

# WHERE HEALTH MEETS JUSTICE

A fellowship program to build healthcare expertise and resources in the legal aid community

## 2015 Fellow Biographies



### **Wendy Ascher**

Managing Attorney/Director of Intake, Southern Arizona Legal Aid Inc.

Ms. Ascher has been an attorney at Southern Arizona Legal Aid since November 2006. As a managing attorney, she has been the director of intake since February 2012. In that role, she provides brief legal advice and supervises intake for the agency. Previously, as a staff attorney, her focus had been public benefits (AHCCCS, Food Stamps, TANF) and housing. Before working at SALA, Ms. Ascher was a law clerk at Pima County Superior Court, Hon. Sarah Simmons.

Ms. Ascher was admitted to the Arizona Bar in October 2006. She attended the James E. Rogers School of Law at the University of Arizona. Prior to attending law school, Ms. Ascher Vice President for Refugee Services at Jewish Family and Children's Service in Tucson.

Ms. Ascher had been a technical advisor and project director for community development programs in West and Central Africa for 12 years. Her first international experience was as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Dori, Burkina Faso (aka Upper Volta). She happily mentions that her son is a 'second generation' Peace Corps Volunteer serving in South Africa.

Ms. Ascher has been a hospice volunteer, Red Cross Disaster Volunteer, winter shelter volunteer, victim witness advocate, and a community mediator.

Originally from Brooklyn, New York Ms. Ascher attended the State University of New York at Binghamton and Cornell University. She studied anthropology, environmental studies, development sociology, and international agriculture. Ms. Ascher currently lives in Tucson, enjoying her husband and dogs.



### **Eric Avildsen**

Executive Director, Vermont Legal Aid Inc.

Eric Avildsen has been the Executive Director of Vermont Legal Aid since 1988. Before that, he was the managing attorney and staff attorney specializing in housing, utility, and mental health law at the Legal Assistance Corporation of Central Massachusetts. He is involved in all aspects of civil justice in Vermont working with the Vermont Access to Justice Coalition and with a wide variety of court oversight and rules committees. In addition, he is a long-standing member of the Resources Committee of NLADA's Civil Policy Group.

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**Jim Barrett**  
Executive Director, Pisgah Legal Services

Jim Barrett has served as the executive director of Pisgah Legal Services since 1993. For ten years prior to that, he was the housing attorney at PLS. He came to PLS as a Reginald Heber Smith Fellow in 1983.

Under Jim's leadership, PLS has moved from a program that was shrinking by attrition due to government funding cuts to a growing civil legal aid program that has more than doubled in programs and size of staff since 1998. Pisgah Legal Services helped 2,080 people in 1993 compared to 14,000+ in 2014.

Jim has led and encouraged work on systemic issues that impact low-income people in Western North Carolina. PLS has helped reduce chronic homelessness in Buncombe County by 82% since 2005 and improved numerous programs that alleviate the ravages of poverty. Over the years, PLS has helped establish more than a dozen other nonprofits that also serve the poor.

Jim was honored with the T. Kennon Roberson Award for Management Excellence in Non-Profit Health and Human Services in 2006. He served as chair of the organization of legal aid executives in North Carolina called the Alliance for Equal Justice from 2005 – 2007. He is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Wofford College (1979) where he received the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award for service. Jim graduated from law school at UNC-Chapel Hill in 1983.



**Laura Berumen**  
Program Director, California Rural Legal Assistance, Rural Health Disparities Program

Laura Dawn Berumen is California Rural Legal Assistance's Rural Health Disparities Program Director. She joined California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc. in 2011 as a migrant unit staff attorney in CRLA's Fresno office. In 2013 she joined the El Centro office as the health staff attorney for CRLA's Health Consumer Center of Imperial Valley where she worked to provide legal advice and community education to Imperial County residents.

