

Community Legal Aid

A non-profit law firm serving the legal needs of low-income individuals and families in central northeast Ohio



www.communitylegalaid.org

Through the lens of an intake worker

by Jenna Wyatt, HelpLine paralegal

On a typical week as an intake worker at Community Legal Aid, I speak with up to 150 people seeking help from our organization. While we are able to accept many cases, far too often I have to tell our applicants “no” to helping them with issues that our non-profit firm has the expertise to assist with, but not the resources.

Through the duration of the pandemic, eviction and unemployment applications have flooded our Helpline, and our existing teams have struggled to meet the increased demand. What I hear from our applicants time and time again are distress calls pleading for help because they have never been through anything like this before and don't know what to do. And while it's true that none of us have had to navigate a global pandemic before, we aren't all experiencing it the same way.

A job loss leads to the need for unemployment insurance from a state system that is outdated and wrought with delays. What this means for our clients is they end up waiting months for benefits to arrive when it used to, and still should, take weeks.

In the meantime, rent and mortgages come due and families end up facing eviction or foreclosure. While the process of foreclosure takes time, the process of eviction is fast, with little regard for the reason the tenant is unable to pay.

Application processes for rental assistance can take time and often aren't approved quickly enough to prevent a court filing for eviction. Many landlords refuse to accept payments from organizations or continue with the eviction after the funds are received. Moratoriums didn't apply to everyone. For families, this can create a domino effect where losing their housing and facing

homelessness can mean losing their children.

Attorneys are needed for situations like these.

During this pandemic, at Legal Aid, we have had to change our priorities to meet the immediate needs in our communities. This forced us to begin rejecting clients seeking help with issues we previously accepted. Anyone calling in with issues such as divorce, custody and guardianship were told that intake is closed and it is uncertain when it will reopen.

There is a common misconception that courts appoint attorneys for those who can't afford one, but this only applies to criminal defendants. This leaves those in need of assistance with civil matters (which make up roughly 75% of cases in court) to fend for themselves. In these cases, community-based lawyering organizations such as ours are usually the only place those who cannot afford an attorney can turn to for help.

It's hard to say no to people in need, and that is part of my daily duties. I have applicants with complex problems on a regular basis and can only refer them to a self-help legal information website. The processes to solve these problems are complex and difficult for the average person to navigate on their own. Our communities are vastly underserved.

Our teams have done their best to meet the needs, but the need has exceeded our limits. We have had to curtail the types of eviction cases we can accept and have to refer people who deserve representation to a weekly zoom class. For most people, this is the only opportunity to speak to an attorney before they represent themselves at their own hearings.

Our hope for the work we do is that it will help people in our communities to bridge the gap from struggling to survive to having the ability to thrive. Each and every one of us has basic needs for housing and food stability in order to have a chance at a life well-lived. During this pandemic, the importance of protecting each other has been at the forefront of all of our lives. This should encompass basic stability needs for all of us.

Community Legal Aid directly assists with keeping families in their homes, or with obtaining a much-needed public benefit. We help members of our communities get a fresh start with an expungement or a bankruptcy and with people needing employee rights assistance. We focus on

helping survivors of domestic violence maintain safety and security, and children with disabilities struggling in school. All of which have a lasting beneficial impact on not just the individuals, but also the communities where they live.

All of the work our organization does expands access to justice to those who would otherwise have none. When all of us have our basic needs met and are living well, everyone benefits. That's how strong communities are built.

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