



Fully funding civil legal aid is critical to the District's COVID-19 recovery effort

Civil legal aid is a critical part of the District's safety net. We have a strong network of civil legal services providers that has mobilized to meet the needs of low-income District residents during the COVID-19 crisis and the need for their work will remain critical.

- The legal aid network has swiftly adapted to the COVID-19 environment by establishing virtual intake processes to ensure the needs of the community are being met. Court-based services like resource and self-help centers were quickly converted to accessible phone lines. Walk-in clinics have been converted to virtual clinics offering one-on-one advice to District workers.
- Many of the clients who need legal services do not have access to computers. Legal aid lawyers are submitting claims on their behalf in order to ensure they receive benefits.
- The legal aid network is helping people navigate the threat of eviction.
- Legal aid attorneys are on the front-lines of assisting clients with finding resources to help with everyday needs such as free groceries, mental health services, and other critical items to help them cope through COVID-19.

We are facing an unprecedented demand for civil legal aid services during COVID-19. That demand will continue to soar. District residents are facing new and unanticipated legal problems that will only continue to grow as we emerge from this crisis.

- DC Courts are no longer operating as they once did before COVID-19. The legal aid network is assisting clients with the navigation of a court system that is changing and adapting every single day.
- With businesses shut down and people out of work, many District residents are turning to the legal aid network for information, legal assistance, and help to access benefits.
- Essential workers who are deemed vulnerable by the World Health Organization due to pregnancy, age, and pre-existing conditions have turned to the legal aid network for assistance with getting work accommodations or help with access to benefits so they are able to keep their income while staying safe.
- Shelter-in-place orders meant to keep District residents safe from COVID-19, have had the unintended consequence of increasing the amount of time domestic violence victims spend

with their abusers. There has been a spike in the overall number of reported cases as spouses who are desperate to leave their situations have turned to the legal aid network for assistance.

- COVID-19 has added an extra layer of difficulty in the areas of visitation and custody, as common areas where parents exchange children such as schools and day care centers remain closed. Some parents are not complying with visitation and custody orders due to fears of their children catching COVID-19 at their former spouse's home. The legal aid network is assisting families with these types of cases.

Access to civil justice is essential to the District community. Civil legal aid continues to help District residents maintain affordable housing, protect wages and jobs, stabilize credit, help children and families get healthy, guard against domestic abuse, and protect District elders.

Investment in the civil legal aid network is critical to the District's recovery. The aftermath of COVID-19 will increase the need for civil legal aid. Any cuts in funding to the Access to Justice Initiative will have a devastating impact on District residents who will need help.

- If the number of unemployment claims filed thus far is any guide, District workers will face unprecedented challenges and will need help navigating the unemployment compensation system and securing available benefits and protections – many for the first time in their lives.
- District residents that were once able to hire private attorneys to handle their cases will now turn to legal aid for services. We must provide adequate funding to meet the demand.
- District residents who had difficulty paying rent during COVID-19 due to lost wages will seek legal aid services to help with impending evictions, debt collection, and other civil legal challenges.
- Domestic violence victims who were unable to safely leave their abusers during the shelter-in-place orders will start to seek help from legal aid lawyers.
- Shelter-in-place orders are difficult on already strained relationships, legal aid lawyers predict there will be an increased demand for divorce, visitation and custody assistance.
- Legal aid lawyers ease the burden on the courts by either directly representing low-income residents or assisting and preparing pro-se litigants for court.
- The impact of COVID-19 on the economy will affect the amount of private donations made to legal aid as financial resources are strained.
- Legal aid organizations who charge on a sliding scale to provide access to lawyers at highly reduced rates will have more clients that cannot pay because they are unemployed due to COVID-19.

There is no higher function of government than to ensure that all of its residents, no matter their economic status, have equal access to justice. The D.C. Access to Justice Commission's FY21 budget request for the Access to Justice Initiative is now more important than ever.

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