

President's Message

What is Civil Legal Aid and Why Does It Matter?

By Leo C. Hamilton

Civil legal aid is free legal advice and representation to low-income and vulnerable people who cannot otherwise afford legal help. Services can be as simple as educating clients about their rights and responsibilities and giving advice. Complex problems may require more extensive attorney representation. For clients, these services mean the difference between staying in a home and living on the street; between a safe family and a life of fear and violence; between getting paid earned wages and having nothing to eat. 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.

Under our criminal justice system, low-income persons are constitutionally guaranteed legal representation before the courts. No such guarantee is provided in civil matters. Yet, I believe that our legal system lacks validity when the least among us is not provided adequate representation in all matters, including civil disputes. From the abused woman seeking safety for herself and her children, to the elderly man unlawfully evicted from his home, legal aid is necessary to ensure that all Americans have access to our civil justice

system.

Legal aid helps people solve problems:

- ▶ Women who are victims of domestic violence.
- ▶ Children who need a stable home or special education.
- ▶ Homeowners facing foreclosure due to fraudulent schemes.
- ▶ Elderly people whose economic security or health care is in jeopardy.
- ▶ Disabled people denied opportunities.
- ▶ Immigrants who work the lowest-wage jobs without benefits or contracts.
- ▶ Tenants facing wrongful evictions.
- ▶ Consumers bankrupted by predatory lenders.
- ▶ Workers cheated out of wages or denied lawful benefits.
- ▶ Communities devastated by natural disasters.

As lawyers, we swore an oath to “never reject, from any consideration personal to [ourselves], the cause of the defenseless or oppressed or delay any person’s cause for [monetary gain] or malice.” I believe that oath places upon all lawyers, as a



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profession, the obligation not only to care about civil legal aid, but also to actively do something about it. The Louisiana Bar Foundation (LBF) works every day to do just that.

Since 1989, the LBF has granted \$54.4 million to support a network of nonprofit organizations providing critical, free civil legal aid services to women, children, the elderly, the working poor, people with disabilities, the newly unemployed and those facing loss of their homes. If you are unable to personally aid in the delivery of civil aid to the defenseless or oppressed, a tax-deductible contribution to the LBF will help ensure that justice is a reality — not just for those who can afford it, but for everyone in Louisiana. To find out how you can help, contact LBF Development Director Laura Sewell at (504)561-1046.

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