



Consortium for the National Equal Justice Library
Oral History Collection
Interview with

Neal Dudovitz

Conducted by Alan Houseman on Oct. 7, 2014

Transcribed by Heidi J. Darts, CSR, RPR, RMR,
CRR, TCRR, TMR

Alan Houseman:

This is an oral history of Neal Dudovitz on Tuesday, October 7th, 2014. The interviewer is Alan Houseman, present in the National Equal Justice Library.

Neal, what is your current job, and then we're going to go through a little bit of your history.

Neal Dudovitz:

Sure. I'm the Executive Director of Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County, which we call NLSLA, since there's several Neighborhood Legal Services programs across the country. And I've been in that position since 1993, so that's 21 years now.

Alan Houseman:

So where did you grow up?

Neal Dudovitz:

I grew up in the Midwest, in the Twin Cities, St. Paul, Minnesota. I guess from the time I was a teenager, I wanted to be a lawyer and get involved in public interest. I consider myself a sort of typical child of the '60s.

Alan Houseman:

And where did you go to law school?

Neal Dudovitz:

I went to Northeastern University School of Law in Boston. At that point, it was a brand new school. In fact, I'm the third class of Northeastern's. I guess they existed in the '50s, but when they reopened in the '70s, I'm part of the third class at Northeastern.

Alan Houseman:

And why did you go there?

Neal Dudovitz:

I went to Northeastern, much to the concern of my parents who didn't like the idea of my going to a school which at that time was not accredited. I was struck by its commitment to public interest. I had a real interest in that. At that time it had a four-year program,

interestingly, because in Northeastern, like the whole university, it believes in cooperative education. So you alternated between going to school and working. I thought that was a pretty neat idea, so that's why I went there.

Alan Houseman:

And after Northeastern, where did you go?

Neal Dudovitz:

First, at Northeastern, because of its cooperative education model, I had opportunities to do some legal services and public interest work particularly at Mass Law Reform. So one of the great leaders of our community, Alan Rogers, I worked as a law student under Alan. After that, I looked for a legal services job when I graduated and took a job at Legal Services of Eastern Michigan in Flint, Michigan. Actually, I skipped my graduation. I left Boston and went to Flint.

Alan Houseman:

And did you enjoy Flint?

Neal Dudovitz:

You know, Flint was an interesting experience. I was there just before the great economic collapse in Flint. It was a very interesting community that sold itself as a small town, but it was really the metropolitan area of like a half a million people. It was a union town, as most of the Detroit area was at that time. It was sort of owned by General Motors. There were like 10 General Motors plants there. And so it was an experience to work in a different kind of environment and to work for a legal services program that was committed to doing not just day-to-day work but to do whatever kinds of work was necessary to help our clients, including I guess what today we call impact work.

Alan Houseman:

And who was the director then?

Neal Dudovitz:

Well, the director then was a gentleman named Tony Locricchio, who was an

interesting leader in the legal services community. The one thing about Tony is he was an incredibly dynamic guy. For a new lawyer out of school, Tony said to me, "You do the work, I'll make sure you have everything you need and keep you protected." And, of course, he was great at doing that.

So, I got there and I was, I would say, within several months working on some pretty significant work. So that was a great start for me. His commitment to ensuring that people have the support to do that kind of work is something I probably still carry with me as a director.

Alan Houseman:

That's Tony, of course, a character.

Neal Dudovitz:

Yes.

Alan Houseman:

We can come back to Tony at some point maybe.

After Legal Services of Eastern Michigan, where did you go?

Neal Dudovitz:

Well, I should add that one of the personal reasons I went to Flint was my wife at the time was in the middle of social work school. We needed to go to a place where she could complete her work, and Flint was commuting distance from a bunch of schools. When she finished her school and I had been in Flint for a couple of years, I decided to sort of test the waters and look around and sent out resumes to a few places and was sort of excited that people had some interest in me. I ended up at the National Senior Citizens Law Center in Los Angeles after making a connection with another longtime leader in our community, which is Paul Nathanson.

I remember very vividly that Paul came and met me at the Detroit airport. We had what felt like a great interview to me. The idea of coming to California for a kid from the Midwest was intriguing. Again, there was a commitment and promise to do work that was

significant and interesting work that Paul promised me. So I came out to Los Angeles. I had no connection to California at that time.

It was at a time when legal services, the status of backup centers as we call them, was really unknown, and so I was making a move. I now had a little baby, a child, and I was nervous about going to California and having to pass the California Bar. So the only bargaining I did was his commitment that I would get a month off with pay so I could take the California Bar exam because, in case I didn't have a job, I needed to be able to be marketable in California.

