

NINA MOINI: Later this week, a royal blue cargo van will roll into Faribault and Northfield, offering no-cost legal help to community members. The Justice Bus is a mobile office set up to help with civil cases related to issues like eviction or custody arrangements. There are four of these in the state, each dedicated to a different region. Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services has one. The group's outreach coordinator Jenna Saverynski and family law attorney Jocylyn Poehler are taking it to stops around Southeast Minnesota this fall, and they join me now to tell us more about it. Thanks for being on the program, Jenna and Jocylyn.

**JENNA
SAVERYNSKI:** Hi. Thanks, Nina.

**JOCYLYN
POEHLER:** Thank you, Nina.

NINA MOINI: What a great service you're providing for people. And a cool way to do it. Why does the state have these four buses, Jenna, I wonder? Where were you seeing the need to be mobile like this?

**JENNA
SAVERYNSKI:** Well, great question. So we got the Justice Bus during the COVID era when the state purchased four vehicles for four different legal aid organizations in the state using some CARES Act funding. And really, we were trying to find new and creative ways to help serve people during the COVID lockdown and with everything moving virtually. So we started using it in 2023, I believe. And really have been prioritizing using it in our more rural communities where we might not have a brick-and-mortar office.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, a lot of things that originated during COVID or had some relief money tied to them wrapped up. So it's neat to see something continuing on and continuing on to be funded, it sounds like. But who's eligible for these legal services, Jocylyn? Can anyone literally walk up?

**JOCYLYN
POEHLER:** Great, yes. So, Nina, our office will assist anyone who comes to us. We cannot provide full representation to everybody who sees us. We are a civil legal aid office. So primarily we target low-income individuals, families, and also seniors, but also eligible client groups. That said, we love going to all of the communities that we serve and spreading information and providing resources for folks. Getting the word out about different opportunities and programs in these smaller communities is really crucial to making sure that the communities and the people that live in them are able to get access to those things.

NINA MOINI: Yeah and Jenna, how do you all decide where to go, where to park? How do you make sure that people still know that this service is available? Because you can be closer to people driving in this way or being mobile, but how will they know, I guess, Jenna, that you'll be there?

**JENNA
SAVERYNSKI:** Yeah. Well, first of all, SMRLS serves 33 counties. So we have a very large service area. But when we were choosing locations to bring the Justice Bus, we were looking at demographic data and census data from across our region and really trying to pick out areas, again, that didn't necessarily have a brick-and-mortar legal aid office.

We're also looking at communities where we have strong partnerships with some of the other community organizations, and they really help promote our events, and we're trying to make it easier for people to access these services by going to places where we think that our client groups are already going to be at. That's why you often see the Justice Bus at food shelves or community action agencies.

NINA MOINI: Jocylyn, what are some of the common legal issues or problems that you help people with?

JOCYLYN POEHLER: Well, we get a lot of different legal issues and problems, and one of the most interesting things about the Justice Bus is that sometimes people will come to us thinking they have a problem in a particular area, but it's really a couple of problems, or it's a different type of an issue than they initially understood it.

But that said, we see a lot of consumer issues, people coming to us with debt problems or unfair collection issues. We see a lot of people coming to us with safety concerns, either for themselves individually or for somebody else, and a lot of housing assistance and working with people to address habitability issues in their communities.

So those are a lot of the different things. But we hear a lot of different things. And even if it's an issue that we don't handle in-house, we often have partner organizations or we know of other resources that we can send them to or refer them to so that they are getting in touch with the right people.

NINA MOINI: I think that's a really good point. I'm sure a lot of the time people are having a problem and they don't know where to begin or where to look. And so even if they can't be served, I guess, in the moment by the services that you all are providing are important to mention that you would then help them to find other resources. But what is turnout typically like? I mean, do you feel like you're reaching the people who need to be reached, Jenna?

JENNA SAVERYNSKI: I do. I mean, of course, we can always improve and we're always working to improve our model. But we oftentimes have a line of people waiting to see us, and it can make you feel great that yes, we're going to the places where we're going to be connecting with potential clients or clients who have questions and things like that. But also just seeing the vast need out there is a little disheartening as well. But we are doing what we can to connect with our community members.

NINA MOINI: What are you hearing, Jocylyn, in terms of where the need is for people? I'm sure people are maybe struggling financially. Is that a barrier to a lot of people seeking legal aid help?

JOCYLYN POEHLER: Yes. Finances are always a problem for-- I would say anyone involved in the legal system. Most people don't have funds to or the desire to go pay a lawyer to litigate an issue. But we're really here to try to serve the gap of the lowest or the people that least can afford or handle these issues on their own.

And those can really stem out beyond just financial barriers to-- I mean, well, the financial barriers can include things like transportation issues, child care issues, inability to get time off of work, and these are all things that people have to navigate. And people with more resources are often in a better position to be able to do that.

NINA MOINI: I do wonder if folks are wondering, Jocylyn, if you help at all with immigration issues or problems related to immigration, just because that system is so overwhelmed right now in the state.

JOCYLYN POEHLER: It really is. And so we do some limited immigration work in house. Our funding restricts some of the work that we can do, but we have a statewide partnership throughout Minnesota and we partner with other legal aid, or not only legal aid-- we partner with other organizations who can provide more assistance for immigration work when we are not able to, but the need is so overwhelming the resources at this time.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, yeah. Jenna, just lastly, tell us where your next few stops will be and what people can expect in terms of maybe potential growth for this program.

JENNA SAVERYNSKI: Sure. Well, as you mentioned at the beginning of the story, we will be in Fairfield-- or Faribault and Northfield on Thursday.

[LAUGHTER]

So we'll be in Rice County on Thursday. And then we'll be in Winona next Tuesday. Later on, we'll be going to Caledonia in Houston County, as well as in Owatonna. And I encourage listeners, if they want to go onto our website, smrls.org, you can find a calendar of Justice Bus events as well as a button if maybe one of your listeners is a community organization who wants to bring a justice Bus to their area. You can connect with us that way.

NINA MOINI: Awesome. Jocylyn, Jenna, thank you both for your time. Really appreciate it. Safe travels to you both.

JOCYLYN POEHLER: Thank you, Nina.

JENNA SAVERYNSKI: Thank you.

NINA MOINI: Thank you. Jenna Saverynski is outreach coordinator for Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services, and Jocylyn Taylor is the group's lead family law attorney.