

# Duluthian

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## CHAMBER BOARD CHAIR **AARON KELLY:** TAKING THE REINS IN 2023

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# STRIVING TO PROVIDE SAFETY, SECURITY AND STABILITY

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

**L**egal Aid Service of Northeastern Minnesota helps clients navigate an increasingly complex legal system on an individual basis, providing legal aid to the largely-underserved population of Northeastern Minnesota. Their priorities are simple: to provide safety, security and stability in areas where there are power imbalances by providing legal assistance to protect the civil rights of the common citizen. Providing these services requires a team of well-trained, passionate and dedicated professionals.

LASNEM was chartered in Duluth in 1952 by members of the local bar association to “provide legal advice and service to those among the people of Duluth, Minnesota, who are unable to afford legal counsel.” For the first two decades, it was voluntarily staffed by only a few

dedicated attorneys. In 1972, William “Bill” Burns and two other Duluth attorneys volunteered to be a committee to establish a full-time legal-aid office. “We were able to raise the money from the Bar Association, the county and the city to hire a full-time lawyer,” recalled Burns. “A couple of years later, we hired a second lawyer. When the federal government came forward with the Legal Service Corporation (1974), it allowed us to expand even more.” Geographically, LASNEM now covers 27,683 square miles across eleven counties, from Duluth to the Canadian border, and from the eastern edge to the midpoint of the state, with offices in Duluth, Virginia, Grand Rapids, Brainerd and Pine City.

Burns, a senior partner with the law firm Hanft Fride, has served on the board since LASNEM was founded. He

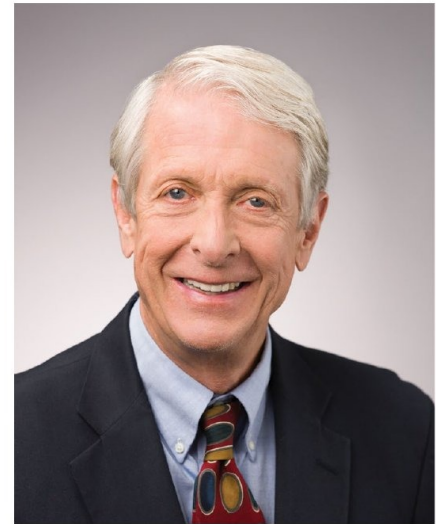
*LASNEM was chartered in Duluth in 1952 by members of the local bar association to “provide legal advice and service to those among the people of Duluth, Minnesota, who are unable to afford legal counsel.”*



is currently the board chair, a position he has held multiple times. The board presently has eleven members, with a majority of them required to be lawyers. "We are responsible for establishing a clear mission within the bounds of what we are and where our funding comes from," Burns said.

people who are having issues with benefits, be they federal, state, county or private, for that matter. They also do a significant amount of family law, mostly focused on families with children."

LASNEM is led by its dynamic Executive Director Dori Rapaport,



***"LASNEM represents a lot of people who are having issues with benefits, be they federal, state, county or private, for that matter. They also do a significant amount of family law, mostly focused on families with children."***

– BILL BURNS, LASNEM BOARD CHAIR

"Our priorities are always driven by our resources and circumstances. The pandemic caused a profound impact on our operation and also produced a huge number of landlord/tenant issues." Fundamental needs like housing are a priority, Burns suggested. "LASNEM represents a lot of

whom Burns proudly lauded as "probably the most prominent of the legal service directors in the state. She does a lot of legislative advocacy, in addition to managing our multiple offices." Tiffany Doherty serves as the Director of Advocacy. She oversees the legal-staff side of

the organization. "She makes sure that the law firm is functioning the way the law firm should function," said Rapaport. Rachel Albertson is LASNEM's Development and Communications Manager.

On the administrative side, Tara Serck is the Director of Finance



LASNEM Justice Buses and legal aid team members visit the Minnesota State Capitol.



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***“Some of the initiatives that we are implementing and have been implementing for the last couple years are models for the state and the nation.”***

– TIFFANY DOHERTY, LASNEM DIRECTOR OF ADVOCACY

Administration. Rapaport says that Serck, LASNEM’s accountant, “makes magic happen. She is wonderful, and I just love working with her.” In addition, Alanna Hanson is LASNEM’s Intake and Data Manager, supervising all intake staff.

