

# North Mississippi Rural Legal Services Volunteer Law Project

## Volunteer Information Handbook



Connecting volunteers  
and under-served communities

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## About the Volunteer Law Project

The purpose of the Volunteer Law Project at North Mississippi Rural Legal Services is to connect volunteers and under-served communities, and further volunteer interest in public interest legal careers. To achieve these goals, the project matches volunteers with areas of client need based on the volunteer's interests, skills, and availability. By becoming involved in the project, volunteers gain valuable legal experience and first-hand knowledge of how the public interest legal sector operates. Most importantly, volunteers will provide an invaluable service to low-income communities and community members in need.



## Job Description: Volunteers

As a volunteer, you will:

- Be trained in several areas of public interest law, such as family, housing, wills, bankruptcy, tax, education, employment, and public benefits.
- Assist clients with the completion of intake questionnaires and applications.
- Determine the eligibility of our clients by calculating income, verifying assets, and inquiring about allowances which make clients eligible for legal services.
- Use knowledge of substantive law to develop and enhance intake questionnaires, as well as self-help materials that will be sent to clients.
- Learn interviewing techniques, case analysis, and issue spotting in areas of public interest law.
- Become a skilled listener, who will gather information in a considerate manner, analyze the facts, and apply substantive knowledge.

## Volunteer Qualifications

- Sensitive and caring attitude
- Enthusiasm about assisting low income Mississippians
- Highly motivated to use your skills to assist the community
- Ability to work efficiently with people from diverse backgrounds
- Ability to communicate effectively individually (one-on-one) and/or present information in a group setting
- Able and willing to attend training sessions
- Will NOT profit financially or accept remuneration for services

Time Commitment: Volunteers may commit as many hours as comfortable.

Training Required: Volunteers are required to complete an initial orientation. If a volunteer is assisting in a specialized area then the volunteer will be requested to attend training when available.

Travel Required: Some travel may be required in order to complete volunteer duties, such as to meet with clients, attend training, or educational outreach. Individuals will be reimbursed for travel with prior supervisor's approval

Working Relationships: Volunteers will work closely with a supervising attorney and the staff of North Mississippi Rural Legal Services.

Available Resources: Volunteers will receive the necessary guidance, training, and materials to fulfill their responsibilities.

Volunteer Policy: volunteers will receive equal opportunity and treatment through recruitment, training, and service. There will be no discrimination based on age, disabilities, gender, race, color, national or ethnic origin, religion, or economic status.

## **Benefits of Volunteering for Pro Bono Work**

- Gain practical legal experience. You will get the opportunity to do hands- on legal work that will provide you with experience and add value to your resume.
- Make connections with legal professionals in the community. Through your volunteer work, you will be rewarded with several valuable networking opportunities.
- Serve your community and individuals in need. You are providing a real service and making a difference in peoples' lives.
- You will stand out in the job market by volunteering. Legal volunteer work demonstrates character, maturity, and work ethic.
- Improve professional skills, such as legal research and writing, public speaking, communication, etc.
- Develop a writing sample



## **Volunteer Conduct**

Volunteers are expected to adhere to North Mississippi Rural Legal Service's code of professional conduct. Your supervising attorney will notify you of these policies upon your orientation with the organization. Volunteers are expected to maintain satisfactory attendance and job performance. Failure to do so will result in termination of the volunteer position.

Examples of misconduct include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Dishonesty
- Violation of organization's alcohol, substance use and abuse, or sexual harassment policies
- Theft
- Insubordination, rude or disrespectful behavior, offensive use of indecent, or foul speech
- Excessive absenteeism
- Job Abandonment
- Criminal activity

## **Expectations for Project Volunteers**

- Let your supervisor know right away if you are unable to volunteer so others may take advantage of the opportunity. Volunteers help fill the gap in services by volunteering with agencies that provide legal assistance to low-income populations. Since your volunteerism is so greatly relied upon, it is crucial to remain dedicated to a placement once you have committed to an agency. Please consider your work load and other commitments before agreeing to volunteer.
- Check your e-mail regularly for e-mails, or let your supervisor know if email is not a good way to communicate with you.
- Provide your supervisor with advance notice of scheduling changes and your end date.
- Submit your volunteer time log to your supervising attorney at the end of each period that you volunteer

- Complete and submit your final evaluation of your experience with the program to your supervising attorney.
- Use good judgment and decision making while volunteering. When not sure what the right decision is, you should always ask your supervisor for assistance.
- Always ask questions and bring ethical concerns to your supervisor's attention. Remember your primary responsibility is to use good judgment, be conscientious and seek help whenever needed on a potential ethical or professional question.
- Although you will not be paid for this volunteer experience, it is still a professional commitment you have made that will provide you an opportunity for professional development.
- The quality of your work and the professionalism you bring to this experience will serve you well. One aspect of professionalism is keeping track of and reporting the hours you spend on a project. We need to know how many hours you volunteered in order to prove our value to the legal community.
- Read and understand all Project guidelines as set forth in this handbook.