My goal, by the way, which I've now given up, was to end up in the San Francisco Bay Area because that always seemed like the place to be if you were into progressive issues. But I never made it.

Alan Houseman:

Well, you did pretty well here. So tell me a little bit about the legal work you did at the National Senior Citizens Law Center.

Neal Dudovitz:

Well, it was interesting. Another longtime community character that sort of passed by me at that point was Bob Cohen, who's the director at the Legal Aid in Orange County. He and I started on the same day at National Senior Citizens Law Center.

Alan Houseman:

Oh, really.

Neal Dudovitz:

Yeah. So he had been in Las Vegas at a legal services program and we both started at Senior Citizens on the same day. And I think that was 1975 or '76.

Initially, I was hired to do work under a new Older Americans Act project. I think it was the first big Older Americans Act project that National Senior Citizens had, which was try to convince legal services programs to get involved in the Older Americans Act and get into those kinds of issues.

And so my initial job was to go to all these different states and meet with people in those states, the private bar and legal services programs, to try to convince them to get into this work. That wasn't my favorite thing to do, although it was good in building relations and learning how to get out and talk about legal services often in places that weren't so interested. I remember pretty vividly a trip I made to Kansas, flying around the state on a little prop plane like a salesman. I guess it was a good experience to have but not my favorite.

And so I quickly got myself into litigation at National Senior Citizens. The heavy litigation at that time was focused on pensions, the ERISA, the private pension law passed in 1974, I believe. It was just starting and being enacted. That one turned out to be a major initiative and major issue for National Senior Citizens because it was pensions, because it was a brand new law and offered interesting opportunities for people to protect their retirement benefits and avoid poverty.

So it was a high priority for National Senior Citizens and really involved some extraordinary litigation and opportunities because there was no expert. Nobody knew this stuff. We became the experts.

We also carried out, were in the midst of, which I became a big player in, a strategic litigation effort that preceded, began before ERISA to get more equity into the pensions covered by the National Labor Relations Act – that is, pensions that were collectively bargained. For a lot of laborers particularly, these pensions were an extraordinarily bad deal. People would work very, very long periods of time and get either no or tiny, tiny benefits because the rules that were used were designed to cause them to forfeit their credit.

If you view pensions as we did as deferred compensation, you do the work, some compensation you get today in salary, some compensation you get years later in a pension. You've already done the work, and if you get zero at the end of that, you're basically not getting compensated.

So we were working on a series of cases involving the construction laborers' pension fund here in San Diego, California. We argued under the National Labor Relations Act that

there was kind of a due process equity obligation to ensure that benefits were spread out to as many people as possible rather than the principle of as few people as possible, which is what they did. So for example, we showed that something like 95 percent of the people who put money into the fund got zero, and about five percent got pensions that often exceeded their salary. That was the argument.

So I worked on cases involving that issue for I would say 10 to 15 years at Senior Citizens. It was a really long-term, strategic effort. The main case I think went to the Ninth Circuit two or three times, involved significant amount of exceptional discovery working with really national experts, and ultimately resulted in about \$15 million in pension benefits being distributed to low-income laborers who otherwise would have gotten zero.

So one of the highlights of my career was being able to really play such a significant role in such a long-term, strategic effort to make change that really made a difference for lots of people.

Alan Houseman:

Describe again what the National Senior Citizens Law Center is and does.

Neal Dudovitz:

Okay. National Senior Citizens Law Center is a national support or backup program, so their goal is to work with legal services programs in the field to support them in training and providing technical backup to their work on individual cases, and helping them often or co-counseling with them on significant litigation efforts.

At Senior Citizens, during I would say most of my time there, we had a very large docket of litigation in the federal courts across the country. And it ranged. Pensions was one of the issues. We did a lot of benefits work. Some civil rights type work. And I would say there were three or four of my colleagues together, we really had a period of time I would say largely in the late '70s, early '80s, early/mid-80s, where we really carried a very important docket.

Some of the other people I worked with there were Gill Deford, who's one of my

longtime personal friends from that area. He and I worked together for like 17 years at Senior Citizens doing really an extraordinary amount of litigation all across the country. Sally Hart Wilson was another lawyer who ended up getting Medicare advocacy in Arizona. Bruce Miller, who teaches at Western Massachusetts Law School now. That was probably one of the most fun times of my life doing all the federal court litigation.

And then Gill and I had a period of time over two or three years where I think we had about four or five cases back to back in the U.S. Supreme Court. And that doesn't happen too many times in your life, so that was really an incredible opportunity and experience.

