

Legal Aid Society

of Middle Tennessee and the Cumberland

INFORMATION FOR RELEASE

Contact: Meredith Yates

(615) 515-4888

meredith@bradfordgroup.com

Legal Aid Society Welcomes Skadden Fellow, Launches Re-entry Advocacy Program

Program aimed to promote successful reintegration

NASHVILLE, Tennessee, Oct. 22, 2015 – Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee and the Cumberland announced today that it has added Skadden Fellow Vidhi Sanghavi Joshi as the leader of a new two-year project focusing on re-entry issues in Middle Tennessee and the Cumberland Plateau. **Vidhi Sanghavi Joshi** will start a program to help individuals with criminal records combat the legal barriers they face upon re-entering the community from jail or prison.

Skadden Fellowships, awarded by the Skadden Foundation, are given to graduating attorneys who wish to devote their professional time to providing legal services to low-income or vulnerable populations, like the population served by Legal Aid Society. The program funds a project of the Fellow's choosing, aimed at filling an unmet legal need, and is meant to kick-start the Fellow's career in public service. This will be the first Skadden Fellowship awarded to do work in Tennessee since 2007.

"During her time with Legal Aid Society, Vidhi will focus on launching a strategic program through which Legal Aid Society provides holistic legal services to low-income individuals with criminal records," said Gary Housepian, executive director of Legal Aid Society. "The state's most recent study of recidivism reported that 46 percent of people released from Tennessee's jails or prisons return within three years. We hope to impact these statistics with increased focus and efforts in this area. We want to help these individuals support themselves, rebuild their lives, and become part of their community once again."

In her new role, Joshi will research the legal remedies available to ease the collateral consequences that stem from a criminal conviction in the 48 counties Legal Aid Society serves, and then determine the best way to provide access to these remedies through Legal Aid's services.

Often, simple issues like obtaining a driver's license or applying for housing may prove difficult for individuals re-entering the community. Even for those charged with misdemeanors, the process to re-enter into the community can be expensive—potentially costing several thousands of dollars in court and incarceration related fees.

“Under Tennessee law, if people with criminal records cannot pay the cumbersome fees they owe from their interaction with the criminal justice system upon re-entering the community, their driver's license is automatically suspended,” said Joshi. “This law makes it exponentially more difficult for a person to acquire a job, get to work, find housing and move forward with his or her life and is just one more example of how the law prevents people with criminal records from having an opportunity to succeed before ever being released from jail.”

With this program, Legal Aid Society will partner with and guide individuals with criminal records through their re-entry into the community. Assistance will include correcting inaccurate criminal records, securing licenses, obtaining certificates of employability, helping with eviction proceedings and other legal processes. The project will also seek out partnerships with other community agencies to build a coalition of advocacy.

“It is our hope that, with Vidhi's guidance in launching our new re-entry program, we are able to remove barriers that stand in the way of formerly incarcerated individuals starting a new life with confidence and stability,” said Housepian. “Doing so will help reduce our country's extremely high recidivism rate and support a healthy and productive community where futures are not forever defined by one's past.”

Joshi is a graduate of Indiana University and Vanderbilt Law School. Prior to joining Legal Aid Society as a Skadden Fellow, she was an extern in the organization's Nashville office, where she did research and helped persons with criminal records overcome housing and public benefits problems.

She has also interned for the Southern Center for Human Rights in Atlanta, the Tennessee Office of the Post-Conviction Defender and Nashville attorney Elliot Ozment. She is the co-founder of the Re-entry Entrepreneurship Project, which partners with Project Return and Vanderbilt Law School to help formerly incarcerated persons start their own businesses. She is also a former Fulbright Scholar.

“Vidhi's deep passion for re-entry work is inspiring,” Housepian added. “We're excited to see her pen a new chapter in Legal Aid Society's story as we reach out to a vastly underserved population.”

Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee and the Cumberland advocates for fairness and justice under the law. The non-profit law firm offers free civil legal representation, educational programs and advice to ensure people in its region are able to protect their

livelihoods, their health and their families. It serves 48 counties from offices in Clarksville, Columbia, Cookeville, Gallatin, Murfreesboro, Nashville, Oak Ridge and Tullahoma. Legal Aid Society is funded in part by United Way. Learn more at www.las.org, or by following the firm on [Facebook](#).

###