

community justice

MOLDOVA

LAW IN ACTION

A YOUNG MOTHER IN THE VILLAGE OF HÂNCEȘTI in Moldova was living in fear: abused by her husband she needed protection for herself and for her children. She tried the police and then the courts but received conflicting information. She walked away feeling confused and helpless. Then she visited a paralegal working in her village who advised her how to file a complaint for a court protection order, which was successfully granted and enforced.

The paralegal who helped out in Hâncești was a member of a small but growing network of just over 30 paralegals in Moldova working for a number of local civil society groups. They are an integral part of Moldova's strategy to establish a national legal aid system serving the country's 3.5 million people, which used paralegals to provide low-cost primary legal advice for everyday problems such as work papers and pension benefits.

ORGANIZATION

The paralegals work within a legal structure that was established in 2007 by Moldova's Law on State Guaranteed Legal Assistance, passed in response to the failures of the previous underfunded and unstructured system.

The law provides for a two-tier system—with a national network of community paralegals to provide primary legal advice, and a second level of 'qualified' legal counsel, provided by public defenders in civil and criminal cases.

The system is managed by the National Legal Aid Council (NLAC), which operates five regional offices. As a result of funding and administrative challenges, NLAC has only been functioning since September 2012. Funding for the paralegals is currently provided by the NLAC and the Soros Foundation-Moldova, which has been actively involved in the reform effort since 2003.

ELIGIBILITY

All Moldovan residents are eligible for primary legal aid regardless of their financial status. To qualify for primary legal aid the applicant makes a written or an oral request to their local community – most inquiries are dealt with immediately, if not a response is delivered within three days from the date of submitting the application.

The service is also supported by an internet service www.parajurist.md which was developed to serve as a legal awareness tool for anyone who seeks answers to legal questions faced on a daily basis. Together with its social media pages, the website created a space where people are constantly updated about the latest developments in legislation, about work, welfare or any other opportunities they can benefit from, but also where they can contact a paralegal and receive a thorough consultation within just a few days.

IMPACTS

Since 2010, when the program began, more than 12,000 people have sought advice from the paralegals, and the program is estimated to have resolved over 11,000 cases that might otherwise have ended up before the courts.

An average of 420 requests for legal advice and information are addressed to paralegals in their communities on a monthly basis and 64% of people who addressed the paralegals took action to solve their legal problems. In many cases, this is possible due to the personal involvement of paralegals, who accompany their beneficiaries to the relevant institutions or who communicate with various specialists on their beneficiaries' behalf.