As program director of CRLA's Rural Health Disparities Program, she manages the Health Consumer Center of Imperial Valley and provides assistance to attorneys and other program directors in addressing rural health disparities. Laura is honored to work with CRLA because of its ongoing dedication to help low-income residents, especially farmworkers and immigrant families. She was born and raised on the southern border in a Mexican immigrant family and attended law school to help empower poor communities like the one in which she was raised. She graduated from Cornell Law School and received her undergraduate degree from University of California Berkeley.

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**Lisa Brody**

Managing Attorney/Project Director, Bay Area Legal Services Inc. (BALS)

Lisa Brody is the Managing Attorney for the Bay Area Legal Services West Division, which includes Pinellas, Manatee and Sarasota Counties, is a longtime advocate of providing access to justice for the indigent populations. She also serves as the Project Director for the Health & Justice Project which is a medical legal partnership between Bay Area Legal Services, Inc. and Community Health Centers of Pinellas, Inc. In 2008 and 2012, Lisa was presented the Community

Partner Award from the St. Petersburg Housing Authority for her “outstanding service and commitment to protecting the rights of citizens participating in housing programs”. Lisa is presently devoting her efforts to developing Medical/Legal Partnerships in the Tampa Bay Area in order to further assist low income residents with removing the social and legal barriers that may be hindering their health. Efforts such as the Medical Legal Partnerships are representative of Lisa’s desire to holistically address the low income needs of the community.

Lisa received her undergraduate degree in Political Science from the University of Oregon in 1992 and subsequently received her law degree as well from the University of Oregon in 1995. While a student at the University of Oregon, Mrs. Brody was an outspoken student advocate and was appointed to serve as a student representative to numerous Campus Boards both as an undergraduate and law student. Mrs. Brody recently graduated with a Graduate Certificate in Non Profit Management & Innovation from the University of Tampa.



**Robert Bush**

Senior Staff Attorney, Georgia Legal Services Program, Inc. (GLSP)

Robert created and managed the HIV/AIDS Legal Project of the Georgia Legal Services Program for several years, and became involved in healthcare advocacy, initially, through representing Project clients. He is a Senior Staff Attorney for GLSP, managing the statewide Elder Action Team, in addition to actively representing clients. He has served as a committee chairman on the Governor's Board of Health Information Technology and Transparency, and currently serves on the Executive Committee of the Chatham County Safety Net Planning Council. He is a past co-chair of the Legal Services Delivery Committee of the American Bar Association’s Section of Litigation and he is a past member of the Board of

Directors of Georgians for a Healthy Future.



**Peggy Earisman**

Director, Manhattan Legal Services

Peggy Earisman has been the Director of Manhattan Legal Services since 2005 after three years of service as interim project director. Her entire thirty-year legal career has been spent in legal services for the poor, starting at Passaic Legal Aid Society in Paterson, New Jersey, then as a Managing Attorney at MFY Legal Services and now at MLS. As the Director she manages this legal services office of over 40 people which offers legal advice and court

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representation in the fields of housing, public benefits, family, employment, consumer, immigration, education, SSI/Social Security, domestic violence issues and representation of people living with HIV.

Over the course of her long and distinguished career, she has worked to provide high quality legal services in a way that reflects communities' needs and desires. This includes representing public housing tenants and the Public Housing Residents of the Lower East Side (PHROLES) in seeking to enforce their rights to grievance procedures and to retain their homes; obtaining federal land to construct transitional housing for homeless families and litigating the first reported case under the Stewart McKinney Homeless Assistance Act; and helping assert the voices of low-income communities in the Lower Manhattan rebuilding effort after the September 11, 2001 World Trade Center attack through representation of the Rebuild Coalition.

A 1980 graduate of Columbia University School of Law, Ms. Earisman was awarded the James B. Larsen Staff Attorney of the year in New Jersey in 1988 and in May 2001 Ms. Earisman was recipient of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York's annual Legal Services Award.



