

President's Message

Civil Legal Aid is a Good Investment

By President Valerie Briggs Bargas

Civil legal aid is free legal advice, representation or other legal assistance provided to low-income and vulnerable people who cannot otherwise afford legal help. Civil legal aid helps people solve critical, life-changing problems. Without legal help, even relatively minor problems can escalate. Often, the failure to resolve these issues can tear families apart or drive them further into poverty.

Nearly 20 percent of Louisiana citizens live in poverty. We rank among the highest in the nation. Louisiana is one of only a few states in the country in which civil legal services receive no state appropriation of funds. Over the last six years, civil legal aid organizations in Louisiana sustained a significant drop in state and federal funding while the poverty rate has increased. These

funding declines, combined with high poverty, place our already challenged civil legal aid system in crisis.

At the request of the Louisiana Legislature, the Access to Justice Commission conducted an Economic Impact and Social Return on Investment Analysis, or SROI, funded by the Louisiana Bar Foundation (LBF). Nearly 40 civil legal aid organizations providing services in Louisiana participated in the analysis for fiscal year 2016. For the full report, go to: www.raisingthebar.org.

The Analysis shows that dollars spent on Louisiana's civil legal aid providers are well spent and deliver unmistakable economic returns to the state. Key findings include:

► In fiscal year 2016, Louisiana's civil legal aid organizations provided assistance in 26,437 legal matters consisting of more than 100 types of civil legal problems including family law, housing, healthcare, public benefits, consumer protection, community support issues, government and legal system issues.

► The net economic impact value resulting from Louisiana civil legal activities during the year totaled \$93,977,000.

► The total net social return on investment for Louisiana's civil legal aid programs during the 2016 fiscal year was 873 percent.

► In other words, for every \$1 invested in Louisiana's civil legal aid services, these programs deliver \$8.73 in immediate and long-term consequential financial benefits.

Civil legal aid saves taxpayer dollars by keeping families together, reducing domestic violence, helping children leave foster care more quickly, reducing evic-



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tions, increasing access to benefits and offering citizens a way out of poverty. Civil legal aid opens doors to the justice system and provides reinvestment in the community. Funding for civil legal aid has a ripple effect, impacting not only the families served but the community at large. Schools, businesses, government agencies and the state as a whole benefit from resolving civil legal problems.

It is our hope that the Analysis will help us better educate the public on the value of civil legal aid and will lead to restored funding of civil legal services to Louisiana's most vulnerable citizens. Continued funding of the civil legal aid providers will provide a substantial impact to our state.

How can you help? Pro bono hours worked by Louisiana lawyers are an important component of the legal community's efforts to meet the civil legal needs of the poor. According to the Rules of Professional Conduct, Article 6.1, "Every lawyer should aspire to provide legal services to those unable to pay. A lawyer should aspire to render at least 50 hours of pro bono publico legal services per year."

In 2015, the Louisiana Supreme Court adopted a new rule that gives Louisiana attorneys the opportunity to earn CLE credit for pro bono legal representation. With this rule, the Court provided an additional incentive for Louisiana lawyers to undertake pro bono representation. Louisiana attorneys are encouraged to take advantage of the new rule and, in doing so, assist the state's substantial population of indigent and near-indigent people needing legal services.

Our society improves when people understand the law and have equal access to justice. It is our job to continue to provide civil legal assistance to Louisiana's most vulnerable citizens because access to affordable legal services is critical in a society that depends on the rule of law.

INDEX TO ADVERTISERS

D. Wesley Attaway.....	71
Bourgeois Bennett.....	43
Broussard & David.....	OBC
Christovich & Kearney, L.L.P.....	37
CMC Advisors.....	40
Expert Communications.....	70
Robert G. Foley.....	71
Gilsbar, Inc.....	71, IBC
Gordon, Arata, Montgomery, Barnett, McCormack, Duplantier & Eagan, L.L.C.	48
LawPay.....	1
Legier & Company.....	IFC
LexisNexis.....	2
Louisiana Association for Justice.....	25
MAPS, Inc.....	50
McGlinchey Stafford, P.L.L.C.....	41
National Academy of Distinguished Neutrals.....	52
The Patterson Resolution Group.....	39
Perry Dampf Dispute Solutions.....	45
The Roosevelt Hotel.....	54
Schafer Group, Ltd.....	49
Schiff, Scheckman & White, L.L.P.....	38
Sessions, Fishman, Nathan & Israel, L.L.C.	42
Taggart Morton, L.L.C.....	70
Upstate Mediation.....	46
The Write Consultants.....	71