Alan Houseman:

Did you argue in the court?

Neal Dudovitz:

I've argued two cases in the court. Actually, for us, it was a great opportunity. Gill was our expert on Medicaid deeming, which always seemed like, are you kidding me, this is the way the system is. But we said, we can't allow that kind of system where you just assume people have income that they don't have. We made a concerted effort to try to get rid of it.

And he had two cases that was taken by the Supreme Court back to back. I think they were on the same term, but they were argued a month or six weeks apart. I had second chair. I backed him up in both of those cases. He was the lead lawyer.

Then they took a third case which came out of Iowa, which was also about Medicaid deeming. And Gill had also been the lead counsel in that case, but he offered to let me argue that case since he had already done two. That was a case called Herwig v. Ray. So I argued that case, which really followed one of the cases we lost. Of the first two cases we did, we lost one big case, which is a case called Schweiker v. Gray Panthers. We represented the Gray Panthers in that case and we lost that case. But its ruling sort of naturally led to winning the backup case that was sitting in the wings, the Herwig case.

But you don't know how the Supreme Court works. The Herwig case had split four to four in the Eighth Circuit. So the Supreme Court took the case anyway instead of remanding it.

So that was the first case I argued in the court.

And then Gill and I did a couple other cases right after that, so it was really an extraordinary experience. I guess in my dream as a kid of the '60s that went to law school, I mean, arguing a case in the Supreme Court, wow, that was pretty incredible opportunity. It was the time when my parents stopped asking when are you going to get a real job. You know, when my parents came to watch the Supreme Court argument, they were kind of blown away by that and I guess they recognized that this was going to be my career.

Alan Houseman:

And you ultimately became Deputy Director of the Senior Citizens.

Neal Dudovitz:

I did, I did. When Paul Nathanson left to teach at University of New Mexico Law School. We had a lot of shifts, and the leadership of the program shifted to the DC office and I became the deputy director responsible for the Los Angeles office.

Alan Houseman:

And who was the director in DC? Was that Bert Price or --

Neal Dudovitz:

Before Bert is Ed --

Alan Houseman:

Ed King.

Neal Dudovitz:

Ed King --

Alan Houseman: Right.

Neal Dudovitz: Ed was originally director. He didn't last too long. He ended up in Micronesia after that. Then Bert Price took over. So I guess I've been blessed to have had opportunities to work with a whole bunch of leaders in the legal services community over the years.

Alan Houseman:

And then you moved on to Neighborhood Legal Services, right? How did that happen?

Neal Dudovitz:

Well, it was interesting for me. After 17 years of doing litigation, and particularly in some of these areas feeling like somebody would call and they would bring an issue or a case to us or talk to us about a client problem in a case, and I sort of felt that it was becoming relatively routine to me. I wasn't sure that I felt like I knew how to do it. I knew how to do important litigation and significant litigation in the federal courts. In fact, the area that I think I was pretty good at was federal court practice. I really enjoyed the strategic aspects of federal court practice. And I was kind of getting tired of that.

The other thing that struck me was that the courts were a pretty blunt instrument for really getting to fix the problems, to really make real change. I think the courts are pretty good at stopping, halting bad things. They're pretty good at forcing people and governments to sort of do the right thing in a general way. But when it really comes to the detail of making the changes and implementing and carrying it out, my experience is the courts are blunt instruments and they're not so good at that and they have difficulties doing it.

I remember the issues with the mental institutions, where courts kind of took over mental institutions and that was tough for them to run them. Recently in California, we had the issues of the prisons and health care system where the Ninth Circuit has been struggling for, what, 10, 20 years trying to figure out how to make the system work.

So I was interested in exploring other forums, particularly sort of, if you will, legislative and local government forums for how you really help poor people and get them on a path out of poverty. I liked the idea of going to a, what I would have called at that point a mid-size legal services program that was big enough to make a difference in the communities it focused on and really become what I called a player. When issues involving poor people happened in that community, everybody would be asking where's the legal services program, what do they know, what can they bring to the table. So that was interesting for me.

I will say that there was a lot of change in those years at Senior Citizens for a number

of people, including my friend Gill. He left for other reasons and moved to Boston, and that was probably another factor in it. But I really relished the opportunity to apply my interests in sort of different forums. I like the, I'll say, political with a small "p" aspects of that. You have to really work with the community and the elected officials, and I didn't miss that. I would say the down side, another big down side of being at a support center – or I guess that's what we call them today (they were backup centers in those days) – was you were separated from clients. It was difficult to get the experience and the benefits and the opportunity to work with the client community.

