



Launching Transformational Change During Our Centennial

By Rita A. Sheffey, Executive Director,¹ Atlanta Legal Aid Society, Inc.

Stepping into the role of executive director of a legal services program can be daunting, particularly when coming from outside the program. In my case,



the program had been led by a single executive director for 42 years, nearly half of Atlanta Legal Aid Society's (Legal Aid) existence. Fortunately, I have a long history with the program. I had known my predecessor for more than three decades. I was a long-time board member, a past

board president (2005), knew many staff members, and had mentored some of them. I had worked in the Atlanta and Georgia public interest, public service, and pro bono community during that time and led my law firm's pro bono efforts, including overseeing our own pro bono clinic. I am a self-described quasi-insider. Still, the first year of any new job is likely to be challenging. Having created my previous position of Emory Law's Assistant Dean for Public Service, I realized the importance of the first year of any new endeavor. I also knew I needed to be mentally and physically ready for the challenge on Day 1.

Atlanta Legal Aid hired me in March 2023. I wanted to finish the academic year and decompress, so I asked to start on August 1st. Legal Aid graciously agreed. I strongly recommend a break when changing jobs, particularly to a different sector. While I recognize that not everyone has this luxury, the mental health break alone was worth it. Thankfully, a strong deputy director with significant tenure in the firm ably steered the ship between the former executive director's retirement and my arrival. I eased into the role behind the scenes.

The First Nine Months:

My professional experience, including pro bono and litigating cases in a large firm, and overseeing pro

bono and advising hundreds of law students pursuing public interest careers, prepared me well to relate to a diverse constituency in pursuit of ensuring justice for all. Of course, there would be other areas I would need to develop and learn. When I arrived, we were preparing to centralize online and telephone intake and to begin a rental assistance program with a state agency. We also faced significant challenges in our technology, affecting all aspects of our work. I approached the role with humility, respect, and appreciation for the privilege of serving, but also with optimism, confidence, determination, and total commitment to transforming a great legal services law firm into an extraordinary one.

My initial goal was to meet with each of the more than 150 staff members one-on-one, doing a "listening tour" in our five offices, and meeting with people in their natural groups (offices and substantive units). I have been to each office at least twice and have met with more than half of the staff, but I have a long way to go. From the first office visit, I was warmly welcomed and humbled at how open and transparent many staff members were with me. I learned about their work, but I also learned about their families and the challenges of caring for aging parents or children with health issues. They shared why they love Legal Aid and what they want to see changed (or not). They also were very curious about me and my plans for Legal Aid. I have been as transparent as possible, and I intend to continue doing that.

I have endeavored to listen more than talk, especially in individual meetings, but in larger groups I have found that relaying information is critical. To ensure open and transparent communication across the firm, I instituted monthly meetings of the entire staff on Zoom. Participation has hovered around 85-90%, which I value tremendously. Our paralegals, navigators, intake specialists, receptionists, and other staff who support lawyers in various ways, have expressed their appreciation for the inclusivity and direct sharing

of information. Agenda items have included critical upgrades to technology, our Board-approved strategic plan, financial information summarizing our sources of revenue and expenses, progress toward centralizing intake, implementation of a rental assistance program, challenges and success in recruiting, LSC compliance, DEI initiatives, the performance evaluation process, wellness, our centennial, and the role of the board of directors. For one recent meeting, I invited the new president, who had worked as a fellow in the program and whose firm had many lawyers who were active volunteers, to introduce himself. Our next staff meeting will be in person, and I particularly look forward to that one. I hope that meeting will be more interactive and conducive to enhancing our sense of community. Many staff members have not had a chance to meet in person and get to know their colleagues.

While I am on the topic of meetings, I struggle with who, what, when, where, and how (Zoom, in person, or hybrid). I quickly found that my calendar was so full of meetings that there was little time to focus on some of the larger, strategic tasks. And some of those tasks should be primary, not relegated to left-over time. Initially, I continued the various meetings in place before my arrival (monthly manager meetings and weekly administrative meetings) but soon discontinued them.

I am experimenting with other options for a variety of reasons. For example, not all managers are similarly situated. Some oversee offices; some supervise substantive law units such as the Home Defense Program, the Disability Integration Project, and the General Law Unit; others are in administrative roles. We now have quarterly meetings of the office managing attorneys where we focus on issues of particular interest and concern for them. I am planning a meeting of the unit managers and will obtain their input as to what will most benefit them. Administrative meetings have been more ad hoc. Also, I no longer participate in every interview of attorney candidates or help check references of finalists. Instead, I conduct the final interview of a candidate and sometimes extend offers at the end of that interview. I value meeting a candidate before we hire them and hope to continue this more limited practice. I also now limit meetings on Fridays to catch up and prepare for the week ahead. Friday is also a good day to start a new project or tackle something requiring focus.

