



09 May 2013

For immediate release

Legal Aid Advice Line makes access to justice a reality for many South Africans

Legal Aid South Africa's call centre, the *Legal Aid Advice Line* has contributed immensely towards national efforts to increase access to justice for all South Africans, recording about 180,000 calls since its launch in 2010.

From its first year, the Call Centre has experienced steady growth in call volumes with an average of 50 000 to 60 000 calls a year.

The Legal Aid Advice Line prioritises civil matters including children, family and land matters - areas of the law in which there is an increasing demand for legal aid.

According to Legal Aid SA spokesperson, Mpho Phasha, the call volumes are expected to steadily increase in the coming years as more and more people become aware of this service.

"Backed by a consistent PR and marketing campaign, as well as improved operational efficiencies, we expect the call centre to maintain steady growth for years to come," says Phasha.

He said the organisation had invested in the best call centre technology in the market to cater for high call volumes, thereby ensuring the delivery of timely, efficient and professional services to callers.

Legal Aid Advice Line Manager, Andries Nthebe says call centre staffing is also adjusted from time to time to respond to peak demand periods. "At the moment, we are able to service our clients more efficiently through a centralized call centre, which is open from 7am to 7pm. Callers who call outside these times are invited to leave a message with their telephone number so that we can call them back in the next business day. If demand for assistance outside normal hours should increase, we may have to enhance our services by extending our operations outside normal office hours," explains Nthebe. About 70% of our calls are resolved by call centre staff while the balance is referred to Justice Centres and other institutions.

Since it was launched the Call Centre, which currently has a staff complement of four qualified attorneys and 18 paralegals; has continued to be an instrumental tool in ensuring that access to justice becomes a reality for the poor and those living in rural areas. The staff members in the centre usually give advice to callers in civil, family, labour and criminal matters or such matters to Justice Centres for further action and assistance. Notably, this advice is being rendered in five of our 11 official languages.

Nthebe explains further: "The Legal Aid Advice Line has greatly impacted the lives of the poor and vulnerable through the general advice services we offer. The fact that calls are free means that we are able to call the clients, and that has brought about a significant reduction in the cost to them. The clients save on transport costs and are able to receive legal advice over the phone. We also have quality assurance measures in place to ensure that our staff meets the clients' needs. For instance, all our calls are mechanically recorded and management can recall historical recorded calls and also tap into real time live calls to ensure efficiency".

The Legal Aid Advice Line is primarily an outbound call centre. With the launch of our new website www.legal-aid.co.za, we found that rather than seek information on how to access our services, clients pose the actual legal questions they have on the web contact. The Call Centre staff responds to the questions and makes follow-ups with the clients depending on the nature of the assistance required.

"For this reason, we have decided to assign these to our call centre staff. This has created an outbound component to our services which seems to be growing," says Nthebe.

This landmark by the Advice Line is indeed a great feat as it enables Legal Aid South Africa to broaden its reach and thus providing immediate legal advice to the poor and most vulnerable. Further the excellence demonstrated by the Advice Line also resonates well with the high performing culture of our organization. The increase in service to the poorest of the poor amongst our communities validates our commitment to ensure that the Bill of Rights and all the other principles enshrined in our Constitution reverberate in the daily lives of all South Africans.

"We strongly are of the view that everyone is entitled to human dignity which must be promoted, amongst others, through access to justice. However, it can be frustrating when people do not have equal access to legal representation," says Nthebe.

He concludes: "With much commitment and dedication displayed by the Call Centre staff, there is no doubt that those in need of legal representation will not be deprived the opportunity."

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Issued by the Communications Department of Legal Aid South Africa. For more information, please contact the National Spokesperson, Mpho Phasha on 011 877 2081 or the Corporate Communications Manager, Nelisiwe Masina on (011) 877 2153/082 380 8079).

Visit our website at www.legal-aid.co.za or call the Legal Aid Advice Line on 0800 110 110.