We did develop at Senior Citizens a really good relationship with Gray Panthers. And I volunteered to be the connection there because I loved going to their conferences and meeting with them. So I realized that I missed that. So another factor for me was to be able to get involved in a lot of strategic advocacy and be right there with the clients.

Alan Houseman:

So describe Neighborhood Legal Services so that we have a context of what we're going to talk about next.

Neal Dudovitz:

Okay. Well, Neighborhood Legal Services began in 1965. It was actually one of the close to one of the original OEO programs. It was created because the local community action agency said, hey, we should have a legal services program. And they applied for the money.

An interesting side note, I know now, is that somebody who is a good friend of mine now, Judge Harry Pregerson in the Ninth Circuit, he was one of the lawyers who helped in the San Fernando Valley that pushed that.

Initially, the program was called San Fernando Valley Neighborhood Legal Services. It was focused on the San Fernando Valley part of Los Angeles. And some of the communities around that, particularly going up to the, what we call the Antelope Valley here, which is the cities of Lancaster/Palmdale, it was always a second LA program to the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, which was clearly the big Los Angeles legal services program. But it did meet

one of my needs because it had a more limited geographic scope. It has always been, and I hope still is, what I call a full-scope legal services program. We do everything. We've always tried to do sort of basic bread and butter kinds of issues like family law issues and unlawful evictions, unlawful detainers, and some more significant impact work with the program. It had, I think, only about 30 people at the time that I moved there with a budget of a little over two to two and a half million dollars. But it is one of the original LSC programs and so they're part of the group in California of eight or nine LSC programs.

We've expanded considerably. We're now at about \$14 or \$15 million. We work throughout the county. We took over additional area of the county around 2000 when there were a lot of changes in LSC's structure and another Los Angeles County program was eliminated. So we moved over to the San Gabriel Valley, which is Pasadena, Glendale, Burbank, and all the way out to the eastern edges of the county, to Pomona.

So now we have three offices. We have our original space out in Pacoima, which is in the northeast San Fernando Valley. I think we've been pretty much been in the same corner of San Fernando out there since 1965. We have an office in the city of Glendale, which is a mid-sized city of 200,000 people, which is in the center of the county, and it's where our administrative offices are. We have a third office out in El Monte, which is a city in the San Gabriel Valley. And El Monte is one of the poorest communities in Los Angeles County. And then we have people located at various courthouses and other sites throughout the county.

Alan Houseman:

And how many staff do you have?

Neal Dudovitz:

We have about a hundred staff, about 45 lawyers.

Alan Houseman:

Just so that this is clear in the record, when people say Los Angeles, they think of the city of Los Angeles. Los Angeles County is a much bigger thing.

Neal Dudovitz:

Los Angeles County is the next much bigger thing. I think there's about 10 million people in Los Angeles County. Next to the states of California and New York, Los Angeles County, for us, it's like a state. It's got as many poor people or more poor people than most states in the country and has about 40 or 50 different cities. Obviously, the biggest is the city of Los Angeles.

The San Fernando Valley, which most people think of as something separate from the city of Los Angeles, is actually about one-third of the city of Los Angeles. So it's a big piece of the city. It sees itself as some kind of unique part of the city, and of course went through this whole effort of trying to separate itself from the city, but it is part of the city of Los Angeles.

Alan Houseman:

So what have you done when you got there? You've obviously built this organization from 30 people to a hundred, from two or three million dollars to \$14, \$15 million. Describe a little bit more about what you were trying to do.

Neal Dudovitz:

Well, one of the things I was trying to do is develop an ethic towards looking at addressing the core needs of poor people and trying to make a difference, to transform communities, to improve their lives and deal with the fundamental issues of poverty. We tried to do that or I tried to do that by being a little different and innovative in the way we did the work.

That first happened to us somewhat by accident. I started in June 1993, and January 1994 was the Northridge earthquake which nearly destroyed our office. At that point, we had one office in the northeast San Fernando Valley. It was shambles from the earthquake. But we responded to that by deciding to just stop all of our regular work and really move out there and be aggressive in representing our clients who were hurt by the earthquake and ensuring that they got the help they needed to get themselves back on their feet.

In that effort, we began a different way of doing work in the program and developing

some innovative programs to get our staff out in the community and working directly with FEMA to rebuild their lives. I think that began sort of a change, a different way of functioning. We did that pretty effectively, I think, for three or four years after the earthquake.

