

Civil Legal Aid

Providing Help to Those in Need



Jon Laramore

Hoosier business leaders know, for better or worse, that the legal system is intertwined with commerce. They may be less aware, however, of how civil legal aid benefits not just low-income Hoosiers, but also the bottom line for businesses.

To clarify, when a police officer tells someone that they're entitled to an appointed lawyer if they cannot afford one – that provision applies only to criminal cases. There is no right to legal counsel in civil cases. Hundreds of thousands of litigants in Indiana go unrepresented in these kinds of legal cases each year. Many of them don't know they can get help when they are faced with issues like divorce, paternity, eviction, debt collection, Medicaid enrollment and more.

Civil legal aid programs, like Indiana Legal Services, provide free access to legal help and justice to those on the low end of the income scale. Civil legal aid builds public confidence in our justice system, makes the court system function more smoothly and benefits Indiana businesses in other ways – I'll mention four below – as well.

1. Civil legal aid lawyers represent low-income employees, not just the indigent and unemployed.

The working poor often have incomes below the poverty level and qualify for our services.

2. Civil legal aid can build economic stability.

Legal representation can open doors to greater self-sufficiency. For example: Nancy (not her real name) came to our Fort Wayne Second Chance Project clinic to see if we could help her get a specialized driver's license so she wouldn't have to take the bus. Our lawyer discovered she qualified for a regular driver's license, but owed \$3,000 in reinstatement fees.

We helped Nancy get a court to waive the fees, allowing her to obtain a regular driver's license. Nancy not only saved a reinstatement fee equal to three months' rent and food for her family, but she also was able to drive to work and school functions. Civil legal aid increases the chance of economic success.

3. Civil legal aid can reduce stress and worry, which leads to better job performance.

Research shows that stress can result in higher absenteeism, lower employee performance and illness. As one business leader told me, civil legal aid reduces employees' worries, making them healthier and more productive.

4. Civil legal aid can remove limits to job

opportunities – and sometimes lead directly to employment, like it did for Jerry (not his real name). When Jerry's stolen car was recovered, the police had it towed to an impound lot. Lacking funds to get his car released from the lot, Jerry was told his car would be sold.

One of our lawyers got a court order temporarily halting the sale, and we negotiated release of the car for no cost (after all, as a crime victim, Jerry was not at fault for the impoundment). Jerry picked up the car in the morning, and the same afternoon drove it to a job interview that required a personal car to transport individuals with disabilities. Because of our aid, Jerry kept his car and got a new job.

Funding challenge

Last year our 60 attorneys served more than 11,000 clients across the state, but we often couldn't handle all their needs. During the same period, we had to turn away more than 3,000 Hoosiers because we lacked the funds to hire additional lawyers and support staff.

Civil legal aid programs across the nation, including Indiana Legal Services, receive up to 80% of their funding from a federal grant through the Legal Services Corporation (LSC). At the time of this writing, Congress had yet to finish the appropriations process that will determine LSC funding for the bulk of 2018.

Fortunately, we also receive funding from local sources including the state of Indiana, United Way agencies, foundations, law firms and individuals. It is not enough, however, to offset a potential federal cut, which means we may have to turn away more low-income Hoosiers who need legal assistance to maintain their jobs, homes and standard of living.

Especially in light of uncertain federal funding levels, we know we have to build more local support for our efforts, financially and as advocates. We will continue to educate the public (including the business community) about the importance and impact of our efforts, not only for those we serve, but for the communities where they live and the places they work.

AUTHOR: Jon Laramore is executive director of Indiana Legal Services, the only statewide civil legal aid program in the state. He was previously a partner at Faegre Baker Daniels and legal counsel to governors Frank O'Bannon and Joe Kernan