status and future prospects

On May 28, 2004 the “Community Legal Support Center” was formally inaugurated at the Chaco Advocate Foundation in Moreno. In July 2004 the first report of legal needs and legal resources available in the community was completed.

In the first months, the presence of the Program was solidified in Moreno and trust was built with local organizations. The first problem brought up by the community’s own members was related to public transportation. Numerous meetings with different community participants took place where collecting signatures and organizing a march were proposed as methods to provoke a change in public transportation service. As a result, around 100 local organizations met on July 14, 2004 to coordinate different tasks. Finally, on August 11, 2004, the symbolic march took place with around 1500 Moreno residents; around 15,000 signatures were collected requesting public transportation changes. The local authorities agreed to hold meetings with different organizations with the objective of discussing possible solutions. In November 2004 the local government ordered the local public transportation company to change their practice of administering the special student ticket and stop collecting an illegitimate tariff.

Various other cases are being reviewed with the possibility of initiating a collective action.

During 2004 legal advice was also given to neighborhood groups for problems derived from running water service (illegitimate collection, lack of service, etc.).

The initial agenda for 2005 includes community work in subjects related to the access to education and the condition of public health care.

In the area of Community Legal Literacy, different community workshops were held in July and September. The experiences, challenges and content were gathered in a manual that is currently being prepared.

In April the legal clinic will begin to function, it will allow the admission of many more consultations as well as dissemination activities and legal literacy education.

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