Then I began working on a series of what I think are innovative projects that we took on to deliver services in a different way. One of them is something called self-help centers. We got concerned about the lack of help that was available to our clients in the courthouse. We began working with the local judiciary and bar to create a model for how to help people, particularly in the family law and unlawful detainer matters where we didn't have enough lawyers to represent them, to effectively access the courts and get help in the courthouse. And that has evolved into 10 self-help centers spread throughout the county where we have our lawyers – or sometimes we subcontract to our sister program, LAFLAS – where they have the lawyers in the courthouse who help people fill out forms and answers for unlawful detainers in the courthouse.

Since we've created those programs, we've helped nearly a million people access the courts. Most of them are people that, in the past, legal services programs would have turned away. These are people who used to call our office and we would say, you know, we can't help you, or we would call them in for an interview and tell them we can't help them. Instead, we've got a program that helped a million people who we used to say no to.

The other part about that program is it's funded mostly by general funds from the County of Los Angeles. Not funded by the courts, and it's not funded by foundations or anything. It's actually funded by general funds that the board of supervisors has appropriated now for I think it's about 15 years. And I guess one of the messages or things I learned is you take what you can get.

I don't believe this board would have ever given us that much money to provide representation. Just wasn't going to happen. But self-help interested them – and I guess this does sort of get to the civil Gideon stuff – because they believed that everybody ought to be able to walk in a courtroom and be heard, that it was important that their constituents could do that. And the

idea that they could do that by themselves they understood was going to be pretty difficult. So funding a lawyer to sit there to talk to people and help them so that they had the capacity to be heard was something that interested them. And really, today we have about 15 years of contracting with the County. We're in the County budget. You know, nobody asks any questions. That's one of the achievements I'm particularly proud of.

Alan Houseman:

How do the self-help centers that you helped develop relate to the self-help centers that the California court system has developed?

Neal Dudovitz:

Right. Well, ours are separate from them. There are a couple principles that we embody that they don't. First of all, we're independent. What we tell people is, when somebody comes in and wants help, rather than give them somebody owes a duty to the court or the judges, we give them somebody who's independent, somebody who can really sit there and be more objective in analyzing and pursuing their needs. What the independence allows us to do is not just fill out the form and send them on their way but actually get involved with the court in making changes and fixing the system when it's not working for people in the community.

Although we use a lot of technology, and we teach people in large classes about how to do stuff, we're most known for the one-on-one assistance that we provide. We believe that somebody ought to sit next to either a trained volunteer or a lawyer, and they ought to hear it from somebody who sort of knows what's happening. We don't rest on big classes or technology which the courts use.

By the way, we help many more people than most of the courts do in California. We can't use the word advocacy, but it's advocacy in the sense that we want people to be able to go beyond filling out that form, if that's a need. And we want to ensure that people really get what they need and we want to ensure that they learn it. I think we're pretty good at doing that. So it differs somewhat.

The other systems you've talked about are court funded. They get their money allocated from either the state court system or the local courts. While we have partnerships with our courts because we're located in the courthouse, we work with them extraordinarily well, but we're independent. Of course, that's led to one of our latest projects, which is the Shriver civil right to counsel project in Los Angeles.

Alan Houseman:

I want to get to that. We'll talk about it now.

Neal Dudovitz:

Sure. Well, you know, Shriver is different because it's a representational model, and most of our other court stuff is self-help model. We should be clear that the Shriver here in Los Angeles is a collaborative effort of four legal services programs: Neighborhood Legal Services, Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, Public Counsel, and Inner City Law Center.

But I think one of the reasons we're good at Shriver and we were able to help really organize the effort is the skills we learn in how to interview and, if you will, process people through a system in the courthouse in an effective and efficient manner. That is critical to Shriver because we have to see a lot of people in order to get the cases which we're going to represent.

We do it a little different than self-help because it is representation, so we are very clear that we are advising people. And when we prepare their answers, we tell them what we think they should do. In self-help, we tell them what their opportunities are and they tell us what to do. Important distinction.

Alan Houseman:

Now, what areas are you working in in the Shriver program?

Neal Dudovitz:

Just evictions.

Alan Houseman:

Just evictions.

Neal Dudovitz:

Just evictions. And at one courthouse. Not a courthouse that has a self-help center. So in fact, there is no self-help center at the Mosk Courthouse in Los Angeles, which is the largest Los Angeles courthouse and maybe the largest courthouse that processes evictions in the country. It's pretty close. Maybe 16,000 -17,000 evictions a year are done out of the Mosk Courthouse. In Los Angeles, something like 65,000 or 70,000 evictions are processed every year, which is why it's really important because if all those people ended up homeless, it would be awful for the community. And so that's really why I think it's important.

