

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

We are one body

By John Petit, managing attorney, and Rachel Nader, advocacy director

If there is one thing we learned over this pandemic, it's that we are all connected.

When we are facing a contagious disease, if we don't act as one, we are all at risk. When we look at problems on an individual basis only, when personal rights trump societal responsibility, what happens?

We all continue to suffer. Disease spreads. Viruses find fertile ground because we did not all work together to eliminate the spread.

The same is true in all aspects of our lives, and one way we see this play out is in the intersectionality between poverty and justice.

"Poverty is the parent of revolution and crime." -Aristotle

This is not a new concept. We've seen this unfold since our country was founded -- since before our country was founded. Laws and systems built for the benefit of certain individuals create imbalances and detriments for others.

As a simple example, we have a housing crisis. There is not enough affordable housing for the working poor. For years, we have made it easy to profit from rentals. Property owning and investing legislators enacted laws to protect their investment and make it easy to evict those less fortunate.

Of course, we implemented laws to protect homeowners facing potential foreclosure because we place a higher value on those who own property than we do those who rent. When the foreclosure crisis hit more than a decade ago, we changed laws to give more time and opportunity for those at risk of being foreclosed upon the chance to save their home.

Yet, we still allow a renter to be evicted within a month of a single missed payment. Now, since

the pandemic burst the eviction bubble, the body is suffering, so we offer rental assistance, a mere band aid applied to an unjust system.

Another example is the economic disparity that exists within our legal system. First, and unless you're charged with a crime, you have to be able to afford an attorney in order to have legal representation in court. This inherently puts people with financial means in a place of advantage over those in low-income households.

And our system takes it a step further, through fines and fees people are expected to pay for an act as simple as filing your paperwork in court. For those who can't afford to pay it, late fees rack up like interest on an unpaid credit card balance. It becomes unmanageable and unrealistic for them to pay back. And what is the consequence? You lose your driver's license, or even face jail time -- both of which severely hinder your ability to earn income, both now and in the future.

"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." -Martin Luther King, Jr.

These examples offer a glimpse into a broader systemic problem -- that systems of inequity, including those that exist within our laws and structures of justice, perpetuate poverty for one group of people, while others are free to live their lives and fully participate in realizing the American Dream.

But what we must recognize, what the pandemic has taught us, is that we all are part of the same system. And when the system fails for any one of us, it fails for all of us. When we allow each other to be treated differently based upon ability, skin color, or financial means, we all suffer. When we allow individual rights to profit off the demise of others, we allow the pandemic of poverty to spread.

Our country has thrived on the freedom of individuals to be creative. However, this freedom must be exercised in the realm of also being responsible for those less fortunate.

"When a poor person dies of hunger, it has not happened because God did not take care of him or her. It has happened because neither you nor I wanted to give that person what he or she needed." -Mother Teresa

We need a justice system that protects the rights of those least among us, and we all must lend a hand in moving us in this direction. When we say, that doesn't affect me, and focus on our individual rights and ignore those who suffer, eventually we all will suffer. The virus of poverty will continue to spread or mutate into other forms of injustice.

We are, all of us, responsible.

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