

MICRONESIAN LEGAL SERVICES

LSC | America's Partner
for Equal Justice
LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION



STRATEGIC PLAN 2026 - 2031

ABOUT MLSC

Micronesian Legal Services Corporation (MLSC) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, governed by a 10-member board of directors, with at least one director representing each of the regions in which we have offices. We have a total staff of 50, including secretaries, trial counselors, paralegals, attorneys, and our administrative staff, including accountants and IT Specialists.

Individuals and families may be eligible for free legal assistance from MLSC if their household income is below 125% (or 200% in some circumstances) of the U.S. Federal Poverty Guidelines for Hawaii and their assets do not exceed specified amounts. Groups, associations, and corporations may also be eligible for free legal assistance from MLSC if they lack funds to retain private counsel

MLSC never charges for services to the community. All our services are always free. MLSC is supported by several sources, including each of the governments in which we have offices, the U.S. Legal Services Corporation, other institutional and government grants, and by individual donations.

Mission

The mission of Micronesian Legal Service Corporation is to promote equal access to justice by providing high-quality legal assistance to low-income people. MLSC improves the lives of the people of Micronesia by helping them solve important legal problems; and strengthens communities through advocacy.

Vision

We believe in a Micronesia where all people are treated fairly and with respect; government and institutions are accountable even to the most vulnerable among us; where those who need legal services the most get the highest quality assistance to better their lives; where justice and fairness for all, even the poor, is the standard not only in our courts but in every community; and where communities thrive under democratic principles.

Regional Offices

MLSC has offices throughout Micronesia, including the Commonwealth of Northern Marianas (with offices on Saipan), on Guam, in each of the four states of the Federated States of Micronesia (Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei, and Kosrae), and in the Marshall Islands (Majuro and Ebeye). Our central administrative office is located on Saipan.

Chuuk. The Chuuk office has a directing attorney, four trial counselors, and two legal secretaries. The office is located on the main atoll, Weno. The Chuuk office closes an average of 600 cases per year, affecting nearly 5000 people. The major types of cases

we often handle include family law, travel and identity documents, employment disputes, land rights issues.

Guam. The Guam office opened in 2018 when the U.S. Legal Services Corporation awarded funds to MLSC for Guam. The office is located near the judiciary. There is a directing attorney who has been on staff since June 2024. There are also two staff attorneys, three paralegals, and two legal secretaries in the office. The Guam office also has a number of volunteers assisting in various capacities. The Guam office closes an average of 200 cases per year, affecting 800 people. The major types of cases often provided on Guam include family law, disaster relief, consumer law, immigration and civil rights.

Kosrae. The Kosrae office has a directing attorney, staff attorney, and two legal secretaries. The office is located on the main island. The Kosrae office closes an average of 300 cases per year, affecting well over one thousand people. Like other MLSC offices, the Kosrae office handles a wide variety of civil cases, as there is no other source of free legal assistance for civil legal issues on the island. These include help with legal documents, land disputes, employment law, and family law issues.

Marianas. The Marianas office has a directing attorney, two staff attorneys, three paralegals, and a legal secretary. The office is located on the island of Saipan. There has been a satellite office on Rota, which provided notary services, but this is no longer open. The directing attorney has been with the MLSC for over four decades. The Marianas office closes an average of 300 cases per year, affecting 900 people. The major types of cases often provided include family law, civil rights, landlord/tenant law, and probate.

Marshall Islands. The office for the Republic of the Marshall Islands has a directing attorney, staff attorney, a trial counselor, and four legal secretaries. The primary office is located on the island of Majuro with a secondary office on the Ebeye atoll. The Marshall Islands office closes an average of 350 cases per year, affecting almost 1,000 people. The major types of cases offered include land disputes, brief services related to travel and identity documents, family law.

Palau. The office for the Republic of Palau has a directing attorney, staff attorney, two paralegals, and a legal secretary. The directing attorney has been with MLSC for over a decade. The Palau office closes an average of 600 cases per year, affecting almost 2,000 people. The major types of cases often provided offered include family law, brief services related to identity and travel documents, land disputes, employment law, and civil rights.