**Annette Farnan**

Interim Executive Director, Legal Aid of Nebraska (LAN)

Employed with Legal Aid of Nebraska for 20 years Annette has been a critical member in Legal Aid of Nebraska's success. Starting her career in one of Legal Aid's Norfolk office, she gained experience in a rural practice office. When she transferred to the Omaha office she became the Project Director for the first VAWA grant for the Legal Aid Society and was then promoted to managing attorney of the Omaha office. Annette followed that tenure with successfully structuring the intake units, a model that continues to exist and remains the cornerstone of Legal Aid's case management and data collection. The ElderAccessLine® was created under her direction. Farnan has been a driving force responsible for grant writing and reporting on the majority

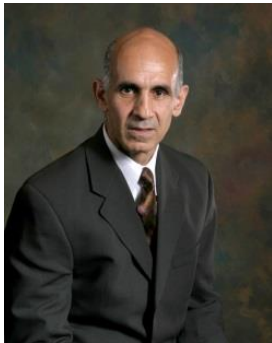
Legal Aid's funding sources including the Legal Services Corporation, the Civil Legal Aid and Services Fund, and the Legal Aid and Services Fund. As a practicing attorney, Farnan has experience in all areas of poverty law including family, housing, consumer, benefits and disability law.

In 2009 Farnan was appointed Deputy Director for Legal Aid. In that role she has been responsible for project oversight of several successful LSC Technology Grant Initiatives. Other responsibilities have included grants management, technology and website, general operations, human resources and assisting in resource development. In July, 2014 she was named Interim Executive Director immersing herself into all aspects of fund raising, donor development, liaison to the Board of Directors, budget management and overall administration of the Firm. Under Farnan's leadership the Medical/Legal Partnership Project continues to grow, expanding to include 2 additional hospitals, with the prospect of an additional 3 hospitals being added by mid-2015. Additionally, a joint MLP between Nebraska Legal Aid and Iowa Legal Aid is currently being developed.

Her greatest accomplishment continues to be her family, including her two sons; James a college freshman with a goal of being a Legal Aid attorney, Henry, a high school sophomore with a goal of being a starting varsity football player his junior year and her husband John, her greatest supporter.

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**Gary Housepian**

Executive Director, Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee and the Cumberland Mountains

Gary Housepian began his legal career 37 years ago VISTA lawyer for a migrant farmworker program in Arizona and went on to be a legal services staff attorney in Knoxville, Tennessee. Since that time, his career has included positions as Managing Attorney of Disability Rights Tennessee (the state's protection and advocacy program), General Counsel to the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, General Counsel to the Tennessee Department of Human Services, Assistant Attorney General with the State Attorney General, staff attorney with the Tennessee Justice Center (a public interest law firm), and as a trial attorney in private practice. Since 2007, he has been Executive Director of the

Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee and the Cumberland Mountains, Tennessee's largest nonprofit law firm.



**Michelle Marie Kezirian**

Senior Director of Litigation, Bet Tzedek Legal Services

Michelle Marie Kezirian's supervisory responsibilities at Bet Tzedek include Impact Litigation, Housing, and the "Right to Health" Project, a medical-legal partnership with St. Francis Medical Center in Lynwood and St. Vincent Medical Center in Los Angeles. She also teaches courses entitled "The Intersection of Law, Health, and Public Policy" and "Medical-Legal Partnership Clinic" at UCLA School of Law. Ms. Kezirian received her B.A., *summa cum laude*, from the University of California, Davis (1992) and her J.D. from the Santa Clara University School of Law (1996).

After graduation, she worked as an associate for Crosby, Heafey, Roach & May and Jackson & Abdalah. She was also an Adjunct Professor at the Santa Clara University School of Law where she taught and coordinated the Honors Moot Court program. Prior to her position at Bet Tzedek, she was a Senior Staff Attorney at Inner City Law Center in Los Angeles. Ms. Kezirian is actively involved in the community as a board member of Tenants Together, a statewide tenant's organization, and the International Visitors Council of Los Angeles. She is also a member of the Pacific Council on International Policy and numerous other community organizations.



