

Legal-Assistance Agency Picketed By Staff as It Observes 10th Year

By TOM GOLDSTEIN

Inside the majestic, Colonial-style auditorium of the New York County Lawyers' Association, 100 prominent lawyers and advocates for the poor gathered yesterday to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Community Action for Legal Services. They discussed the history, future and philosophical underpinnings of providing free legal services to the poor.

Outside the building at 14 Vesey Street, 100 staff lawyers and legal workers of Community Action for Legal Services picketed, demanding better wages and working conditions.

Several blocks away, on the Lower East Side at a Community Action for Legal Services office, clients with housing and immigration problems huddled in the stark second-floor waiting room.

Future of Project Pondered

One woman, sounding desperate, telephoned the office. Her husband of 26 years had left her and had gone to a home for the elderly in Israel. She was given an appointment two weeks from now.

Outside the office, at Grand and Elizabeth Streets, the words "Free legal assistance if unable to afford lawyers," are translated into Hebrew, Spanish and Chinese. Beneath that sign hangs a second sign, like an afterthought. It translates the message into Italian.

The office, which recently moved into the Italian neighborhood from Canal Street, is one of 16 offices of Community Action for Legal Services—the largest federally financed legal services in the country.

It began 10 years ago, as an offshoot of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "war on poverty," and yesterday many of those involved in its start reminisced about the past and pondered the future. At times, the celebration was a somber one.

Roger Cramton, dean of the Cornell University Law School and chairman of the board of the National Legal Services Corporation, told how the need for legal services "will always outrun the resources" and how ways must be devised to stop "massive hemorrhages of talent." Nationally, about a third of the 3,000 or so lawyers for the poor leave their jobs every year.

Alluding to the pickets outside, who belong to a union, William R. Klaus, a lawyer from Philadelphia and a founder of the legal services movement, worried about possible unionization of legal workers across the country.

"The union movement has one club—the strike—" he said. "When our lawyer's strike, no one is hurt except the poor community."

Later in the afternoon, after the pickets had disbanded, Sargent Shriver, now a Washington lawyer, was given an award for "distinguished service to the legal services movement." Mr. Shriver headed the Office of Economic Opportunity in the formative years of the movement.

Since then, the movement has grown dramatically, especially in the last two and a half years, since Congress established the Legal Services Corporation, a nonprofit organization that finances local groups.

Community Action for Legal Services has not grown as rapidly as other programs, and in New York there are fewer than 200 full-time lawyers for the estimated two million residents who qualify for free legal aid in noncriminal matters. To be eligible, the income of a family of four cannot exceed \$5,300.

Union Rejected Pay Offer

In the last few years, the number of neighborhood offices have decreased, and there are still offices that accept only emergency cases. The service's lawyers are still paid less than lawyers for most governmental agencies, and their union has rejected a new pay offer. A 1976 law graduate earns \$14,000 a year, and management has offered an increase of \$850 this year and \$1,050 next year.

That salary, while less than the salary that the Legal Aid Society pays its lawyers who represent the poor in criminal and civil matters, is a substantial increase over the salary three years ago.

Beyond money matters, the nature of neighborhood law practice is changing, and not all the lawyers are happy about that.

"In the past, we had an enormous caseload and miserable conditions," recalled Roger K. Evans, the managing at-



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Staff lawyers and legal workers for Community Action for Legal Services picketed 14 Vesey Street, where that organization marked 10th anniversary.

torney of the Grand Street office. "The trade-off was you had individual freedom. What we're giving up now is that freedom. One office has asked lawyers to punch in and punch out. The whole zest will be missing. The emphasis is on management, the concern is accountability."

At the anniversary celebration, several

speakers also expressed the worry that Legal Services, which depends on appropriations from Congress, may become too formalized, too much of a bureaucracy. Dean Cramton said he was sensitive to this problem. But, he added, "You can't spend hundreds of millions of dollars without knowing how the lawyers are spending their time."