

The Importance of Civil Legal Aid to Human Rights Funders

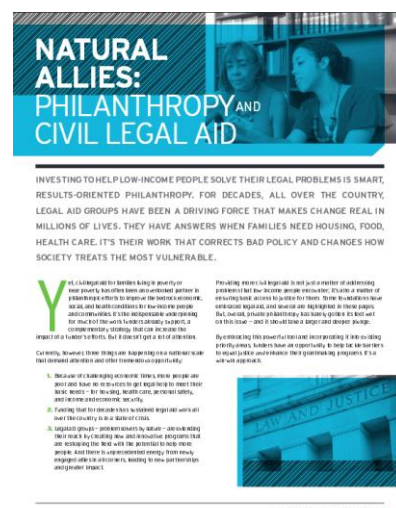
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“Most Americans don’t realize that you can have your home taken away, your children taken away and you can be a victim of domestic violence but you have no constitutional right to a lawyer to protect you.”

That keen observation by Jim Sandman, president of the Legal Services Corporation (LSC), the largest single donor in the U.S. for civil legal aid, shows why legal assistance – even in non-criminal cases – is so essential.

Whether the issue is immigrants seeking protection on the job, the disabled trying to claim rightful health benefits, senior citizens seeking custody of grandchildren to keep families intact, or a victim of domestic abuse obtaining a restraining order to stay safe from harm, cases such as these can have a severe impact on the fundamental security and dignity of individuals and families, compromising basic human rights.

There is no question that the potential or certain loss of one’s home, or the loss of health and government benefits that are necessary for survival, can be devastating and life-altering, particularly for low-income people. Without legal help, even relatively minor disputes can escalate into dire situations, sending individuals and families further into poverty.



[Natural Allies: Philanthropy and Civil Legal Aid](#), a recent publication from the Public Welfare Foundation and the Kresge Foundation, shows why supporting civil legal aid can be a powerful tool in a funder’s toolbox.

For human rights funders in the U.S., especially those who truly want to “bring human rights home,” investing in civil legal aid makes perfect sense. Civil legal aid supports and adds value to programs and strategies to which many funders are already committed, including help for children and families, education reform, and income security. Just as importantly, it makes human rights enforceable and real. Whether through direct service or broader policy change, civil legal aid provides the means to ensure equal access to justice, a human right in and of itself in the view of many experts.

Today, the gap between demand for civil legal aid and the supply of providers is enormous. Funding for legal services at the federal, state, and local level in the U.S. has dropped precipitously in the past two decades. State and national studies estimate that an astounding 80



percent of serious legal needs of low-income people go unmet due to grossly insufficient funding and support.

In the face of this crisis, leaders in the civil legal aid sector are responding creatively to expand their ability to serve more people. They are designing and implementing thoughtful and innovative solutions in service delivery, such as self-help centers in courts and libraries or on-line forms that make it easier for people to represent themselves. And powerful new allies, including top state court judges, are advocating for increased legal aid resources and fewer barriers to civil justice for the poor.

Grantmakers can offer support in multiple ways:

- Identify grantmaking programs that could achieve improved outcomes and reach their goals more efficiently by adding civil legal aid partners
- Invite current grantees to look for opportunities to collaborate with legal advocates for those they serve
- Provide general support for the legal aid groups that serve their own communities

The potential of legal aid – and its current state of crisis – has led to an incredible moment of opportunity for all funders, including those committed to human rights. Adding this strategy as a tool in our grantmaking toolbox can add value and complement whatever else we are doing to make a difference in advancing human rights. It's an important way to help protect the security, integrity, and dignity of all people, not just those who can afford it.

To learn more about legal aid and areas of need, visit these authoritative websites:

- American Bar Association, www.ambar.org/sclaidinitiatives
- Legal Services Corporation, www.lsc.gov
- National Legal Aid and Defender Association, www.nlada.org/civil
- National Center for State Courts, www.ncsc.org/atj

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