Pohnpei. The office for the state of Pohnpei in the Federated States of Micronesia has a directing attorney, two staff attorneys, two trial counselors, and a legal secretary. The Pohnpei office closes an average of 1,000 cases per year, affecting over 5,000 people. The major types of cases provided often include brief services, as well as

travel and identity documents, powers of attorney, family law, land disputes, contract and employment law, and probate.

Yap. The office for the state of Yap in the Federated States of Micronesia has a directing attorney, staff attorney, two trial counselors and a legal secretary. The Yap office closes almost 400 cases per year, affecting over 1500 people. The major types of cases offered include powers of attorney and other legal document preparation, guardianship and name change, wills and estates, family law.

STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

The MLSC Board of Directors engaged in a process by which MLSC's leaders, both board and management, will determine what MLSC intends to be in the next five years and sound strategies for achieving these objectives.

The consultant selected to facilitate this process was Dr. Troy McVey, a long-time faculty member at the University of Guam. He holds a doctorate from the University of Southern California and has prior experience in facilitating strategic planning processes in the region.

The comprehensive strategic planning process included meeting with major stakeholders in the organization beginning with facilitated sessions with the entire organization in July 2024.

The board was actively involved in this process. There was extensive consultation with members both in quarterly update meetings, as well as one-on-one meetings.

Four Key Questions were reviewed through meetings, documents, and surveys.

1. What are our goals for clients and communities, and how do we measure success?
2. Are our primary strategies (direct legal services, community legal education, collaboration) still appropriate?
3. How can MLSC foster a culture of innovation?
4. How can we incorporate feedback from those we serve into decision-making?

Responses and findings to these questions were shared in a 28-page interim report to the board in an 80-minute update conversation in December 2024.

In addition to the staff input sessions at the conference and the one-on-one meetings with board members, there was also a targeted capacity review meeting in December 2024 with Directing Attorneys on zoom. Two surveys were used to tease out operational and technical details of the organization.

Finally, the consultant and Executive Director visited the offices in Chuuk and Majuro in late January 2025. These visits allowed for direct interaction with judicial and legislative partners, as well as formal and informal opportunities to talk to staff and community members about perceptions of MLSC.

Several documents and reports were reviewed by the consultant in preparation of this report, in addition to the focus group sessions, surveys, and interviews conducted, and visits to the MLSC website.

- Data obtained by management from MLSC's case management system.
- *About MLSC* Document
- *Community Focus* Document
- Staffing Pattern Document

The draft plan was shared with the Executive Director and the board for review and consideration at the July 2025 board meeting. And a final plan, with some modifications, was sent to the Executive Director following the meeting.

SWOT ANALYSIS

The sum of these activities are presented below in the format of a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis. A SWOT analysis is a strategic planning tool used to assess an organization's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. It helps organizations understand their internal capabilities and external environment to make informed decisions and develop effective strategies.

Benefits of using SWOT analysis:

- Provides a comprehensive understanding of the organization's position.
- Helps in strategic planning and decision-making.
- Facilitates identification of competitive advantages and disadvantages.
- Enables proactive management of potential risks and challenges.

Strengths

Internal factors that give an organization a competitive advantage are identified as **Strengths**. These could include a strong brand reputation, a skilled workforce, or unique resources.

- The current Executive Director and Deputy Director have long histories in the region and are well regarded by staff, community, and legal partners alike. Board members are well positioned in their communities and governments to advocate for the organization.