Breaks are Essential:

Taking a mental health break after leaving my

previous job was critical to approaching this role with clarity and energy. While our firm embraces a hybrid work schedule, I quickly realized that was not feasible for me, at least not yet. I had conferences to attend and internal and external relationships to develop. I need to be present physically and emotionally as much as possible. I attended the MIE New Executive Director Training, the National Legal Aid and Defender Association (NLADA) annual conference, the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) Innovations in Technology Conference, and the LSC 50th anniversary celebration, all of which were valuable in many ways. I especially loved the informal dinners with other executive directors during these conferences, and I appreciate them more than I can express. I learned that, while regular remote workdays do not work for me right now, what does work is to take a week or ten days outside the office (the beach is my happy place) and combine remote work with time off. Those breaks help me focus and prioritize, and I am learning to translate that into my daily routine in the office. From my first day on the job, I quickly noticed staff members who had reached or were approaching burn-out. I recognize it all too well, having personally crossed that Rubicon after the pandemic. I don't have all the answers, but I am committed to addressing this issue. I have met with therapists and others to discuss ideas and a handful of staff members have volunteered to help me think through next steps. My stressors differ from those of my staff, of course, and what works for each of them will no doubt differ from what works for me. Still, I need to set a good example. I also need to foster a healthy work environment. When I took time off between jobs, quite a few staff members expressed that I was a good example for them. I think of that often, and it motivates me to take care better care of myself. As several wise colleagues have noted, this is a marathon, not a sprint.

Lessons Learned Thus Far:

I learn new lessons every day, but here are some important takeaways thus far:

- Show up and be present. Whatever else is swirling around you, be present in the moment for the person sitting in front of you.
- Listen, listen, and listen some more. Practice active listening. Hear what is being said.
- Be curious. Prejudge no one and nothing. You do not have all the answers.
- Validate what you hear. Validate feelings. They are real.

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- Prepare for fatigue, whether decision, physical, or emotional. It often will be all three at the same time.
- Continue the status quo (unless harmful) while you learn as much as you can.
- Look for small ways you can change things for the better, and do it sooner rather than later.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate, and communicate more. Be clear, transparent, inclusive, and authentic.
- Address problems promptly. They do not usually improve with age.
- Be nimble and flexible. Expect the unexpected, early, and often.
- Be decisive. There will be too many decisions to make, and many can be made quickly. Know when to consult and engage others, and when you need to act alone.
- Follow up promptly.
- Admit your mistakes, take swift corrective action, learn from them, and move on.
- Be bold: ask current and new funders to support what you need. Do not limit yourself to what happened in the past. If you don't ask for something, you won't get it.
- Find allies within the firm and within and outside of legal services.
- Change is difficult, and often unsettling, for everyone, including you. Be patient and show yourself and others some grace.
- Don't be defensive. And do not take everything (anything?) personally. Even if a complaint is about you, there often is more behind it. The issues may well have been there before you arrived.
- Make your office space welcoming, to you and others. Mine has lots of natural light (a bonus), colorful artwork, a water fountain, lots of plants with personal history and meaning, a Duke basketball signed by Coach K, and some other fun touches!
- Set a good example for others.
- Keep the door open as much as possible to invite others to stop by, but respect privacy and confidentiality in meetings.
- Keep confidences except when required to disclose or avoid harm to others.
- Accept your humanity and imperfections.
- Take time to reflect on progress, however small.

- Engage a therapist and/or an executive coach.
- Take time off, whether an hour, a day, a week or more. Recognize the early warning signs and act quickly to rest and recharge.
- Recognize the successes and achievements of others, early and often.
- Savor all compliments when given and remember them during the difficult times.

The Future:

There is no other job I could imagine undertaking at this stage of life. I love this law firm. I love the people. I am committed to the mission. And I am committed to developing and nurturing relationships (funders, community partners, anyone who supports racial and social justice as we do), normalizing salaries, enhancing diversity, minimizing burnout, improving our infrastructure, celebrating our centennial, building capacity, and to transformational change. It sounds overwhelming, and it is, but we cannot fail. I must not fail. Too much is at stake. Our clients need us to be at our best. Some of this likely will sound familiar to you. My experience is not all that unique. I have learned that there are others who have walked this walk who are happy to help guide me. I thank you for your generosity.

This year is a big one for Atlanta Legal Aid. We are celebrating the centennial of our founding in 1924! There are relatively few law firms and non-profit organizations that ever reach this milestone. We are reflecting on and recognizing past successes, but we are primarily focused on the future. How can we enhance the client experience from their first contact with us? How can we ensure empathetic compassionate service throughout? How can we effectively, safely, and smartly use artificial intelligence? How can we better focus on wellness for staff and avoid or at least minimize burnout? What new legal issues will future clients face? How can we pivot to address those issues? How can we substantially expand our fiscal resources to sustain our vital work? How can we better support our staff? These questions and others keep me up at night and get me up each morning.

