

Civil Legal Aid is an essential service, helping low-income people receive assistance in housing, unemployment, domestic violence, immigration, and public benefits for food, health care, and education. Civil Legal Aid is a vital tool in the Commonwealth's long-term recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, which has disproportionately affected economically disadvantaged people. The Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC) provides critical infrastructure that supports the network of civil legal aid organizations serving the Commonwealth.

In FY20, which includes the first four months of the pandemic, more than 95,000 people benefitted from civil legal aid. To qualify for civil legal aid, Massachusetts residents must have income at or below 125% of the federal poverty level—\$33,125 per year for a family of four.

In FY21, legal aid organizations expect to address an increase in need in many areas. Based on data from cases closed during the first six months of FY21, legal aid organizations anticipate:

- 54% increase in employment discrimination cases
- 42% increase in housing discrimination cases
- 37% increase in unemployment compensation cases
- 45% increase in mental health cases
- 58% increase in disability rights cases
- 98% increase in criminal record expungement cases
- 7% increase in domestic abuse cases

Systemic Advocacy work by legal aid lawyers has resulted in legislation and programs to advance housing security, access to TAFDC and SNAP benefits, emergency provisions for the unemployed, and education equity. Since last March, legal aid advocates have been engaged in developing legislation to: extend the eviction moratorium; create the COVID Eviction Legal Help Project (CELHP); create and pass the state Lost Wages Bill; craft the federal Continuation Assistance Act, which increased unemployment benefits for people qualifying for Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Benefits; and extend free school meal benefits to children with disabilities being raised by grandparents or other relatives (SSI kinship).

Legal Aid Lawyers are essential workers and community partners with social service agencies, providing training, materials, and information to groups that work with people in poverty to secure food, shelter, and medical assistance.

Legal Aid organizations anticipate a rise in need. The pandemic has delayed some legal issues, but legal aid organizations see a rise in need. Emergency rental assistance has helped keep people in their homes, but advocates expect evictions to continue to be a formidable challenge for low-income residents. Domestic violence has increased during the pandemic as many adult and child survivors are isolated from support networks and other means to receive protection. An increase in bankruptcies and foreclosures is forecast as financial losses mount.

A network of MLAC, legal aid organizations, bar associations, and the Access to Justice Commission **trained and activated a large Pro Bono Network** of private lawyers who provide valuable volunteer legal services.

A library of free Self-Help Materials created by legal aid advocates, including educational materials and forms in multiple languages, is available online.

- **MassLegalHelp.org**, a comprehensive website detailing legal rights in Massachusetts masslegalhelp.org
 - **Massachusetts Legal Answers Online**, a free service that lets people question volunteer attorneys mass.freelegalanswers.org/
 - **Legal Resource Finder**, contacts for Legal Aid by town or type of case - masslegalservices.org/findlegalaid
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