Alan Houseman:

So what specifically is the Shriver pilot project doing?

Neal Dudovitz:

The Shriver pilot project is taking people who have a case where there's a lawyer on the other side and where they are poor and providing them a lawyer to represent them, what we call full-scope representation in the case. We do about 2,000 of those a year in the Shriver program.

The people come into the courthouse. We have a room there we call the eviction assistance center where they come in. We interview them, we prepare answers for them. And if we accept their case for representation, that day stuff is electronically transferred to one of the representation programs, one of our partners, and people are set up with an appointment with a lawyer for the next day so people can begin working on their case.

It's not a civil Gideon in the true sense because everybody doesn't get a lawyer. We do make choices based on what we call vulnerability of the client and analysis of their case and whether or not they've got appropriate legal arguments to make in their case. So that's a judgment call that we make in our eviction assistance center to decide whether to accept the case for representation.

So we've had a system where, I don't know, I would say maybe less than one percent of the tenants in the Mosk Courthouse had lawyers. And now, in our Shriver program, between

those we give limited scope and full-scope help, we see about 5,000 people, which is close to 25 to 30 percent of the cases that go through the Mosk Courthouse.

So we've changed, I think, how the courtroom works every day, how the judges pay attention to tenants, how the system works and different way tenants do depositions. They do discovery. We've ensured everybody has interpreters. And we have, I think, a very high rate of settlement but much better settlement results for our clients.

Alan Houseman:

And this is being evaluated; is that correct?

Neal Dudovitz:

This is being evaluated, but the evaluation is a little behind, so I haven't seen the evaluation yet. But it is being evaluated by an outside company in Oregon, by evaluators who have done some evaluation of drug courts, so they have some experience in evaluating court court systems. But I'm sorry that I don't think it's going to get to all the kinds of changes because there was not a good base line developed.

But the difference for me going in the courtroom before we started and going in the courtroom today is just really different, and the relationships now that we've built with both lawyers on the other side and the court really, really makes a difference for people.

We're concerned that not only the people we represent get help but that we help make the changes in the justice system that are going to help those people who we don't represent. Because even if we're helping a third of the people there, that means two-thirds of the people are not getting any help.

A lot of Shriver is about leveling the playing field, dealing with a system where you have a lawyer on the other side, people who are unfamiliar with the courts, who in many cases don't really have the ability to argue well for themselves in that courtroom structure. Providing representation is a lot about leveling the playing field.

I think that's really different than the other big area where we have lack of representation in California and I assume throughout the country in the family law context

where there's often no lawyer on either side of the case. There's a need for making the system work better from the court's perspective, but it's not the same balancing and it doesn't really turn the traditional advocacy system upside down.

I always learned in law school here's how it works, each side puts their person out there, they argue whatever they argue, they make their best shot at it, and then the judge sits up there and weighs all those things and makes a decision. But when you've only got somebody making those arguments on one side and the other side is at best silent, obviously that system can't work, it seems to me.

So Shriver really is an attempt to make the system work, at least in the LA Shriver program. I think it's worked. For lawyers on the other side, it's much easier to reach settlements when you have a lawyer to talk to to work things out than when they're trying to talk to a tenant who might not speak the same language or can't understand what they're talking about.

Alan Houseman:

Have you done other innovations at Neighborhood Legal? I mean, we've talked about several.

Neal Dudovitz:

Right, right. The other big thing we did at Neighborhood Legal Services is get involved in health advocacy. We've been doing that now for 15 years. And we started in working with the private foundation, the California Endowment. I think it was in the 1990s that we began to look at the issues of health and how the lack of health care was impacting our clients. And we saw the need for greater health coverage way back then, and we have been working on it since then almost exclusively with private foundation grants. We've had some local government grants to do that, but most of our work in that area has been done through private foundation grants.

And we have a program called the Health Consumer Center, which now has by itself, about 20 of our staff working under those health grants, including a half a dozen health

lawyers. But we've had several health lawyers always in the program since we started that work.

So we and several other California legal services programs have been involved in that effort because we're funded now as a statewide legal services collaborative providing assistance to people both on their obtaining health care but also on affecting their health care.

We've also been into something else which a lot of people are into these days called the medical-legal partnerships because we think that it should be about the health of the community and eliminating what people call the social determinants of health or the barriers of the social determinants of health that really impact people's health status and health outcomes.

So we've been working on that in conjunction with our advocacy to the point that we have developed and are co-teaching a class at USC Law School about the social determinants of health and how doctors and lawyers should work together as advocates. That's also a class at the USC Medical School. It's a joint class. I'm very proud of those efforts. We were into health way before most people recognized the interest in health.

