



# Legal Services in Rural Nevada: The Volunteer Attorneys for Rural Nevadans

BY VICTORIA S. MENDOZA, ESQ.

**A common question asked by Nevada lawyers is, “What is VARN?” Volunteer Attorneys for Rural Nevadans (VARN) is a legal service group that provides pro bono legal services for residents of Nevada’s rural counties. VARN started as a project of the Young Lawyers Section of the State Bar of Nevada in the mid-1990s. The Young Lawyers Section chose this project because there was no mechanism within the state bar that organized a pro bono service for low-income rural county residents who needed legal assistance with members of the Nevada bar who were willing to provide free legal services to these residents. The project was so successful that it received an American Bar Association award for Best Project by a Young Lawyers Section of the bar in the U.S.**

VARN was incorporated on December 31, 1996—more than 25 years ago. In the beginning, VARN only coordinated pro bono clients in need of services with lawyers in the rural counties of Nevada. At that time, VARN had one employee, a non-lawyer, Odessa Ramirez. Since 1996, VARN has grown to employ several attorneys and administrative personnel to provide other legal services for rural Nevadans when the need arises.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Soroptimist International of Carson City (SICC) wanted to help victims of domestic violence in rural Nevada who were unable to obtain legal representation for their civil court cases, usually family law matters. SICC began to have an annual local fundraiser to obtain funding to hire attorneys for these victims. Under this project, victims of domestic violence could receive an initial grant of \$1,500 to pay for a local private attorney to represent them. At the time, no one really knew what the demand for services would be. Soon, the demand for services exceeded the ability of local fundraising to pay for services. Grant funding was found, and in 2002, VARN added the Domestic Violence Victims Assistance Project (DVVAP) to its pro bono services, offering free legal services to victims of domestic violence in Nevada’s rural counties.

The first DVVAP attorney was Valerie Cooney from Carson City. By 2021, VARN employed three attorneys to represent domestic violence victims. DVVAP is funded by grants, which are administrated by the state of Nevada; the Nevada Attorney General’s Office; a grant from Carson City; and court filing fees from Carson City, Douglas County, and Lyon County; as well as funds from the E. L. Cord Foundation, the Hawkins Foundation, from the Nevada Bar Foundation and IOLTA, SICC, and generous donations from many Nevada lawyers and individuals. The project has been very successful and has

provided free legal services to hundreds of victims of domestic violence who reside in the rural areas of Nevada.

In 2013, VARN added an immigration project to handle the immigration problems of victims of domestic violence. The project is named the Domestic Violence Immigration Integration Project (DVRIIP). This project provides free legal assistance with Violence Against Women Act self-petitions and U-Visas to victims of domestic violence. This project was funded by a grant from the Office of Violence Against Women (OVW). The grant provided funds to hire an immigration lawyer and a bilingual legal assistant.

In 2018, VARN added a project to offer free legal assistance to seniors (anyone 60 years or older) who reside in the rural areas of Nevada. This project, known as the Rural Senior Law Project (RSLP), has met with much success. RSLP is federally funded by the Aging and Disability Services Division of the Nevada Department of Health and Human Services. During the pandemic, RSLP assisted hundreds of rural seniors with legal help concerning their many housing issues. George McNally, the current RSLP lawyer, said that he loves his job and his interactions with the many seniors in the rural areas of Nevada.

“Every day I go home knowing that I have helped someone with a legal problem that was keeping them up at night. And that is a good feeling for a lawyer,” he said.

VARN still maintains its first project: classic pro bono coordination. During the 25 years of VARN’s existence, this project has grown to include an “Ask a Lawyer” program called “Lawyer in the Lobby” in addition to connecting pro bono clients with private lawyers who can assist them with their legal problems. VARN offers annual Legal Aid Fairs in Carson City and Douglas County.

VARN answered the call for short legal consultations by establishing a “Lawyer in the Lobby” program, which provides a free 20-minute consultation with a private attorney. The program started with two sessions per month—one devoted to family law inquiries and one devoted to general law inquiries. The program is so

# Faces of VARN



Volunteer Attorneys for Rural Nevada’s (VARN) pro bono volunteer attorneys come from many areas of practice and find that pro bono service is rewarding. For example, **Danielle Davis**, one of VARN’s pro bono attorneys, is working for the Washoe County Public

Defenders’ office in Reno. She regularly takes pro bono cases and does a monthly “Lawyer in the Lobby” session. Besides her busy lawyer life, Davis is also the mother of two young boys. VARN is very appreciative of her continued work with pro bono legal services.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 17

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# The Volunteer Attorneys for Rural Nevadans

popular that it has been expanded to five sessions per month—two devoted to family law, one general law session, one session devoted to questions from seniors, and one session devoted to questions from Spanish speakers. Before the pandemic, the Lawyer in the Lobby sessions were held at VARN’s offices in Carson City. Since the pandemic, the Lawyer in the Lobby sessions are held by telephone only. Each year the VARN Pro Bono Project serves between approximately 500 and 750 participants.

VARN’s offices are in Carson City. VARN usually employs four to five attorneys, three legal assistants, a bilingual receptionist, an executive director/managing attorney, and a part-time administrative assistant to assist with the DVVAP, RSLP and pro bono programs. The VARN attorneys frequently travel to many historic Nevada courthouses, including Douglas County, Storey County, Lyon County, Churchill County, Pershing County, Humboldt County, Lander County, Elko County, White Pine County, Mineral County, and Carson City. Most of the judicial districts in rural Nevada do not have e-filing, and VARN attorneys must file their legal documents with the judicial districts in person or by mail. The Eleventh Judicial District Court is the exception. That court requires e-filing, which operates much like the e-filing system in the Second Judicial District Court in Washoe County.

VARN has recently received funding for a “Justice Bus” for use in the rural areas of Nevada. The bus is still under construction, so stayed tuned for more information about it in the future.

If you are interested in learning more about VARN, you can find us online at [www.varn.org](http://www.varn.org). If you would like to take a pro bono case or do a Lawyer in the Lobby session, please contact Victoria Mendoza at [vmendoza@varn.org](mailto:vmendoza@varn.org). You can also reach us by email at [info@varn.org](mailto:info@varn.org).

# Faces of VARN

Another faithful VARN volunteer is **Chuck Zumpft**, a busy private practitioner from Minden. When VARN had office meetings with the participants for “Lawyer in the Lobby,”



Zumpft would come to the office in Carson City from Minden (15 miles away) on his motorcycle, complete with helmet and cycle gear, much to the delight of the participants waiting in VARN’s office lobby. He has been volunteering his time to VARN’s pro bono program for more than eight years. He says that it is easy to fit in with his schedule. VARN’s pro bono program would not be the success that it is without attorney volunteers like Davis and Zumpft. VARN and its clients are grateful for all the work that these pro bono lawyers do

for the underserved populations in Nevada’s rural counties. In fact, one happy VARN pro bono client has stated that the legal services that they received from VARN “saved their life.”



**VICTORIA S. MENDOZA** has been a member of the State Bar of Nevada for more than 40 years. She has worked with VARN since 2014 when she started as a DVVAP staff attorney and the pro bono coordinator. She is VARN’s executive director and managing attorney.



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