

Dan Glazier: Providing legal help to the poor during the pandemic justice crisis



The COVID-19 pandemic has swept through the nation like a tsunami. The damage will swell over the next many months as families face the loss of jobs and savings disappear. Those never in poverty before will find their lives disrupted facing crises in food, housing, healthcare and safety. Those who were living on the economic margins before the pandemic are now facing even more dire circumstances.

The pandemic is not just a medical emergency and an economic crisis. It is also a justice crisis. Without legal assistance, many will not receive the critical help they need to navigate the significant challenges they are facing during these

unprecedented times.

For 64 years, Legal Services of Eastern Missouri has been providing civil legal assistance to low-income persons in 21 counties throughout eastern Missouri. The need for our services has always been great and requests far exceeds resources in normal times. As this pandemic unfolds, the need for help potentially will exceed anything we have ever experienced before.

We are preparing for these challenges. We, along with other public interest civil legal advocates, are front line responders of this justice crisis. Working remotely, we are finding ways to reach our clients through online education, through Facebook Live webinars, through virtual Court hearings, and through Zoom and Teams meetings.

We are gearing up to assist some of the more than 400,000 Missourians applying for unemployment benefits. There are new laws and benefits available to those seeking unemployment insurance related to COVID-19. Navigating these new laws and helping those unfamiliar with the process is an essential service at this time, both with applications and appeals for denied claims. We are marshalling our forces to both educate and represent persons needing help.

With so many people out of work and facing financial crisis, delinquent rent payments may lead to eviction issues. The St. Louis area courts are not currently hearing eviction matters. However, when the courts reopen tenants being sued for rent will need legal representation to protect their rights and to keep families from becoming homeless.

Without income, putting food on the table is exceedingly difficult. Food stamp applications in Missouri are the highest they have been in at least 10 years. The laws and requirements for food stamps have also changed due to COVID-19. It is necessary that people have legal help to ensure they get the food assistance they

are entitled to.

Similarly, during this health crisis people need help getting the healthcare they need through programs such as Medicaid, Medicare and Missouri Healthnet. We are working every day to remove the legal barriers so people can get critical healthcare.

There is no worse predicament than sheltering in place with an abuser. At-risk partners and their children's lives are in danger when they are cut off from support networks and isolated in abusive homes. Abuse survivors desperately need legal protections such as court orders of protection that are so necessary for survival. The domestic violence survivor population is always our largest client base during normal times. Sadly, the number of victims of abuse is expected to dramatically increase during the COVID-19 crisis.

Additional resources are critically important to meet the needs of thousands of families impacted by COVID-19. The civil legal aid community often speaks about the Justice Gap - the difference between the civil legal needs of low-income families the over in our communities and the lack of resources to meet those needs. As the number of low-income persons in our 21-county service area swells because of COVID-19, their need for legal help grows exponentially. Without more resources, the Justice Gap widens.

Both public and private sector resources must be marshaled to ensure legal assistance is available to those most impacted by COVID-19. During this unprecedented crisis, it is critical to work towards ensuring that all citizens survive the pandemic with their needs and rights intact. Civil legal aid is both an emergency and long-term response to help ensure that all Missourians travel the path towards recovery from this difficult time.

Reprinted from the May 25, 2020, St. Louis Post-Dispatch Article. Dan Glazier is the Executive Director of Legal Services of Eastern Missouri.

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