Alan Houseman:

I would say nationally that your health consumer work with your statewide colleagues is unique. I don't think there's anywhere in the country that does anything like that.

Neal Dudovitz:

I think it is unique. And it's unique that we've lasted so long. It's unique that the foundation, the California Endowment is still funding us. I've never added up all the dollars, but I think it's probably \$12 to \$15 million of grants from the Endowment over the course of that time. We just opened a new program funded by them.

I do want to say that that those are big, innovative signature projects that I'm really proud of. I'm also proud that, you know, I've pushed and promoted large-scale advocacy and litigation when that's been needed in the program.

So very recently, we were involved in a major civil rights suit involving race discrimination in the administration of the Section 8 program in the cities of Lancaster and

Palmdale. And we put together a pretty broad coalition of lawyers to help us file suit against the cities and the County of Los Angeles to stop them from trying to push mainly African-American Section 8 recipients out of the Antelope Valley. There's a lot of racism issues in that community. Pushing that kind of effort and making that a signature part of the program is important to me, and I think it's been important to the program.

I should point out one other effort which is, while we're talking about the history of legal services, is we were one of the handful of California programs that sued the Legal Services Corporation when the restrictions were imposed in '95, '96. I was part of that. I'm very proud that our board was willing to follow through on its principles and risk suing its funder, which is not an easy thing to do. I think we got results. One of the worst aspects of those restrictions did get changed in the process and was done by regulatory change. But the fact that money could flow through the programs and not pass on the restrictions, which was a big change.

Alan Houseman:

Yeah, that was a very significant victory.

Neal Dudovitz:

That's right. And that came even though we technically lost the case.

Alan Houseman:

Yeah, but it came.

Neal Dudovitz:

But it really made a huge difference. And I think that is something that I've worked hard to do, which is to do the advocacy that needs to be done and not let the restrictions get in the way of that.

Alan Houseman:

You've won a number of awards and achievements. Could you just tell us a few of those, and then I want to go on to a couple of last questions. We can talk more about Neighborhood Legal Services.

Neal Dudovitz:

Yeah, well, frankly, I don't think I've won that many awards, but it's okay. I'm not in it for the awards. But I think I would say rather that I've been involved in a lot of extraordinary opportunities. I've also had a chance to work with a lot of exceptional advocates and also mentoring several people who I think are really extraordinary advocates in the community. I'm very, very proud of those opportunities.

Alan Houseman:

I see here you were the San Fernando Valley Business Journal's Top 25 Lawyer.

Neal Dudovitz:

I was, I was, I was.

Alan Houseman:

Okay. Don't be so modest here.

Neal Dudovitz:

I want to mention a couple other things since we're talking here. Another important priority for me has been language access. The communities we represent are some of the most diverse in the country. We have communities like the San Gabriel Valley, which might have the largest number of Asian Pacific Islanders than anywhere in the country. The City of Glendale is the home of more Armenians than any other place outside of Armenia. And, of course, Spanish here in Los Angeles, not to mention the Tagalog and many other Asian languages that we have, too, throughout the area. So we made language access a extraordinarily high priority in our program. We try to maintain our work in four languages; Armenian, Spanish, Chinese, and English.

And I'm also proud that I think something like 75 or 80 percent of our staff is bilingual, including more than 50 percent of our lawyers. I think our lawyers are about 60 percent bilingual. Together we speak, I don't know, 10 or 15 different languages. That's --

Alan Houseman:

That's an extraordinary set of data, actually.

Neal Dudovitz:

We also take the view that it's top to bottom. Our board is one of the most diverse boards in the country, I'm sure. In fact, when LSC recently came out to look at us, they were blown away by how diverse our board of directors are.

I want to set that out as both something I'm really proud of, something that we work really hard at, and something that I hope the legal services community works harder at because language access is just such a critical outlet.

So we're working at that at several levels, now with the courts in California who are under attack by the Justice Department for their lack of language access, and with the housing authorities who don't provide appropriate language access.

And one issue we're working on, which we told the State we're going to sue them on, is language access under the Medicaid expansion in California. It's hard to believe it, but in fact some of the information the State of California put out was only in Spanish and they didn't do anything in other languages. So language access --

Alan Houseman:

It's amazing. No Asian, no --

Neal Dudovitz:

No. And some of the notices they gave people about their need for renewals came out in only one language. But we have put language access in our program. It's now like up at the top. It's one of our highest priorities, and we do it in a whole series of different, different ways. But I do think the amount of language access we provide and our commitment to bilingual staff has been extraordinary and is something that's really important to me.

