

# Legal Services attorneys seek better pay, benefits

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The Legal Services Staff Association, a national organization of legal services workers, is pushing for a new contract and pay structure which could bring it into line with colleagues in other cities.

Members of the association, which represents over 250 attorneys, paralegals and clerical workers, have been on strike since April 1. Anita Miller, co-president of the association, says a key demand is for a structured pay system.

Said Miller: "Right now we have no salary structure. What we have is an archaic system under which attorneys are paid according to their date of graduation and other staff receive a flat increase." The aim now is to secure a contract based on step structured pay increases, Miller said.

Miller noted that the current unstructured system, coupled with low wages, contributes to poor fiscal administration. "Our attorneys receive salaries that are 46 percent lower than those paid to Legal Aid Society members. That encourages our attorneys to seek other positions within three to five years of joining Legal Services of New York City. Our funding sources are not linked to the city, but we have experienced bad

times over the past 10 years and we think it is time for a change of direction."

In another development, the Association of Legal Aid Attorneys (ALAA) which represents nearly 1,000 attorneys, says it has gone over eight months without a contract and now faces cuts in health benefits.

Michael Letwin, ALAA president, says the cuts will reduce the quality of legal representation to people applying for legal aid. Said Letwin: "Attorneys work for Legal Aid because of their commitment to the public interest but not to get rich. Yet while ALAA members already make less than most lawyers in the public and public interest sectors, a threatened reduction in health benefits will discourage even committed attorneys from applying to or remaining at Legal Aid."

The association has proposed ways of saving money in Legal Aid and in the criminal justice system so that health benefits can be maintained. David Addams, ALAA executive director, says the proposals focus on reducing the high level of management compensation, the need for Legal Aid management to handle caseloads, and on shifting more cases to Legal Aid from the more costly 18B panel of private attorneys.