

## Legal Aid Clinics Scheme

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As India lives in its villages, it is imperative that the villagers be provided an effective legal assistance in their village itself. As of now it is also a fact that most of the legal services institutions are located in urban and semi-urban areas which position puts the villagers at a disadvantage. To overcome this hurdle a Scheme of Legal Aid Clinics has been prepared to provide legal relief easily to the indigent and backward sections of our society. The Scheme, adopted in December last year under the National Plan of Action of the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), is being implemented through the legal services institutions (i.e., the Taluk/Sub-divisional/Mandal Legal Services Committees, District Legal Services Authorities, High Court Legal Services Committees, State Legal Services Authorities and Supreme Court Legal Services Committee established under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987) spread throughout the nation. NALSA plans to set up Legal Aid Clinics in all villages throughout the country. Legal Aid Clinic is one of the thrust areas envisioned in the NALSA's *Quinquennial vision & strategy document*.

Legal Aid Clinics on the lines of primary health centres where a doctor and other auxiliary medical staff provide basic health care to the people situated in village areas affected with poverty and social squalor. Like the doctors rendering health services to the people of the locality in the primary health centre, a lawyer manning the legal aid clinic provides legal services to the people. The basic objective of the Scheme is to provide legal services to the poor, marginalized and weaker sections of the society as categorized in Section 12 of the Legal Services Authorities Act 1987, especially to the people living in faraway places including the places with geographical barriers, away from the seats of justice and the offices of the legal services institutions. The aim of the Scheme is to provide an inexpensive local machinery for rendering legal services of basic nature like legal advice, drafting of petitions, notices, replies, applications and other documents of legal importance and also for resolving the disputes of the local people by making the parties to see reason and thereby preventing the disputes reaching courts. In cases where legal services of a higher level are required, the matter can be referred to the legal services institutions established under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987.

Legal Aid Clinics are manned by *paralegal volunteers* (selected and trained by the Legal Services Authorities) and lawyers with a sense of commitment, sensibility and sensitiveness to the problems of common people. The paralegal volunteer is available during the working hours of the Legal Aid Clinics.

The Legal Aid Clinics are located at a place which is easily accessible to the local people. A room within the office building of the local body institutions like village *panchayat* is considered ideal.

The local Legal Services Authorities are persuading the local body institutions like village *panchayat*, *mandal* / block *panchayat*, municipality and corporation etc, to provide a room for the functioning of legal aid clinic. Since the legal aid clinic is for the benefit of the people in the locality, the local body institutions is impressed upon the need to co-operate with the functioning of the legal aid clinics and to realise that the legal aid clinic is aimed at promoting peace and welfare of the people in the locality.

Legal Aid Clinics are under the direct administrative control of the nearest legal services institution having territorial jurisdiction. The District Legal Services Authority has the supervisory and advisory powers on all Legal Aid Clinics functioning within the district. The State Legal Services Authority has the power to issue guidelines on the working of these Clinics.

The State Legal Services Authorities issue directions from time to time for improving the services in the Legal Aid Clinics to ensure that members of the weaker sections of the society are provided legal services in an efficient manner. The State Legal Services Authorities are required to send quarterly reports about the functioning of the Legal Aid Clinics within their jurisdiction to National Legal Services Authority.

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