

Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation

Civil Legal Aid and the COVID-19 Crisis: Fall 2020 Line Item 0321-1600: FY21 Budget Request \$29 million

Civil legal aid is a vital tool in the Commonwealth's recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. Economically disadvantaged people are disproportionately affected by the faltering economy, skyrocketing unemployment, housing insecurity, and other threats to their health, safety, and stability.

Civil legal aid is an essential service, helping low-income people receive vital assistance in housing, unemployment, domestic violence, immigration, and public benefits for food, health care, and education. MLAC provides critical infrastructure that connects and supports the network of civil legal aid organizations serving the Commonwealth. Due to lack of resources, even before the pandemic hit legal aid organizations were forced to turn away over 57% of those financially eligible and seeking assistance.

In FY19, over 76,000 people were denied the benefit of legal services due to limited funding.

In Massachusetts, there continues to be a **surge in need**.

- Nearly **1,800 newly unemployed Massachusetts workers** who need assistance securing unemployment compensation in FY20 – a **290% increase** from the previous fiscal year
- Nearly **1,200 additional housing cases**, despite the eviction moratorium. Legal aid attorneys expect an overwhelming surge of eviction cases now that the moratorium has ended.
- **36% increase in consumer issues**, including bankruptcy filings, debt collection, price gouging, unfair and deceptive practices, and identity theft cases.
- **20% spike in immigration cases**
- **400% jump in minor guardianship** and a **30% increase in custody and visitation cases**
- A critical need for information on restraining orders and other family law issues among survivors of domestic violence as households experience tremendous stress.

To qualify for civil legal aid, Massachusetts residents must have incomes at or below 125% of the federal poverty level. That is \$32,750 per year for a family of four.

In addition to representing individual clients facing extraordinary need, legal aid lawyers are engaging in **Systemic Emergency Work** to help craft legislation regarding housing security, access to TAFDC and SNAP benefits, and emergency provisions for the unemployed.

A network of MLAC, legal aid organizations, bar associations, and the Access to Justice Commission of the Supreme Judicial Court is working to **train and activate a large Pro Bono Network** of private lawyers who are providing valuable volunteer legal services.

Legal aid organizations have created and continue to update a huge library of **free Self-Help Materials**, including educational materials and forms in multiple languages. These resources are invaluable not just to low-income people who qualify for civil legal aid, but also to any resident seeking free and up-to-date legal information.

MassLegalHelp.org, a comprehensive website detailing legal rights in Massachusetts masslegalhelp.org
Massachusetts Legal Answers Online, a free service that lets people ask volunteer attorneys legal questions - mass.freelegalanswers.org/

Legal Resource Finder, contact information for Legal Aid Organizations by town or type of case - masslegalservices.org/findlegalaid

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