**Steven McGarrity**

Associate Director, Community Legal Aid Services, Inc.

Steven McGarrity is the Associate Director of Community Legal Aid Services, Inc. in Akron, Ohio. He began his career with Legal Aid following his graduation from Case Western Reserve University School of Law in 1996. He has served in a wide variety of positions at Legal Aid including Staff Attorney, Grant Compliance Manager, and Managing Attorney. In his current role, he oversees all client services for the firm. He practices primarily in the area of consumer law with an emphasis on debt collection cases. He has played a leading role among legal aid organizations in Ohio in the use of technology to improve client services.

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**Jennifer Mezey**

Supervising Attorney, Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia

Jennifer Mezey is a Supervising Attorney in the Public Benefits Law Unit. Jennifer manages the unit, advocating individually and systemically on a variety of public benefits programs including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, Medicare, D.C. Health Alliance, Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), and Social Security benefits.

Immediately prior to joining Legal Aid in June 2004, Jennifer was a senior staff attorney (and before that, staff attorney) at the Center for Law and Social Policy, where she worked on federal and state child care and TANF policy advocacy and analysis. (She also was Senior Counsel at the National Women's Law Center from April through August 2011 where she focused on federal Medicaid and health care reform implementation policies.) Jennifer began her legal career as a NAPIL Equal Justice Fellow (and Counsel) at the National Women's Law Center, where she advocated for individuals and systemic reform of federal and District of Columbia child support and TANF programs.

Jennifer graduated with a B.A. in Government (with high honors) and English, and a minor in History, from Oberlin College in 1991. She also obtained a M.P.P. from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University in 1993. She received her J.D. from the University of Michigan Law School in 1998, where she was a Clarence Darrow Scholar. While at Michigan, she was an Articles Editor for the *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* and a student attorney in the University of Michigan Poverty Law Clinic. Before law school, Jennifer worked for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as a Presidential Management Intern, participating in the development of the Clinton Administration's welfare reform initiative.



**Elizabeth Soule**

Executive Director, MetroWest Legal Services in Framingham

Elizabeth Soule is the Executive Director of MetroWest Legal Services in Framingham. She has held that post since her appointment in September 2008. Prior to her appointment in 2008, she worked for 20 years as an elder law attorney and supervisor of the government benefits unit at South Middlesex Legal Services (now MetroWest Legal Services.)

Ms. Soule is a member of the Equal Justice Coalition, the Massachusetts Bar Association's Access to Justice Section Council, the Boston Bar Association Delivery of Legal Services Section Council, The Open Table Board of Directors, the Weston Friendly Society of the Performing Arts Board of Directors, and serves as the chair of the Wayland Council on Aging Board of Directors. In addition to being a faculty member for the Trial Skills training program at the Center for Legal Aid Education in Boston, she has taught as a visiting clinical supervisor at the Boston College Legal Assistance Bureau and given numerous presentations on many elder law topics in a wide range of contexts.

Ms. Soule has received the Person of the Year Award from Baypath Elder Services and received the 2014 President's Award from the Boston Bar Association as a member of the Boston Bar Association Task Force on Increasing Funding for Civil Legal Aid.

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Ms. Soulè earned her B.A. in Sociology magna cum laude in 1984 from The Catholic University of America and her Juris Doctor degree in 1987 from The Columbus School of Law at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.



**Laura Tuggle**

Executive Director, Southeast Louisiana Legal Services (SLLS)

Laura Tuggle has been the Executive Director of Southeast Louisiana Legal Services (SLLS) since May 2014. Prior to assuming the role of Executive Director, she managed SLLS' Housing Law Unit during the years immediately following Hurricane Katrina from 2005-2010 after having been a staff attorney there from 1994-2005. From August 2010-April 2013, she served as General Counsel and Director of Client Services as part of a reform administration at the long troubled Housing Authority of New Orleans, which had been under the longest running federal HUD takeover in the country. Her goal there was to improve agency operations so it could return back to local control while making lives better for HANO residents and the community. She returned home to SLLS in April 2013, as HANO prepared to return to regular governance. Prior to joining civil legal aid, she also worked at the New Orleans Pro Bono Project as the Homeless Advocacy Program Manager and their first Staff Attorney.