- The esprit de corps of the entire organization is good. There is a great team spirit between staff and management felt in each of the field offices and retention of employees is high, especially among the directing attorneys.
- The knowledge and expertise of MLSC is highly regarded by the judicial partners of MLSC. In fact, legal service providers see MLSC as the civil equivalent of Public Defender's Office. The organization is Mission-focused and has had a reliable Strategic Plan in place since 2014.
- MLSC is the largest law firm in the Western Pacific, including Guam and all of the regions served. The clients served represent appropriate cross-sections of age, gender, and ethnicity of the communities. The offices do a good job of providing access in the English language as well as the other official languages in the region.
- Weekly Directing Attorney meetings improve legal knowledge and services in each of the regions, leveraging expertise from different attorneys to the betterment of all. Staff development training program rolled out in 2024 is successful and enjoyed by all.
- There is a strong case management system utilized in all offices. Access to the primary online systems, Legal Server and Bamboo HR, is good and appreciated by staff in all offices. General IT Support is adequate in terms of technical Support of hardware/software setup, equipment troubleshooting & repair, network threats, and other cybersecurity issues.

Weaknesses

Internal factors that hinder an organization's performance are identified as **Weaknesses**. These could include limited resources, lack of skilled personnel, or outdated technology.

- More community legal education is needed. The balance between providing legal services and community legal education needs to be grounded in outreach and education that provides help that relieves the burden on legal service. Each Field Office needs to examine carefully the capacity of the office with the needs of the community. These can be how to complete intake forms, what types of cases are better served by other community partners, and what legal activities can be completed by the public with minimal support from MLSC or other providers.
- IT capacity needs improvement, both staff and equipment...old equipment. Access and ability to use other software is limited. There is not a lot of buy-in for Google Workspace, the selected secure email and file management system. Again, training is needed to improve buy-in.

- There is a need for more targeted training of staff, including senior staff, in using standardized software. There is also need for ongoing assessment of the technology needs of staff and identifying solutions.
- Uneven productivity across the jurisdictions, especially when populations are taken into consideration. This can lead to burnout, especially amongst the directing attorneys.
- Staff feel like procedures are tedious and would like greater face-to-face access to the Executive and Deputy Directors.
- Staff in the field offices do not feel there are adequate resources and capacity for expanding access to the outer regions, in terms of transportation and safety equipment. There is a lack of MLSC transportation, which impedes client services and causes staff to use their own vehicles; mileage reimbursement does not take wear and tear into account on staff POVs.
- There is no broad name recognition of “MLSC” nor is there an understanding of what legal services are available. This speaks to a lack of community awareness of the MLSC identity. In direct conversations with community members, there was often no awareness of what MLSC was. With explanation and prodding, “oh, Legal services” was quoted back.

Opportunities

External factors that an organization can leverage to its advantage are identified as ***Opportunities***. These could include emerging markets, changing consumer preferences, or new technologies.

- In terms of direct legal services, there seems to be satisfaction that those services are being provided, but MLSC can do more to increase access to services.
- Partner with public health missions targeted at similar, eligible populations to increase access to legal services. These missions are funded by local governments, so participation would be viewed favorably by the government as well as the community.
- There is a concern that MLSC should be seen as providing timely services which the community values, so regular community meetings or coordination with legal partners would be of benefit.
- While access to technology remains a barrier in our communities, the online application for legal assistance form has steady traffic, showing people from all over the region are accessing our website and interested in trying to get help online.

- A committee is working on benefits restructuring across the organization, gathering input on parity in the various jurisdictions, and receiving staff feedback on issues related to salary versus improved retirement preferences.
- Now starting to handle bankruptcy cases as an example of new advocacy
- Cultivate legacy donations from former staff
- Hold local-style fundraisers
- Submit grant applications to foundations, and
- Be more aggressive in obtaining local government funding.

Threats

External factors that could negatively impact an organization are identified as **Threats**. These could include increased competition, economic downturns, or new regulations.

- The biggest threat, by far, is the potential of a loss of funding from LSC. Federal budget drafts in 2017 and 2026 have included zero-budget lines. The appropriations process in 2017 did provide funding but it is unclear if the current congress will authorize funding as part of the appropriation process.
- Diminishing economic opportunities available to the client base means more people need legal services.
- The uncertainty of technology, at a time when cyberattack threats are credible and internet connectivity is limited, makes finding secure connections difficult.
- Because allocated funds are based on populations, a threat is the shrinking population of the entire region. Likewise, the depleted populations will affect the ability of the regional governments to provide funding support.

OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES 2025-2030

A strategic plan is a roadmap that outlines an organization's goals and the steps needed to achieve them over a specific period, typically 3-5 years. It defines the organization's vision, mission, and core values, and guides resource allocation and decision-making. Essentially, it translates a vision into actionable strategies and measurable objectives.

These objectives and strategies are meant to align with the strategic needs of the organization for the next five years, to help the MLSC leverage its existing strengths, strengthen its weaknesses while strategically taking advantage of opportunities, and building resilience against threats.

Objective 1: Align and track local caseload priorities with Federal and Local initiatives.

Strategy 1.1. *Align organizational priorities with Federal funding priorities by FY2026.*

The United States Federal Government Legal Services Corporation website lists several priorities, which will shift with changing times and Presidential administrations. Given that the Federal LSC is the single largest funding source for MSLC, annual priorities should reflect Federal priorities. A planning consideration should always be “why” do we take these cases? What impact are we trying to make in our community?

Strategy 1.2. *Align project priorities with legislative priorities of each jurisdiction by FY2027.* Also, expand on the current process of the Executive Director listing annual priorities and the Directing Attorneys aligning within the various offices. It may not be appropriate to have legislative review, but a formal consultation may improve planning capacity.

Strategy 1.3. *Immediately make public the case load completions by the codes in the Legal Server system.* Report on those case loads not just in board meetings, but in quarterly outreach to legal, judicial, and government partners. Post at least quarterly updates on the website, unless dashboard integration allows near-instant updating. Offices in FSM should report together, so that state and National Assemblies are both aware.

Strategy 1.4. *Involve the communities served more intentionally in the decision-making processes.* Policy practices should include focus group feedback sessions. For instance, if MLSC re-designs the intake system, a client focus group needs to be involved.

Objective 2: Continue to improve access to justice across the region.

Strategy 2.1. *Strengthen the community education and outreach programs.* By providing more community education, MLSC is helping people who are not clients understand rights and responsibilities. Directing Attorneys will develop community education and outreach plans to be conducted by strong legal advocates on a monthly or quarterly basis, with events attended by board members and reported at board meetings.

Strategy 2.2. *Improve the Website.* The best and most consistent way to get information to people in search of services is to have a current, attractive website, with language about the types of cases MLSC will take, simple online forms (which are promptly responded to), contact information, directions to the offices, and links to social media.

Strategy 2.3. *Allow applicants to make initial contact via their preferred method.* Whether through a phone call, online intake, or facebook messaging or some other social media application, accepting various modes of inquiry is critical for those in search of legal advice, especially those who have never used a lawyer.

Strategy 2.4. *Evaluate the MLSC intake process.* Because LSC has eligibility requirements, the first interaction with applicants--asking about financial info, detailed private details--can be seen as both rude and invasive. There are better ways to start relationships with new clients. Some of the partnerships, particularly with women's advocacy groups, have proven strategies for providing a more supportive first encounter.

Objective 3: Centralize and strengthen the central offices capacity to take the lead in development, training, and technology support.

Strategy 3.1. *Hire a training coordinator with expertise in adult education.* This position will be responsible for inhouse training for staff, as well as training staff on providing community legal education info to adults.

Strategy 3.2. *Expand technical/IT Staff, so that onsite technical training for staff that is meaningful, consistent, and ongoing can be conducted.* Expertise is needed in higher end planning, training development, and systems integration, as well as competent support from someone who specializes in maintenance, troubleshooting and procurement.

Strategy 3.3. *Senior Leadership will work on individual training plans with Directing Attorneys.* Directing Attorneys represent the backbone of MLSC. They are responsible both for local operations and Federal reporting. They need to work closely with their board members and jurisdictional agencies to meet the needs of their communities. They need to engage in professional development and mentorship with the guidance of the central office to improve caseload completion rates, jurisdictional funding, and community engagement .

Strategy 3.4. *The Board should engage in a formal discussion about the location of the central office.* The central office has been located in Saipan (CNMI) for historical reasons, dating back to the Trust Territories. There might be more compelling reasons to move the central office to Guam (as a transportation hub and the largest population center) or Pohnpei (as the seat of government for the FSM, the largest contributor to the MLSC outside of the Federal LSC).