### **ADVOCACY**

When Tiffany Doherty moved to Duluth, she knew she had found a place to call home. Her position as Director of Advocacy was new. LASNEM and Doherty saw it as an opportunity to make meaningful change. “Part of it (the role) was to really evaluate how people were receiving service – the quality of it – and figure out how we can make it better,” recalled Doherty. She said there will always be limited resources, but that doesn’t mean being satisfied with the status quo. Backed by an extensive internal study from 2019 titled “‘Not A Legal Issue’: A Report on Community Need,” which evaluated the services LASNEM provides, Doherty saw it as a pathway to change, spurred along by an unlikely silent partner, the pandemic.

Housing Court is one of the programs LASNEM developed pre-pandemic but accelerated rapidly when in-person services were suspended across the state. Doherty said it was a blessing in disguise when the pandemic hit and the courts went virtual: “It meant that I can have an attorney handle evictions from all over the Sixth Judicial District through the course of an afternoon, rather than physically driving up to Grand Marais, or driving up to Virginia or Hibbing. The judicial districts we work in are so large and courthouses are so spread apart, it was really hard to staff,” but now, “with the virtual courts, we are able to provide a far better service.” Both the Ninth and the Tenth Judicial district courts are also part of the LASNEM coverage area.

Working virtually has enabled LASNEM to create a larger pool of qualified attorneys. As a result, Doherty said they have added two experienced public defenders in the past year, as well as a housing attorney who works virtually across the entire LASNEM area from her office in Duluth.

Doherty oversees a staff of about 27, including fourteen attorneys plus paralegals and legal assistants. Ever the optimist, Doherty is leading an initiative to train and develop para-professionals, a sort of equivalent to a nurse practitioner, but of the legal world. "We have currently five para-professionals. Those are paralegals who have extra education and experience to provide a higher level of service than a standard paralegal can," said Doherty. "Some of the initiatives that we are implementing and have been implementing for the last couple years are models for the state and the nation. We're not just trying to improve the services for Northeastern Minnesota, but trying to improve the services throughout the state and beyond. We've got really incredible, smart, dedicated staff and that's why this works."

### REACH JUSTICE MINNESOTA

Guided by the philosophy that they can always do better, the leadership team at LASNEM incorporated a business-improvement model to their operations plan to help the organization optimize their processes. "It's on us to be able to make sure we're providing the best service that we can," said Executive Director Rapaport. "That's part of what I love about our leadership team: we are not

complacent. We are the only legal-aid program in Minnesota that has really incorporated a business-process improvement model in how we operate. That's how the phone hotline came to be – we brought in consultants that did this process-mapping with us." While streamlining a call-center intake process is not groundbreaking, in LASNEM's case it turned bottlenecks into efficiencies for its staff.

"Our intake line receives, on average, over 2,200 calls a month," said Rachel Albertson. "We have, currently, four – normally five – people answering phones. They are so kind and they are so respectful of people who are in tough situations – crisis situations – when they contact us. The genuine care and concern of everyone I work with to help people any way they can is truly amazing," says Albertson.

Albertson is LASNEM's Development and Communications Manager. She has been with the non-profit since 2005, when she started out as a paralegal in the Brainerd office. Albertson transitioned to her new role in the middle of the pandemic and provided great leadership in the 2020 roll-out of the Legal Kiosk project. Once they received funding approval, Albertson and Rapaport had less than three months





Dori Rapaport (left) and Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison.

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– DORI RAPAPORT, LASNEM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

to get it all up and running. The two worked closely together to implement their plan.

The kiosks basically are computer stations located in accessible public spaces, such as libraries, health clinics and community centers. There are two models of kiosks. Model A is “a public-facing kiosk that serves as a community access point to civil legal justice. These kiosks connect users to civil legal information, self-help services and statewide civil legal-aid intake.” Model B serves as a virtual portal to the individual Legal Aid program managing the kiosk. Model B kiosks are used “for tasks such as intake, meetings with their attorney and appearing virtually as needed while represented by the Legal Aid Program.” Model B kiosks are placed in locations with the ability to create a confidential space while the kiosk is in use.

Helping vulnerable populations – such as elders – is a core tenant of the LASNEM mission, said CEO Rapaport: “Elders are one of the most challenging demographics to reach. Our idea was, what if we work with medical providers and create what has sort of been a natural partnership replicated across the nation – medical-legal partnerships, where we have a presence at medical clinics?”

“We had a prototype kiosk at Bois Forte reservation. They are very rural and we wanted more presence with them, and, to have a connection, the only logical way was with technology,” continued Albertson. They put a computer in a clinic on Bois Forte that gave them a connection to Legal

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LASNEM training session participants pose for a group photo.

Aid, including virtual-meeting capability. Then came COVID, and everything went virtual. “That was the inspiration for the entire project. This was exactly our intent for doing this in Bois Forte. Now, let’s just multiply it, refine the actual idea to make it better and then multiply it. That’s what happened.”