This year, we also will welcome many legal services friends from around the country to Atlanta! The MIE Fundraising Conference will be here in July. The LSC Board will meet here in October. And the NLADA annual conference will come here in November. We look forward to helping host many of you for these eventful gatherings in our hometown. Come see us and say Happy Anniversary!

Behind the celebrations, we are engaged in transformational change. We are centralizing online and telephone intake, scheduled to be fully implemented by the fall. We are beginning a new strategic planning process to guide us for the future. We are automating more processes and starting multi-year budgeting. We are reevaluating our compensation structure to ensure fairness and equity for all, as we aggressively pursue increased funding so we can normalize salaries. We are enhancing certain executive and administrative roles, and adding others, to better serve the law firm as it exists today, and for sustainability. And we are focused on recruiting and retaining a more diverse staff. Considering the new LSC rules regarding governing bodies, we also are assessing opportunities to diversify our board and engage them more in fundraising, pro bono, and awareness of our work. And there is so much more. I am more excited, optimistic, and determined than I was on my first day. I embrace the importance of soliciting the opinions of others, seeking guidance from people who have more expertise than I do in certain areas, and taking a break before I reach or even approach burnout. And I am getting better at declining invitations that are either unnecessary, unessential, or simply too much for now.

I evolve every day. I learn from everyone. I care deeply, very deeply, about our mission, our greatest asset—our people—and our clients. I will continue to do my best for them, and I appreciate those who are on board with creating an even better version of ourselves. This work is hard, but it also is very rewarding. I close with this: Watch what we do as we launch our next century!

- 1 Rita A. Sheffey joined the Atlanta Legal Aid Society (Legal Aid) on August 1, 2023, where she oversees more than 150 staff (90 lawyers) who help low-income people meet basic legal needs, removing barriers to justice through civil legal assistance. Prior to joining Legal Aid, Rita served for eight years as Emory University School of Law's Assistant Dean for Public Service, where she oversaw the Pro Bono Program and advised students interested in post-graduate employment with government and public interest organizations. Prior to Emory, Rita was a partner with Hunton & Williams LLP (now Hunton Andrews Kurth) where she focused on complex litigation and served as Hunton & Williams' Southside Legal Center pro bono clinic director and Atlanta Pro Bono Committee Chair. Rita has received numerous awards for her leadership and pro bono efforts, including the Atlanta Legal Aid Society's Extraordinary Pro Bono Service Award in 2018, the Georgia State University College of Law's Ben F. Johnson, Jr. Public Service Award in 2015, and the inaugural Rita A. Sheffey Public

Interest Award from the Atlanta Bar's Public Interest Law Section in 2012. Rita grew up in southwest Virginia and has degrees from the University of Virginia (B.A. in chemistry), Duke University (Ph.D. in chemistry), Boston College Law School (J.D.) and Emory's Candler School of Theology (Master's in Religion and Public Life). She also did a two-year postdoctoral fellowship in the Department of Biological Chemistry at Harvard Medical School. Rita may be reached at rsheffey@atlantalegalaid.org.

- 2 Monica Eav Glicken is the Executive Director and General Counsel of Public Law Center (PLC). Monica is a graduate of Harvard University and Harvard Law School who hails from Texas and Colorado. Monica began her career in Immigration Law as an Attorney Advisor at the Immigration Court in Chicago, Illinois. A decade-long tenure in private practice followed in both Chicago and Seal Beach, California. Prior to joining PLC, Monica served as a Counseling Attorney and Adjunct Lecturer in UC Irvine School of Law's Immigration Rights Clinic. As the child of immigrants from Cambodia and the Philippines, Monica is a long-time advocate for those who must fight to be heard, working tirelessly to promote greater access to justice and community empowerment for the most vulnerable. Monica may be reached at mglicken@publiclawcenter.org.
- 3 For those that are interested, I particularly found helpful *Financial Leadership for Nonprofit Executives*, by Jeanne Bell and Elizabeth Schaffer; *Joan Garry's Guide to Nonprofit Leadership*, by Joan Garry; and *Management in a Changing World: How to Manage for Equity, Sustainability, and Results*, by Jakada Imani, Monna Wong, and Bex Ahuja.

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- 1 Monica Eav Glicken is the Executive Director and General Counsel of Public Law Center (PLC). Monica is a graduate of Harvard University and Harvard Law School who hails from Texas and Colorado. Monica began her career in Immigration Law as an Attorney Advisor at the Immigration Court in Chicago, Illinois. A decade-long tenure in private practice followed in both Chicago and Seal Beach, California. Prior to joining PLC, Monica served as a Counseling Attorney and Adjunct Lecturer in UC Irvine School of Law's Immigration Rights Clinic. As the child of immigrants from Cambodia and the Philippines, Monica is a long-time advocate for those who must fight to be heard, working tirelessly to promote greater access to justice and community empowerment for the most vulnerable. Monica may be reached at mglicken@publiclawcenter.org.
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