

History of Legal Aid

The Early Years

The beginnings of civil legal aid in the United States can be traced back to the 1870s, when the first legal assistance program was founded in New York. It would be nearly a century before any national structure is developed by the federal government, first with the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity's Legal Services in 1965, and eventually with the establishment of the independent Legal Service Corporation.

American Bar and Legal Aid

The American Bar Association has been a long-time proponent of legal assistance to the poor. They created a standing committee on legal aid in the early 1920s and endorsed the establishment of the OEO Legal Services. To this day, they continue to support LSC and the work provided by legal aid organizations.

Expansion and Consolidation

Following the establishment of OEO's Legal Services, 260 legal aid programs were established across all states. Programs and funding increased as LSC began conducting studies on the needs of the poor, ultimately recommending to Congress a funding model that would provide one legal aid attorney for every 10,000 poor people.

LSC saw exponential growth and expansion of programs. But as the country moved toward economic stagnation and eventual recession, legal aid funding took hits along with everyone else. By the early 2000s, loss in multiple avenues of funding caused by the global economic crisis had forced restructurings and consolidations.

Ohio went from many legal aid programs to nine, with Community Legal Aid being one of them.

Community Legal Aid: A Timeline

1952

Summit County Legal Aid Society incorporated “to secure justice for and to protect the rights of the needy and of individuals of moderate means, to promote measures for their assistance, and to enable them to obtain competent legal advice and representation.” This organization would go on to become Western Reserve Legal Services, serving Summit, Portage, and Medina counties.

Stark County Legal Aid Society incorporated.

2000

Stark County Legal Aid Society and Western Reserve Legal Aid Services merge to form Community Legal Aid Services, Inc.

2014

Northeast Ohio Legal Services merges with Community Legal Aid to extend reach to eight counties in central northeast Ohio, making it the third largest legal aid organization in the state.

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[Table of Contents](#)

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