Over her 20 year public interest career, she has excelled in many areas including direct services, systemic work, and policy advocacy resulting in increased access to housing for special populations including the homeless, significant legal victories for low income tenants resulting in millions of dollars of restitution, media advocacy, and training hundreds of attorneys and housing advocates. She is the author of the Federally Subsidized Housing Program portion of the Louisiana Legal Services Desk Manual and coauthor of the housing portion of the Brookings Institute New Orleans Index at 5.

Laura has received several awards during her career including the 2001 Louisiana State Bar Association Career Public Interest Award, the 2004 Unity for the Homeless Advocacy Award, the 2005 Reginald Heber Smith Award from the National Legal Aid and Defender Association, the 2008 Lindy Boggs Hunger Awareness Award from the New Orleans Chapter of Bread for the World, and the 2010 Distinguished Service for Greater New Orleans Award from Southeast La. Legal Services. Under her leadership as Housing Manager, SLLS was the only Legal Services agency in the country to receive a 2009 Special Award from HUD for its Katrina Related Legal Services work. SLLS also received a Special Katrina Related Award for its disaster related housing work from the Housing Justice Network of the National Housing Law Project in 2010.

She has recently served on the Boards of the Louisiana Housing Alliance, Shared Housing, and chaired the Advocacy Committee of Unity of Greater New Orleans. She currently serves on the Board of the Family Justice Center of New Orleans, the Gillis Long Poverty Law Center at Loyola Law School, and is a member of the Louisiana Housing Corporation's first Fair Housing Task Force. Laura participated in the Mayor's Coalition to End Homelessness, was a member of the Mayor's Housing Transition Committee, is a Steering Committee member of a new collaborative pilot program in New Orleans aimed at ending homelessness for chronically disabled persons, and served on the ABA Commission on Homelessness and Poverty. Laura graduated from LSU in 1984 and received her Juris Doctorate degree from Tulane Law School in 1987.

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**Monica Vignes-Pitan**

Advocacy Director, Legal Services of Greater Miami, Inc.

Monica Vignes-Pitan is the Advocacy Director for the Health and Income Maintenance (HIM) Project at Legal Services of Greater Miami, Inc., which provides free legal services to the low-income communities in Miami-Dade and Monroe counties. The HIM Project handles cases in the area of public benefits, access to healthcare, special education, limited immigration and other civil law areas affecting the low-income community of Miami-Dade County. As Advocacy Director, Monica is responsible for supervising attorney and paralegal staff of the HIM Project.

Monica practices mostly in the area of public benefits law, concentrating on Medicaid issues. She has represented clients in the appellate level in both state and federal courts. In recent years, Monica has served as co-counsel in two landmark federal court cases which granted coverage of additional Medicaid services for children in the state of Florida. Additionally, Monica has also served as Co-Chair of the Little Havana Health Partnership's Host Council and Board Chair of the Miami Coalition for the Homeless.



**Thomas Yates**

Executive Director, AIDS Legal Council of Chicago

Thomas Yates is the Executive Director at AIDS Legal Council of Chicago (ALCC). He has been at ALCC since 2013. Before that, he was General Council at Health & Disability Advocates in Chicago where he worked from 1996 to 2013. He also has been in practice with Jeffrey Rabin & Associates in Chicago in 1998-99, the Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago from 1985 to 1996, and Northeast Kentucky Legal Services in Morehead, Kentucky from 1983 to 1985. Mr. Yates is a 1983 graduate of the College of Law at the University of Iowa. His legal practice has focused on public benefits including Social Security, SSI, Medicaid, Medicare, and state benefits programs.