Since the roll-out, Albertson has fielded inquiries from a circuit court in Michigan, consulted with a group from Western New England and aided state-wide roll-outs in North Dakota, Indiana, Texas and Nevada. “They’re not going anywhere. We’re not ending the project because, even though businesses, courts and people’s doors are more open now,” she said, “the fact of the matter is, they’re still being used – they’re still a resource for people. They are used not only for civil legal services or court hearings, but people use them for criminal-court hearings, people use them to meet with attorneys, people have used them for telehealth, job interviews – all the things that people who have access to technology kind of take for granted in the world today,” said Albertson, emphatically.

The project was funded by a CARES Act grant. The CARES Act grant application was a joint effort of the state and the Minnesota Legal Services Coalition members, said Albertson. She said that all four of the civil legal-service groups in the state jointly applied for CARES Act funding in early 2020. The bulk of the application called for funding for the Legal Kiosk project and for the Justice Buses.

There are four Justice Buses in Minnesota, one for each of the state’s four legal-aid program areas.

Each customized minivan has a meeting space inside and vehicle wrap with LASNEM’s information on the outside. Northeast Minnesota’s Justice Bus has two internet service providers, laughed Albertson: “We cover so much rural area that, when we’re going places and doing outreach, as a point of access to technology and bringing it to the people, we have two – it just picks up whichever signal is better in that location.”

Albertson said that they could do more with more resources, but they are proud of the work they undertake: “A lot of small towns don’t know about legal aid, don’t know that we’re here. There are so many opportunities to reach people in these small towns and communities that you drive through. Legal Aid needs to show that we are serving these communities, even if we don’t have an office in them. The Justice Bus allows us to do a lot more outreach and get the word out, even driving down the road. We have everything that an office has. You can scan and print. We have wireless internet, so you can do everything you do from your home office. That’s essentially the Justice Bus, in a nutshell.”

### **CIVIC AND COMMUNITY VALUE**

“We want people to understand the critical nature of the work that we do,” said Executive Director Dori Rapaport. She wants their mission and their need to be on the radars of Duluth philanthropy in a way that it’s never been.

It comes down to a basic human right, reflected Board Chair Burns. “In many respects,” he said, “over the last 40 years, the courts have come to recognize that the right to



LSMEM Law Day 5K fundraiser is held on a portion of Duluth's Lakewalk..



legal representation should extend beyond the right to a public defender in criminal matters and recognize that there's a need among people of lower income who can't afford to hire attorneys to get their fundamental legal needs met."

The need for legal services in the civil arena is not relegated to rural Minnesota. Rapaport said the themes of safety, security and stability cut across all landscapes and demographics. Funding comes from multiple sources, like the state, corporate philanthropy and private donations. LASNEM receives a small portion of its operating budget from the Legal Services Corporation (LSC), a federally-funded non-profit created by Congress to support non-profit legal services across the country. "Every legal-aid organization has what they call a statement of priorities," explained Rapaport. "These are required if they are an LSC-funded organization, but most legal services funders require that you set priorities so that there's consistency in the types of cases that you're accepting. For example, when people's housing is at risk, if people are being evicted, that's compromising their safety, security and stability, because they're at risk of being homeless."

The culture of non-profits is doing the most with the least. Funding dictates putting the money toward direct services, which by default creates a lean administrative side. Broadly defined, administration in the Legal Services realm is anything

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RACHAEL ALBERTSON, LASNEM DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER




not tied to a case with an individual. The bottom line is that having a strong support staff is critical to handling the volume of cases but is generally underfunded.

**CHALLENGING THE NORM:  
PUT YOUR BEST SUIT FORWARD**

Minnesota is one of the top three states in the nation when it comes to funding for civil legal services, yet the need remains great. The staff at LASNEM are sending out the challenge to put legal-aid services at the

forefront of community-support efforts. This year's fundraising theme is centered around the idea of dressing for success – literally putting one's best "law suit" forward. Once again, by taking it to the streets, LASNEM is looking to raise awareness – and contributions – with their Law Day 5K, an event they debuted in 2022.

The 2023 Law Day 5K is actively seeking sponsors for the walk/run event that takes place along a portion of Duluth's Lakewalk. "We really want to leverage some of what this area

has to offer," said CEO Rapaport, who views the 5K "as a way [to stimulate] spirited public involvement, with a lot of fun tossed in." She encouraged people to put their best modified or full-tilt power suit forward on Sunday, April 30, 2023 and help support access to justice for Northeastern Minnesota. 

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who grew up in Superior, Wisconsin.

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