Alan Houseman:

Are there other big issues like that that? I mean, Neighborhood Legal Services is known as an excellent, innovative program. At least that's its reputation in the legal aid community.

Neal Dudovitz:

Yeah. No, no. I think those are those are the things that stand out for me.

Alan Houseman:

Well, before we close, and you can say whatever you want in closing, I wanted to ask you, though I didn't warn you on this: knowing what you know, knowing innovations that you've been a part of, where do you see the civil aid movement going? Or where would you like to see it go, maybe that's a better way of putting it. Either way. You're a long-time leader, you've done very innovative things. What would you hope would happen down the road and, and what do you see the problems are?

Neal Dudovitz:

What I would hope, and one of the areas that I feel that I've not gotten my hands around, is the need to tackle important issues in an affirmative strategic way and not just in a responsive way.

Most of my career, most things that I've been involved in and most of the big successes that I've been a part of, have been more responsive to somebody who comes in the door and says, "I need help, this is what's happening to me." I've only seen or been involved in a handful of efforts that have involved a strategic effort to address a significant program that affects large numbers of people.

The pension effort I talked about in the beginning is certainly one of those where really there was an effort to address an imbalance or a problem in the systems and strategically work on several cases over time to address that problem. It takes time to do that. That's one of the problems. I saw a documentary at some point about Thurgood Marshall and how he started I think maybe in his mid-20s. And he had these theories about schools and segregation. And I don't know how many he filed, like 30, 40 cases one after the other, each time tweaking his argument a little bit. But he was after a strategic result, and it took a long time and he got there.

I was always struck by the persistence of that, the ability to analyze what's happening and make your adjustments and sort of affirmatively pursue some route to justice. I feel like legal services programs do that sporadically but not enough in terms of addressing poverty.

I also wished we could be a little more insulated from politics. I don't have to tell you how many times we get derailed by politics that often has little to do with us but that makes it really difficult to do the work. I'm worried that we're not going to be able to do that.

My worry is that we'll lose our edge a little bit; that we'll become more about processing large numbers of individual cases and lose the community connections, being part of the community, making a difference and working with government agencies and elected officials to really make lives better for people.

It's made me think of one other thing I should say. One other part of the program I think that I felt was critical is working with government agencies and elected officials, and aggressively working with them, meaning reaching out to them, partnering with them on their efforts, being available to them when they needed help in the community.

And so we've always done at Neighborhood Legal Services a very high amount of what Legal Services Corporation calls legislative-administrative advocacy. Most of us call it policy advocacy these days. That is a big part of our balance. We do litigation, but we do an extraordinary amount of policy advocacy in the legislature and locally in the city councils and in the County Board of Supervisors, which runs a lot of the public benefit programs in Los Angeles County.

So we think those are really great forums to resolve problems for people in large numbers without the difficulties and often the problems people have in litigation and moving through the courts. So we've been very aggressive I would say in the work we do with the elected officials. For that reason, they contact us consistently, regularly for our help in a broad range of issues. And that is an important hallmark of our program.

Alan Houseman:

Any final thoughts?

Neal Dudovitz:

No, other than the comments I made before we started, which is I'm really glad to be part of all of this. I do think the transition from my generation to next generation which is

going to be occurring and is occurring as people retire is going to be a big change for the legal services community. I think there's a lot of wonderful leaders coming up. But it's a shift that I think we've never gone through.

I do remember starting in legal services. If you told me I'd still be here 41 years later, I'm not sure I would have believed that. I often tell my current staff that when I started at legal services in Eastern Michigan, my initial salary was \$9,000 a year, which my wife and baby and I were going to live on. I don't think the corporation had actually been formed then. I remember that you weren't sure if you were going to get a paycheck every week. You had to wait to see if the money from Washington came and got deposited in the bank account, which sometimes came late. You weren't sure you would even get the check. And so times are certainly different. And it's great to see the, and I mean this in a good way, the professionalization of legal services, that I feel like it's here to stay and I feel like I've been part of that. And that makes me feel really good. The future is going to be interesting and probably a little different.

Alan Houseman:

Good. Well, thank you so much. This has been a great honor to interview you.

Neal Dudovitz:

Oh, thank you, Alan.

Alan Houseman:

And we look forward to doing some more work together.

Neal Dudovitz:

Yeah. Well, one thing we didn't say is you and I have known each other from back in my Michigan days. So it's 40 years. So those have been great opportunities. And I did some interesting work in those days with with Gabe Kamoise at Michigan Legal Services.

Alan Houseman:

Okay.