



Legal Services Programs Help Low-Income Clients Navigate COVID-19 Issues

By **Dianna Parker, Baylee Butler, Robin Bozian, and contributors**

As our nation grapples with COVID-19 and the worldwide call for racial justice, the necessity for legal services for low-income communities has become abundantly clear. Challenging systemic inequities and ensuring equal access to justice and basic human needs are at the heart of legal aid's mission.

According to a [Census Bureau study](#), more than fifty percent of households with children under the age of eighteen have lost at least one adult income and are struggling to make ends meet as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lack of income and resources often leads to legal trouble for people receiving public benefits, at risk of losing their housing, or struggling to make sure their children receive the education they need. Legal services programs can help.

With most staff working from home, legal services programs across the country have maintained their traditional civil law practice areas while also shifting resources and priorities to respond to current needs. Despite the ever-changing landscape of the world today, legal services attorneys continue to break down barriers for and stabilize the lives of vulnerable children and families by providing holistic legal services in the areas of income, housing, benefits, and education. Non-profit legal aid programs exist throughout the country to provide free civil legal representation to low-income people to ensure equal access to the justice system.

Housing

Housing stability is more essential than ever, as families cannot “stay home, stay safe” if they don't have a home. Since the pandemic began, legal services advocates have served on the front lines of the eviction crisis, representing families who were unlawfully evicted, identifying and asserting CARES Act violations by federally subsidized landlords, and connecting families with non-legal resources and funds. [Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma](#) has seen a huge influx of illegal evictions and has provided additional housing law training to staff attorneys, as well as set up outside the eviction docket of the courthouse. The organization works with a partner agency, [Community Cares Partners](#) to provide rental assistance to residents who have been financially impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and are facing eviction. Nationwide, legal services lawyers are assembling virtual tenant advice clinics, court-based eviction clinics, and mediation programs to keep as many families and children as possible housed in clean, safe homes.

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In Columbus, Ohio, multiple social service agencies have a daily presence at the convention center that has been turned into a makeshift eviction court. The agencies — including the [Legal Aid Society of Columbus \(LASC\)](#) — offer rental assistance, mediation services and legal information. Elsewhere in Ohio, [Southeastern Ohio Legal Services \(SEOLS\)](#) has begun offering tenant-advice clinics at several rural courthouses to prevent evictions. The [Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati \(LASGC\)](#) ramped up its efforts to prevent evictions during the pandemic. The Emergency Eviction Prevention Assistance Program, in partnership with Cincinnati-Hamilton County Community Action Agency and St. Vincent de Paul, uses a combination of cash rental assistance, negotiation with landlords, and client representation to prevent evictions. LASGC also helps clients register for CARES Act benefits and provides brief advice and service regarding unemployment benefits.

Income and Public Benefits Assistance

Income is unquestionably a concern for millions of unemployed Americans. In response to skyrocketing unemployment compensation applications, legal aid programs like SEOLS have expanded their services. SEOLS began helping with traditional unemployment and Pandemic Unemployment Assistance applications to put more money in the pockets of struggling families. Offering these additional services has helped the program identify systemic issues with the unemployment application process.

Legal aid's role in securing stability through public benefits representation has also become more critical than ever, as counties have expanded permissible uses of funds from the Prevention, Retention and Contingency program that helps low-income parents overcome barriers to employment, and essential workers in high-risk environments struggle to access adequate healthcare. Federal stimulus payments also carried with them additional impediments for low-income individuals who had not previously filed taxes. Legal services tax lawyers responded with self-help notices and instructions to help people navigate the process and get the additional benefits their family is entitled to under the CARES Act. Throughout Ohio, attorneys screened their cases and called individuals to see if they needed assistance completing the necessary forms, represented people in identity theft cases related to Economic Impact Payments and trained partner agencies on how to assist their clients.

In order to increase awareness of changes to public benefit programs, [Legal Aid of West Virginia \(LAWV\)](#) began immediately notifying current and former clients about policy changes. LAWV also uses the agency's existing outreach channels and community partnerships to share information and provide community assistance, such as with meal distribution sites and schedules.

The federal and state relief packages implemented by government leaders, legislatures, and the courts in response to the coronavirus are extremely complex, and low-income individuals must have access to the most up-to-date information in order to survive the economic effects of the pandemic. In Kentucky, [Legal Aid of the Bluegrass](#), through the development and continuous revision of fact sheets posted on the agency's website, has been proactive in providing vulnerable clients with information about eligibility for unemployment benefits, eviction and foreclosure protections, and access to the courts for survivors of domestic

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violence. They have also, in partnership with Goodwill Industries, held virtual clinics during the pandemic for low-income individuals seeking work and requiring assistance with expungements, housing issues, and consumer issues. Also, recognizing that the pandemic will likely create long-term changes in the way that courts do ordinary business, the organization is constructing dedicated self-contained rooms in which clients who lack access to technology may appear remotely for hearings and court business.

Education

Access to education has always been a priority for legal services programs, particularly focusing on the barriers encountered by students with disabilities, students of color, and students whose families are experiencing homelessness. With schools converting to virtual formats, particularly in rural communities where broadband access is spotty, legal services lawyers are fighting for an accessible education for all students.

Since Ohio school buildings first closed in response to COVID-19, [Advocates for Basic Legal Equality, Inc. \(ABLE\)](#) has been keeping parents informed of their rights through a series of fact sheets and Facebook Live videos that have reached more than 1,500 viewers in three languages. ABLE advocates surveyed parents throughout Northwest Ohio about their experiences during the closure and helped parents and other community members present testimony regarding their concerns at local school board meetings. ABLE has also filed a complaint with the Ohio Department of Education that has triggered an ongoing investigation into one public school district that allegedly failed to provide students with disabilities the services and supports they were entitled to under the law.

Throughout the crisis, staff attorneys have worked tirelessly to represent clients facing life-altering legal problems — clients like Cindy Kimbler,¹ an essential worker earning less than \$11 an hour. Kimbler reached out to the LASC after learning that 25% of her wages would be garnished to pay back a payday loan that she took out several years ago to repair her car. LASC helped her file a bankruptcy that stopped the wage garnishment and allowed her to continue to make her rent payments. “It really is going to help me get my life back on track,” she said. “It’s such a relief — a weight off my shoulders. I want people out there to know there is hope.”

Legal services programs across the nation continue to explore ways in which they can serve their mission to combat unfairness and injustice and to help people rise out of poverty. The unique services that legal aid provides are needed now more than ever. The pandemic has resulted in historic levels of unemployment and loss of family income, interrupted education for thousands of vulnerable children, closed access to services that protect domestic violence victims and laid bare the disparities in access to health care for Black, LatinX and low-income rural communities. Legal services providers will be there to mitigate the economic and related challenges that COVID-19 affected individuals and families experience in an effort to stabilize low-income families and break down systemic inequities for the next generation. ■

1 Ms. Kimbler gave LASC permission to share her story.