## **Volunteer Liability**

The following information is a general summary of the responsibilities volunteers bear. This document is not exhaustive, and volunteers should understand the Mississippi Rules of Professional Conduct before volunteering, as our organization is a law firm. These responsibilities and limitations are imposed by Mississippi law and the Code of Professional Conduct. They are not optional and must be strictly adhered to. Most important, you are NOT here to advise applicants as to their legal rights. To do so is practicing law, for which you are not licensed.

### **Volunteers**

- A volunteer may only do work which is preparatory, such as legal research, fact investigation, and working drafts of legal documents and correspondence.
- A volunteer may not act in a representative capacity in protecting, enforcing or defending the legal rights of another, advise or counsel a person in connection with his/her rights through in-person interviews, letters or telephone calls, or dispose of legal issues "by advice and negotiation."

- Volunteers who exceed the scope of their duties may be liable for their actions.
- The volunteer may not be insulated from liability because he or she has a supervising attorney.

## Confidentiality

During your volunteer work, pay particular attention to issues concerning the preservation of client confidences. Volunteers must protect client information and maintain confidentiality. Pursuant to the Mississippi Code of Professional Conduct, a lawyer may not reveal the confidences or secrets of a client. The contents of client files and communications with clients are privileged material. You should discuss cases only with your supervising attorney, not with other attorneys, employers, co-workers, family, friends, or other volunteers.



## Client Sensitivity

An individual requesting assistance from legal services is generally in a difficult and uncomfortable position. Not only is the person involved in a potentially serious or life-changing legal situation, but he or she must also go through our eligibility determination process, answering questions that many of us would not want to discuss with a stranger.

Often, our applicants have sought assistance from a variety of social services agencies and have encountered staff who are indifferent and insensitive to the dignities any individual deserves. As a legal services volunteer, you should strive to be as sympathetic with the applicants as possible. By doing this, you will assist in the development of a good working relationship with the client.

## Conflict Checks

Law volunteers are liable for conflicts of interest. Conflict checks are a regular occurrence for practicing attorneys. It is important that you advise our organization about any organizations with which you have worked or volunteered in the past. Additionally, if you work with another legal organization it will be necessary for you to advise the future employer or volunteer placement that you volunteered with this volunteer placement. There is a conflict check form that must be completed before working with our organization. You should complete this form and turn it in to prior to beginning your placement with our office.



Why is it important to ensure that there are not conflicts of interest? No client wants a lawyer to work on his or her case this week and on the opposing side next week. You know that lawyers can face conflicts of interest- can volunteers, clinic participants, or law clerks? The answer is YES!

## **Challenges of Working With Low Income Clients**

Many clients, especially those with low income, face challenges that volunteers may need to accommodate in order to provide high quality legal services. Here are some common challenges and ways to handle them.

### **Logistics**

Many low-income clients may have logistical problems, such as lack of transportation, phone, or child care. It is important for volunteers to be mindful of the potential issues that a client may have, and to document or speak with the supervising attorney regarding these issues if the client provides this information.

For volunteers that will be representing a client, it is important for the volunteer and the client to identify all of these potential problems from the beginning so that the professional relationship does not suffer later because of them (e.g., the volunteer is unable to reach the client about a court date, or the client misses an appointment). If not addressed initially, these problems often cause the client to think that the volunteer is not keeping the client informed and/or cause the volunteer to believe the client is irresponsible, unreliable or unappreciative. If communication problems arise because the client does not have a phone, perhaps the lawyer can establish a schedule for the client to contact the law office or establish a means of communication by mail or through a client's friend or family member.

### **Unassertive Behavior**

Although most clients will welcome the opportunity to obtain professional assistance concerning their problems, some clients may appear unassertive or have a general inability or unwillingness to ask about or discuss their case. They may not understand legal terms, and may not ask questions for fear of appearing unknowledgeable.

