

# METRO VOLUNTEER LAWYERS AND THE DENVER INDIAN CENTER LEGAL CLINIC

BY: TED KOEHLER



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According to data from the 2010 census, Colorado has the 13th highest American Indian/Alaska Native population in the country. Census Bureau data shows that 107,832 people who identify as American Indian/Alaska Native, alone or in combination with one or more races, live in Colorado. This number represents a 35.3 percent increase from 2000 census data, and the rise is expected to continue. Of the 56,010 people in Colorado who identify as American Indian/Alaska Native alone, 46,395 live in urban areas, primarily in the Denver and Colorado Springs metro areas. In short, a significant percentage of Colorado's American Indian/Alaska Native population lives in cities.

The Denver Indian Center Legal Clinic was formed to serve this community. In spring 2012, Metro Volunteer Lawyers (MVL), the Denver Bar Association's pro bono program, began working with the Denver Indian Center to provide a walk-in legal clinic. The Clinic was founded by two Native American attorneys: Dianne Van Voorhees, MVL's Executive Director at the time, and Danielle L. Demkowicz, then an MVL board member. The first Clinic was held on April 4, 2012, and it has continued monthly since then. The Clinic meets from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. at the Denver Indian Center in Lakewood on the first Wednesday evening of every month.

At the Clinic, volunteer attorneys advise people seeking legal assistance on a wide variety of legal issues, including landlord-tenant, employment, family, and probate matters. As this list suggests, the majority

of the substantive legal issues raised at the Clinic are general civil matters that are not specific to the Native American community. Nevertheless, issues governed by federal Indian law occasionally arise. Volunteer attorneys answer questions and provide referrals to legal resources in the community. They also help Clinic

attendees understand the legal process and how to proceed as a pro se party. Attorneys do not establish a formal attorney-client relationship with Clinic attendees, but if the person seeking assistance meets MVL's financial eligibility criteria, an attorney may choose to take the case.

The Clinic has been well-attended since its inception. In 2018, volunteer attorneys provided assistance to over 50 people at the Clinic. Given its popularity, the Clinic may seek to expand its reach in the years to come, serving Native American communities in Boulder, Colorado Springs, and Pueblo. For now, however, the Lakewood-based Clinic continues to need and welcome volunteers. As MVL's only night-time legal clinic, the Denver Indian Center Legal Clinic is a good volunteer opportunity for attorneys who cannot take time off during the day. **D**

To volunteer or learn more, email **Ivonne Esparza**, Legal Services Coordinator for the Denver Indian Center Legal Clinic, at [iesparza@denbar.org](mailto:iesparza@denbar.org).



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