

Eviction, income, racial justice are top priorities, says Legal Aid Board

Nonprofit tightens focus in response to Covid-19, BLM movement

Community Legal Aid is tightening its focus in the midst of Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Last week, the organization's board of trustees passed a resolution to adopt a set of strategic advocacy priorities for the remainder of the year on five key areas: preventing evictions, removing barriers to employment, building financial assets, assisting with debt relief, and protecting victims of violence.

"We're taking a hard look at the areas in people's lives that are being most affected right now, like their jobs and ability to pay rent," explained Steven McGarrity, the organization's executive director. "Our hope is to focus our expertise in ways that can help people struggling with these issues -- like by helping people who may be having trouble getting unemployment or other public benefits that can make all the difference right now."

Board President Dionne Dowdy acknowledged that the organization is also working to respond to the racial injustice that's been cast in a limelight over the past few weeks.

"First and foremost, we want people to know that we strongly support our black community, always, but especially during this time," Dowdy said. "Our core mission is 'justice,' and that's just not possible to achieve in a culture of racism and structural inequality."

McGarrity said the organization is taking a look at all its advocacy efforts and applying a "racial justice lens."

“Everything we do, every case we take on, we should be asking ourselves: Is race a factor here?” he explained. “And if the answer is yes, then we should be using every tool at a lawyer’s disposal to bring that issue to justice.”

Dowdy believes the best place for the organization to start is with introspection.

“I don’t think we’re any different from any other nonprofit grappling with this issue, or that we have it all figured out,” she said. “On the contrary, I think we have a long way to go. But one thing we can do is take a look at our own bias, our own structure, our own processes, and ask ourselves: How can we do better?”

Dowdy said in the coming months, board members will be taking a hard look at Legal Aid’s diversity, equity, and inclusion policies and initiatives, as well as engaging an external consultant to help identify gaps in service and organizational culture.

“We’re taking this seriously,” she said. “There’s nothing more important than doing this right, and we’re starting with our top leadership in our board.”

McGarritty said Legal Aid staff members also would be fully participating in the organizational review, building on conversations and initial diversity trainings the organization started a couple years ago.

“When we started these conversations shortly after I became director, we knew it was going to be a long road,” he said. “Race is a hard thing to talk about. And as a white man, I certainly don’t have all the answers. But I also know that it’s critical for us to be conscious of these issues and willing to confront and address them, not just internally, but within our community, if we’re going to have any chance of breaking down these systems that perpetuate inequality.”

For now, Legal Aid is encouraging anyone facing eviction, job loss or income cuts, debts, financial crisis, or violence at home, to reach out.

“We’re not going anywhere,” McGarritty said. “We know these next several months are going to be tough for a lot of people, as courts and the state start opening back up. And we want those who are struggling to know we’re here, we’re free, and you should reach out for help.”

Anyone in need of legal help can apply online 24/7 at www.communitylegalaid.org/apply, or by calling the organization’s HelpLine at (800)

Official Strategic Advocacy Priorities in Response to COVID-19, adopted by the Board

The COVID-19 pandemic is having an unparalleled impact on people and organizations in our community. The economic impact of the pandemic will drive many of our neighbors to the breaking point. Community Legal Aid will use its resources to address the most pressing legal needs of the community. Community Legal Aid adopts these Strategic Advocacy Priorities as a supplement to the 2020 Priorities for Cases and Matters.

1. **Evictions** - Most courts in the region imposed a moratorium on evictions while the statewide stay-at-home-order was in place. As Ohio begins to reopen, the courts will begin hearing eviction cases soon. The backlog of pending evictions plus the anticipated number of people who will soon face eviction because they were unable to pay rent in April or May will create a significant housing crisis in our community. Community Legal Aid will prioritize assistance in eviction matters and work with courts, community partners, and policy makers to create community-based solutions to mitigate the effects of the eviction crisis.
2. **Employment** - The pandemic has resulted in the highest levels of unemployment since the Great Depression. Community Legal Aid will prioritize assistance in matters that remove barriers to employment such as criminal record sealing and certificates of qualifications for employment.
3. **Building Assets** - As families struggle through the economic crisis, they must have access to all available government benefits. Community Legal Aid will prioritize assistance in unemployment compensation, food assistance, disability benefits, stimulus payments, and other public benefits.
4. **Debt Relief** - With the loss of employment, families will be unable to meet their debt obligations. This may result in defaults, repossessions, court judgements, and garnishments. Community Legal Aid will prioritize assistance to resolve unmanageable debt through assistance in debt collection matters, automobile repossessions, garnishments and bankruptcy.

5. **Protecting Victims** - Unfortunately, domestic violence has continued unabated during the pandemic. Community Legal Aid has continued to provide representation to survivors of domestic violence, stalking, and sexual assault throughout the crisis. Community Legal Aid will continue to prioritize assistance to victims of violence.

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