If a volunteer is interviewing a client, in instances where clients are quiet or non-communicative, the volunteer may have to provide a more structured interview or ask the client questions that will encourage the client to talk about the problem (e.g., "What do you think your spouse would say the problem is?", or "What would you like to have happen here?"). The volunteer should keep in mind that victims of domestic abuse may be especially reluctant to talk; if the volunteer suspects that abuse is an issue, the volunteer should talk to his or her supervisor and may want to refer the client to a counselor or advocate at a domestic abuse shelter. Actively listening to clients can be empowering for them.



## **Fears**

Volunteers need to understand that some clients are fearful. Even if the problem could be resolved easily, many clients are hesitant to take action because they fear they may lose something else. (For example, a client may be afraid to contact a landlord about a necessary repair for fear of being thrown out with no place to live). Clients fears can be relieved by providing them with their rights under the law.

## **Stress**

The majority of lawyer/client relationships are initiated at times of great stress for the client. Clients may be seeking assistance with feelings of urgency and desperation because the matter must be resolved immediately. It is also important for a volunteer to remember that, in addition to all of the other problems a low-income client may have, there is always the underlying stress of financial burdens. When working with clients it is important to know important dates and deadlines in order to extinguish added stress from the situation. Recognizing and helping the client deal with stress can make the volunteer's job easier and the lawyer-client relationship more productive.

## **Communication**

Attorneys and volunteers should identify and address clients' special difficulties, such as;

- **Physical Disability-** If the client has a physical disability, make sure your meeting location is wheelchair accessible. If in doubt, respectfully ask the client to let you know how you can accommodate him/her. If the client is blind, ask what format the person would like any information from you in (i.e. Braille).
- **Non-English Speaking-** If the client has brought an interpreter, speak slowly (but not more loudly) so that they can understand you better. If it is obvious that communication is not happening, ask the client to reschedule his/her appointment at a time when he or she can bring an interpreter.
- **Illiteracy-** If the client is illiterate, read documents or other papers out loud to be sure the client understands.
- **No Telephone-** Clients may not have a telephone or their phone may be disconnected at some time during your involvement with them. Communicate with them through mail or ask them for a phone number at which they can receive messages. Try your best to take their calls when they call you.

## **Mental Illness**

You can expect that adults with mental illness can be difficult to work with at times. Depending on their particular condition, they may be unwilling to accept responsibility, unable to remember agreements, untrustworthy, difficult to understand, inconsistent with discipline, poor at keeping appointments, and unpredictable emotionally. Afford the same respect to people with mental illness as you would to anyone else. Be flexible, but expect adults to take responsibility for their actions. Missed appointments, lying, and dangerous behavior are unacceptable. If there is a continuing problem with the client, notify your supervisor.

## Services to Individuals

For all clients, discuss any limitations in representation, and explain to the clients in simple, but respectful, terms (no "legalese") what steps the lawyer will take to correct their problems. Despite the sensitivity and professionalism legal services staff and volunteers provide, some clients or applicants will find fault with the program or make providing services difficult. Some individuals are not only hesitant to answer questions, but may also become belligerent toward the screener.

When we turn away an applicant because of a conflict or non-eligibility, that person may become angry or upset. The bottom line is that we just have to deal with it. When necessary, speak with your supervising attorney about what to do or ask a staff member to speak with the applicant.

## Resume Advice

Volunteering has many benefits; among other things, you will learn new practice skills and gain substantive legal knowledge. Be sure to include your volunteer experiences on your resume. Arguably the skills and substantive knowledge you gain by volunteering will be of most interest to prospective employers.

Resume example:

North Mississippi Rural Legal Services, Oxford, MS (January 2007-June 2007)

### *Law Volunteer Project*

- Conducted intake interviews of prospective clients
- Assisted attorneys at various legal workshops .
- Researched various legal topics
- Drafted memoranda and pleadings
- Various other pro bono legal work

# Volunteer Law Project North Mississippi Rural Legal Services

## Volunteer Enrollment Form

Name:

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Address:

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Home Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Mobile Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail Address:

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Year in School:

---

Other Employment?

---

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Career Interests:

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Volunteer Interests:

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How did you find out about the volunteer project at NMRLS?

