

NALSA's Release of 'Handbook of Formats: Ensuring Effective Legal Services' Aimed at Marginalised, Weaker Sections held on Thursday, 4th June, 2020 through Webinar. Keynote address delivered by Executive Chairman of NALSA Justice N.V. Ramana, Judge, Supreme Court of India.

June 4, 2020 – Hon'ble Justice N.V. Ramana, Executive Chairman, National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) today released '*Handbook of Formats: Ensuring Effective Legal Services*' at a webinar in the presence of Executive Chairpersons of State Legal Services Authorities, Chairpersons of High Court Legal Services Committees and Member Secretaries of all State Legal Services Authorities, Chairpersons and Secretaries of District Legal Services Authorities.

In the Keynote address, Justice Ramana highlighted the following issues:

“Unfortunately, even though three months have passed, the situation is still not under control. Pursuant to the lockdown, thousands of people have lost their lives and livelihood, large scale migration has taken place. The lockdown has itself creative psychological issues and violence within the family. Women have been burdened with more work; children have unable to go to schools. Adding, to that working of home has also had it impact on the family life.

But now we have to work with constraints. The Trial Courts have yet not started functioning. The High Court and the Supreme Court are working through videoconferencing. But in spite of the same, the Legal Services Authorities have done tremendous activities during the prevailing pandemic by adopting the latest technology.

One of the critical areas which has come to our notice was rising violence within the family itself. We also saw increasing rise in the number of instances of child abuse. During such times, when the victims cannot reach us, it imperative for us to reach them. Acknowledging the urgency of the situation we have established One Stop Centres (OSCs). Persistent efforts have been taken to provide legal assistance, through teleservices of female Panel Lawyers in every district. In other matters, petitions have been filed under the Domestic Violence Act.

Another focus area for the Legal Services Authorities across the country was to ensure the reduction of over-crowding in prisons. As per the directions of the Supreme Court, the SLSAs have actively assisted High Powered Committees to identify and complete the necessary formalities for the release of prisoners, both undertrials and convicts, during the pandemic.

It is equally imperative that legal aid providers are able to document and report their interventions which is essential to effectuate the various NALSA schemes and frameworks. This Handbook is the first crucial step towards standardizing and bringing in uniformity in the use of formats. This handbook is an effective tool for management of human resources and in future will prove as a small but significant step in realizing justice for all.

This pandemic has presented before us, multiple emerging issues. The most predominant one is that of reverse migration. Massive reverse migration will invariably lead to increase in poverty, inequity and discrimination. This pandemic has also affected rights of women, children and senior citizen. This calls for a persistent and target orientation action plan, which we all have to work out together. THE FUTURE IS GOING TO BE CHALLENGING- LET'S STAY COMMITTED.”

Additionally, he also noted that, as many as 58,797 undertrial prisoners and 20,972 convicts on parole etc. have been released with the assistance of the Legal Services Institutions and legal representation has been provided to 9,558 persons at the remand stage. Legal aid and assistance have also been provided in 1,559 domestic violence cases to women; 16,391 convicts; 1,882 labourers; 310 tenants amongst others. It is also being ensured that Toll free National Legal Helpline 15100 remains fully functional so that no person in need of justice is denied the same. Legal Services Authorities have organised hundreds of webinars across various states and are utilising cost effective tools such as social media, community radio stations, local cable television channels and other digital platforms to increase outreach.

He concluded advised the audience that- ***“Let these challenging times not paralyse you, like all dark nights this too shall pass...”***

The online release programme included a welcome address by **Mr Ashok Kumar Jain**, Member Secretary, NALSA. **Mr Alok Agarwal**, Former Member Secretary, NALSA and **Mr Sunil Chauhan**, Director, NALSA were also present on the occasion. All esteemed guests reiterated the significance of the Handbook as an effective tool for management of legal services activities, and in future will prove as a significant step in improving organisational practices required for providing legal services.

Mr. Ashok Kumar Jain in his welcome address, emphasized on the importance of quality and stated that for achieving quality, processes are more imperative than the outcome. Quality processes not only result in improving the outcomes but also impact the perpetual outcome. This is what the NALSA Handbook aims at. It is expected to improve the managerial framework, and bring consistency in day-to-

day basic working across the country. It will be a guide for the panel lawyers and PLVs on their role.

A brief overview of the handbook was provided by **Ms Madhurima Dhanuka**, Programme Head, Prison Reforms at CHRI during the online release, where she stressed on quality being an important characteristic of legal services. “An important aspect of attaining quality is to ensure that process measures are in place which are aimed at ensuring the performance of work by legal aid providers from the first point of entry into the system,” she said.

Prepared in collaboration with the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), the Handbook is a step towards NALSA’s priority of improving the quality of legal services by strengthening documentation and reporting by Legal Services Institutions across the country. In the year 2020, NALSA is focused to enhance legal services provided for marginalised and weaker sections. This is in furtherance of ensuring the right of every person to have effective legal representation and the duty of the State under Article 39A of the Constitution of India to provide free legal aid to those who cannot afford it.

The Handbook, prepared by NALSA in collaboration with CHRI, consists of two sections. The first section contains formats for legal aid providers i.e. panel lawyers, retainer lawyers, remand lawyers, jail visiting lawyers and lawyers attached to police stations and for community and convict paralegal volunteers. The second section includes formats for Legal Services Institutions including registers for the Front Office, attendance registers, clinics and for the Monitoring and Mentoring Committees. This handbook contains formats that will enhance data collection, enabling NALSA to analyse trends and patterns emanating from data, and identification of issues at the micro level.