

# Bridging the justice gap: Volunteers matter

by Ken Mirkin, managing attorney

“If you can’t afford an attorney, one will be provided to you.”

This statement, commonly known as part of the Miranda Rights, is one of the biggest misunderstandings about the American justice system.

What most people don’t realize is that this statement is only true for people who are charged with a crime, facing a battle in the criminal justice system.

But criminal cases make up less than a quarter of all cases in the American justice system. The vast majority of court cases in our country (more than 75%) are civil cases, which carry no guarantee of a lawyer if you can’t afford one.

And most people can’t.

Studies show that 80% of the civil legal needs of working-class and low-income Americans go unrepresented in a given year. It’s an overwhelming number that the [Legal Services Corporation](#) has dubbed “the justice gap.”

But what do these numbers actually mean, in terms of everyday life for real people?

It means that in the United States, in 2021, you can lose your children, your home, your income, your very health and safety -- all without the benefit of an attorney to represent you.

Our legal system is complicated, filled with rules and nuances unfamiliar to the average person. To use a phrase commonly uttered by our own executive director, the legal system was “created by lawyers and for lawyers.”

So, when a landlord, bank, or collection agency on one side of the courtroom has legal representation and a person or family on the other side doesn’t, the scales of justice are not balanced.

Every county in the United States is served by an organization like ours -- a civil legal aid organization -- that aims to balance these scales. But our organizations can only serve a fraction of the people who reach out for help. Here at Community Legal Aid, in just the first half of this year, we were unable to help nearly three-quarters of the 6,770 people who have applied for assistance, largely due to an overwhelming need that we don't have the resources to meet.

This is why we are endlessly grateful for our partnership with private attorneys. Our volunteer attorneys are crucial to filling the justice gap. By offering their time and expertise, they educate, counsel, and represent Americans whose voices would otherwise go unheard in the justice system.

We call this volunteer effort "pro bono," which translates to "for the public good." This deeply meaningful mantra goes far beyond the notion of "free legal help." It speaks to the very purpose of the legal profession, the value of volunteerism and service, and the core American principle of all of us being created equal.

October is [National Pro Bono Month](#), a time that confirms the spirit of our pro bono partnerships with law firms, corporate legal offices, and private practice attorneys. The value our volunteer attorneys bring to Community Legal Aid's mission can't be measured in case outcomes. It goes much deeper and is no less meaningful than a never-ending quest to do good for the sake of society, to balance the scales, and to make "justice for all" a reality.

*This article is part of Legal Aid's ["Big Ideas" series](#).*

Last updated on October 06, 2021.

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