Objective 4: Achieve financial stability by better diversifying revenue streams.

Strategy 4.1. *Hire a Development Director*, who can not only write grants but also work with local offices on securing appropriations, and also ensure offices are doing the grant-mandated work (program management) and reporting.

Strategy 4.2. *Hire a Communications Coordinator*. This could be an administrative position under the development director, ensuring alignment of communications particularly with development objectives. Knowledge of websites and social media posting strategies could be helpful.

Strategy 4.3. *Hold annual or semi-annual Client Appreciation events*. This could be a lunch or *merienda* event with gratitude expressed by the Directing Attorneys and focus group sessions by paralegals or trial counselors, and also provide an opportunity for feedback and listening sessions.

EVALUATION

An evaluation plan outlines how a program, project, or intervention will be assessed. It details the purpose of the evaluation, the key questions to be answered, the methods for collecting and analyzing data, and how the results will be used. In essence, an evaluation plan provides a framework for a systematic, rigorous, and informative evaluation that can lead to improved programs and outcomes.

Purpose and Scope

Overall, MLSC will assess its organizational performance relative to each objective in terms of financial and human resources (inputs), operation methods and activities (processes), results (outputs), outcomes for clients, and impact in the larger community.

The efficacy of the plan's objectives are to be evaluated. Central leadership will gather and present formative findings to the MLSC Board at Quarterly Board meetings. The organization will also release an annual Communities Impact Report to the key legal partners, legislative and government officers, and available to the public.

Key Evaluation Questions

The evaluation should be focused and aligned with the strategic plan. As such, the key evaluation questions will be reflections of the main objectives of the plan.

1. To what degree have the caseloads of the various offices aligned with federal and local initiatives?

2. To what degree have activities increased access to justice?
3. How successful is the central office at supporting the field offices in professional development and technology use?
4. To what degree are the revenue streams adequately supporting the priorities and activities of the organization?

In addressing these questions, there should be **Key Performance Indicators** (KPIs), or measurable values that demonstrate how effectively an organization is achieving the objectives. KPIs help track progress towards strategic goals, allowing businesses to assess their performance, identify areas for improvement, and make informed decisions. Suggested KPIs for MLSC are below, with an indication of which objective the KPI may address:

- Cases closed in each jurisdiction (objectives 1 and 2)
- Grants submitted (objective 4)
- Staff surveys (objective 3)
- Legislative appropriations in each jurisdiction (objectives 1 and 4)
- Community Outreach Events (objective 2)
- Locally-funded program participation (objectives 1 and 4)

This list is not exhaustive, and may be modified as priorities change.

Evaluation Design and Methods

MLSC should adopt a formative evaluation model, so that the board may be responsive to data and analysis provided by leadership. The Deputy Director is the responsible party for evaluation activities.

Data Collection should be ongoing and consistent across all offices. The primary stakeholder groups are clients, community partners, and staff. Some of the tools suggested are below:

- Surveys for clients with smaller issues
- Surveys for community engagement sessions
- Staff surveys on central support matters
- Exit interviews for clients with issues needing more work
- Focus Groups for policy changes
- Focus Groups or Listening Sessions for community partners

The use of online data collection instruments will aid in collection. Paralegals and Legal Secretaries can conduct exit interviews, which may be recorded simply by submitting the online survey on behalf of the client, soliciting more robust responses.

Attorneys or Trial Counselors can serve as focus group facilitators, as long as planning sessions are held in advance so that expectations can be calibrated.

In general, evaluation findings will be reported monthly to directing attorneys and quarterly to the full board. A simple report for client surveys should be generated for quarterly presentation to the Directing Attorneys and annual presentation to the board. Focus Group reports should be completed within the quarter of the session.

Informed consent will be provided to all participants and participation will be voluntary. All data will be confidential, not only will reporting be aggregated, so that individual identities cannot be identified, even notes will be de-identified. Only the Deputy Director and person collecting the data will have access to raw materials.