

Legal Aid renews commitment to fighting COVID-19 in new year

As everyone wraps up 2020, Community Legal Aid has its sights set on the new year.

“Last year was a tough year for social service agencies,” shared Dionne Dowdy, president of Legal Aid’s Board of Trustees. “From the shift in services to respond to the pandemic, to the growing number of people in poverty, to the financial pressures we’re facing as a result of COVID-19. While last year was vitally important in supporting our community, we know this year is going to be just as critical.”

Legal Aid has seen its requests for help rise in the past several months, specifically in unemployment claims and eviction defense. It’s also been part of a collaborative community response to provide rental and utility assistance and has helped homeowners facing foreclosure.

The non-profit also has maintained its Legal Assistance to Victims project, which helps victims of violence obtain protection and freedom from their abusers, since the beginning of the public health crisis.

“When the state closed down earlier this year, and with so many facets of our economy still closed or suffering, it made an already bad situation even worse for people living in poverty,” explained Executive Director Steven McGarrity. “We had clients who had exhausted their savings, who were living paycheck-to-paycheck, or who were in even worse situations. And unfortunately, we don’t expect that trend to let up in the coming months.”

One way Legal Aid is getting set for 2021 is through its new Board adopted strategic priorities for COVID-19 -- a set of criteria advocates use to determine how to prioritize cases. These priorities include preventing evictions and keeping families housed, removing barriers to employment, building financial assets for individuals and families, providing debt relief, protecting victims of violence, and mitigating education disparities for children in poverty.

Before the pandemic, Legal Aid had to turn away two out of every three applicants because of lack of resources. Since the pandemic, this gap is only expected to widen, as the poverty population grows and the organization is facing added financial strains.

A significant portion of the organization's funding comes from the Ohio Access to Justice Foundation, whose revenue is tied directly to interest rates.

"There's no doubt that this year is going to be challenging," Dowdy shared. "But we know our community needs Legal Aid now more than ever, and we're committed to seeing this through."

McGarrity pointed to its partnerships with local community foundations as a source of inspiration for his organization.

"We are really fortunate to have some amazing foundations in our community that are stepping up to help fill in the gaps our low-income residents are feeling right now," he said. "To have their support is really a vote of confidence that they know how critical legal services are in times of crisis, and that they're going to stand by us in fighting the residual effects of COVID-19."

The non-profit also will be seeking donations from individuals and businesses as part of its annual fundraising campaign. Anyone interested in supporting Legal Aid can visit www.communitylegalaid.org/donate. Donations can also be mailed to 50 S. Main Street, Suite 800, Akron, OH 44308.

Legal Aid's Strategic Advocacy Priorities in Response to COVID-19

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.

These Strategic Advocacy Priorities supplement the 2021 Priorities for Cases and Matters.

Evictions

As many families have been unable to afford to pay rent as a result of the impact of COVID-19,

Community Legal Aid has seen an increase in requests for assistance with evictions. The CDC

moratorium and the patchwork of court closings in response to surges of COVID-19 cases in the

community will result in an even greater need for assistance with evictions in 2021. 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Education

In response to the pandemic, all Ohio schools switched to remote learning for the final quarter of

the 2019-2020 school year. For the 2020-2021 school year, the largest urban school districts in

our region have continued with remote learning. While remote learning negatively impacts all students, students with learning challenges are particularly vulnerable to falling even further

behind their educational goals. Community Legal Aid will prioritize assistance to families in the

major urban school districts needing assistance with Individual Education Plans. 504 plans, and

related activities and will work with school districts, community partners, and policy makers to

develop systemic solutions to the negative impact of remote learning.

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