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# NORTH MISSISSIPPI RURAL LEGAL SERVICES

## Volunteer Law Project

### *CONTACT INFORMATION*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Home Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Mobile Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_

### *EDUCATION AND VOLUNTEER HISTORY*

Law School: \_\_\_\_\_ Year: \_\_\_\_\_

PLEASE INDICATE ALL COURSES RELEVANT TO THIS INTERNSHIP.  
INCLUDE THOSE IN WHICH YOU ARE CURRENTLY ENROLLED:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

PLEASE LIST ANY STUDENT GOVERNMENT OR OTHER LEADERSHIP  
ROLES AND VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES IN WHICH YOU HAVE BEEN  
INVOLVED DURING THE PAST FIVE YEARS:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

**EMPLOYMENT HISTORY** (Most recent first)

Job Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Employer: \_\_\_\_\_ Dates: \_\_\_\_\_

Job Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Employer: \_\_\_\_\_ Dates: \_\_\_\_\_

Job Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Employer: \_\_\_\_\_ Dates: \_\_\_\_\_

Special Skills (Computer, Languages, Etc.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Career Interests:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

How did you find out about the volunteer project at NMRLS?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**AVAILABILITY**

I can volunteer for approximately \_\_\_\_\_ weeks beginning \_\_\_\_\_.

I can volunteer approximately \_\_\_\_\_ hours per week. I

am available:

Mornings:     Monday    Tuesday    Wednesday    Thursday    Friday

Afternoons:    Monday    Tuesday    Wednesday    Thursday    Friday

**CERTIFICATION**

I certify that all statements made on this application are true to the best of my knowledge:

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

## Volunteer Law Project Letter of Commitment

I understand that there are certain guidelines that I must adhere to as a condition of my membership in the Volunteer Law Project (hereinafter referred to as "the project"). These guidelines are as follows:

I understand that I must submit a completed student membership form, signed letter of commitment, and a signed volunteer confidentiality agreement to begin my membership with the project. I understand that as a member of the project, I may make note of my membership for resume purposes. However, if at any time, I am dismissed from the project, I understand that I must remove the notation of membership from my resume.

I understand that I am responsible for keeping record of my hours of service through a timesheet provided by the project.

I understand that if I fail to meet with the attorney or client for a scheduled appointment, I may be placed on probation. If this conduct occurs a second time, I understand I will be dismissed from the project. The Coordinator of the Volunteer Law Project does have the right to review the circumstances surrounding my absence to grant possible exemptions for emergencies.

I understand that I am a representative of North Mississippi Rural Legal Services. As such, I will conduct myself in an appropriate professional manner. If at any time, it is reported that I have behaved in an inappropriate manner as a representative of the project, the Coordinator of the Volunteer Law Project does have the option of dismissing me from the group if they deem it necessary.

I understand that I am to keep confidential all information that I obtain through my volunteer work

I understand that I must provide information as to all potential conflicts of interest.

By signing this letter of commitment, I commit myself to the standards and guidelines presented hereto.

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

*Volunteer Confidentiality Agreement*

I, \_\_\_\_\_, acknowledge that the unauthorized disclosure of any information designated as confidential violates clients' right to privacy and the attorney-client privilege. As a volunteer, I recognize that North Mississippi Rural Legal Services have a duty to maintain attorney-client confidentiality and it is my responsibility to hold client information in strict confidence. The violation of confidence may cause my immediate termination as a volunteer with North Mississippi Rural Legal Services' Volunteer Law Project. The violation of confidence may cause legal action against me.

I hereby acknowledge the above as a binding agreement between myself and North Mississippi Rural Legal Services to maintain client confidentiality. I have carefully read this agreement and fully understand its contents. I sign this agreement freely and voluntarily.

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Law Volunteer Signature*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Print Name*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*NMRLS Supervising Attorney*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

## Volunteer Conflict Check Form

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Volunteer Name*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date*

*Please list any legal positions at which you have worked as a volunteer, law clerk, clinic participant, etc. Copy and attach additional sheets if necessary.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Firm Agency Clinic*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Supervising Attorney*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Adverse Parties Opposing Attorneys Firms Agencies Clinics*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Matters worked on*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Dates worked*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Firm/Agency/Clinic*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Supervising Attorney*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Adverse Parties/Opposing Attorneys/Firms/Agencies/Clinics*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Matters worked on*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Dates worked*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Firm/Agency/Clinic*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Supervising Attorney*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Adverse Parties Opposing Attorneys Firms Agencies Clinics*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Matters worked on*

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Dates worked*





