



The Lonnie Powers Innovation Fund

Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation | 35th Anniversary

In honor of its 35th anniversary and its founding executive director, the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC) is establishing the Lonnie Powers Innovation Fund to support continued innovation and change within the civil legal aid community in Massachusetts. The Fund will allow MLAC to support projects that increase access to legal information and help and that utilize new technologies and creative models of service delivery to meet the evolving needs of low-income people across the Commonwealth. Potential projects include:

- creating a smartphone app that centralizes and provides easy access to the wealth of existing online legal information and resources in Massachusetts;
- developing software low-income tenants can use to document housing concerns and easily bring these issues to court;
- creating a website that walks clients through the various steps of updating or filing government or legal forms;
- collaborating with case management software companies to facilitate discovery and use of external data by civil legal aid programs for client benefit.

Initiatives like these can help thousands of low-income residents with serious legal issues, decreasing the need for direct representation and allowing civil legal aid programs to stretch their limited resources further. Through these efforts, Massachusetts can make real progress towards ensuring access to justice for all its residents—not just those who can afford it.

Change and innovation have been constant in MLAC's work since its creation 35 years ago. When the statute creating MLAC was adopted by the General Court in 1982, there were 10 local, independent civil legal aid programs in the Massachusetts. Few, if any, had computers and the federal Legal Services Corporation provided the majority of the state's legal aid funding.

Today MLAC funds a highly coordinated network of local programs covering all regions of the state, as well as seven statewide programs. MLAC has worked to centralize technology services, supporting statewide help-desk services for all MLAC-funded programs and offering a full array of technology services to enhance the daily work of the programs and increase opportunities for collaboration. Instead of isolated programs working independently, there is a high degree of cooperation and coordination among programs. In 2012, as the housing crisis caused by the Great Recession deepened, MLAC partnered with the Attorney General's office to create a statewide, virtual law firm to provide assistance in foreclosure cases and their aftermath. With funding from the Massachusetts Office for Victim Assistance, MLAC has recreated the virtual law firm concept with even more partners to provide a full range of civil legal assistance to victims of crime. The Legal Services Corporation now provides only 12 percent of the total funding for MLAC-supported programs and MLAC is the largest single funding source for civil legal aid in the Commonwealth.

Every legal aid program has a well-functioning website, and MLAC provides partial funding to four system-wide websites that supply information for legal aid staff, pro bono attorneys and the public. Mass Legal Answers Online allows low-income residents to post questions about their civil legal problems on a website and to receive answers and legal advice from pro bono attorneys. Programs continue to innovate by cooperating with the Access to Justice Commission and the court system to establish and maintain Court Service Centers and other methods of providing advice and representation to those who come to court on their own. Despite these inventive efforts, lack of funding forces legal aid programs to turn away 65 percent of eligible, low-income people who seek assistance.

As civil legal needs grow and change due to anti-immigrant federal policies, the ongoing crises of opioid addiction, chronic homelessness and lack of safe and affordable housing, and other issues, MLAC must be a leader in developing innovative ways to help low-income residents while continuing to support the vital, ongoing work of civil legal aid programs. The Lonnie Powers Innovation Fund offers just such an opportunity.