



Poetic Justice

Volume 16 Issue 2 Summer 2019

Stories of Philanthropy and Hope from The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland

Historic “Lead Safe” Legislation Passes In Cleveland

Legal Aid helps catalyze community change

On June 24, the City of Cleveland passed monumental lead safety legislation that mandates action to address the lead crisis in our city’s older homes. The new legislation requires landlords to secure lead-safe certificates for all of their occupied rental units starting March 1, 2021. This is a significant change from current practice, which requires action only after a child’s blood test shows elevated lead levels. The new requirement will be enforced on a roll-out schedule, and will extend city-wide by the end of 2023.

Legal Aid was invited by Cleveland City Council to provide counsel for the legislation process. In early 2019, we joined the newly formed Lead Safe Cleveland Coalition, a group that includes city officials; members of local philanthropic, healthcare, environmental, and educational organizations; community leaders; and community members who have been impacted by lead. Legal Aid attorneys are leaders in the group, serving on several committees while guiding the coalition’s policy goals.



Abigail Staudt, Esq.
Managing Attorney, Housing
Read Abby’s 2017 op-ed on children and lead
poison at <https://tinyurl.com/StaudtOpEd>

Lead poisoning has detrimental effects on cognition in children, and lead is pervasive in homes built before 1978. According to an Ohio Department of Health report from 2018, about 12 percent of city children under 6 who were screened for lead in 2016 and 2017 had dangerously high levels of the toxin in their blood.

Though the new legislation is an important step and a significant achievement for Cleveland, there is still work to be done. Legal Aid remains committed to representing individuals who have suffered from



lead in their homes, and we will also assist tenants who face retaliation when they demand their landlords comply with the new law.

Earlier this year, a clinician at University Hospitals referred “Ashley” to Legal Aid after finding elevated lead levels in her one-year-old daughter’s blood. Despite a 90-day Control Order from the City of Cleveland and Ashley’s repeated efforts at communication, the property management company refused to act. Ashley’s Legal Aid attorney helped her put rent money into escrow with Cleveland Municipal Housing Court. This compelled the company to attend a court-scheduled mediation, where a representative finally agreed to repair Ashley’s apartment. Three weeks later, Ashley’s family returned to a newly safe home.

Cleveland’s new legislation is the result of years of Legal Aid’s advocacy for the health of Cleveland’s children – including a suit filed against the City of Cleveland in 2017. When the legislation was introduced in June 2019, Councilmember Griffin specifically acknowledged Legal Aid’s impact on this important issue.

Legal Aid is grateful to the Mt. Sinai Foundation for their support of Legal Aid’s healthy housing advocacy work.

“Though the new legislation is an important step ... there is still work to be done.”

Legal Aid in the Neighborhood: Where and When People Need Help



1. In-house attorneys from **Sherwin Williams** and **Squire Patton Boggs** (US) team-up to assist at a Legal Aid brief advice clinic.
2. **Sandra Walker, Esq.** (ACT 2 volunteer)
3. A team of attorneys from **KeyBank** visit Legal Aid for a "Neighbors Make a Difference Day" *pro bono* project.
4. **David Alden, Esq.** (Jones Day)
5. **Anthony Alto** (Cleveland Marshall College of Law student)
6. **Lenore Kleinman, Esq.** (ACT 2 volunteer)
7. **Mary Maloney, Esq.** (Jones Day)



It's Here!

All-New www.lasclev.org



One year ago, Legal Aid staff members began quietly and meticulously working to re-design our website. The brand-new www.lasclev.org has now officially launched, and the end result is a streamlined, robust, and accessible trove of information.

Thanks to the **Supreme Court of Ohio's Civil Justice Program Fund**, our online home has more easy-to-find resources for the community, the latest news and information, and a secure online intake form so prospective clients can apply for help anytime.

Our next steps with implementation are improved accessibility for those who speak a language other than English and access to a deep library of resources for *pro bono* attorneys.

www.lasclev.org 

Accolades for Our Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic



Our Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic (LITC) received the United Way of Greater Lorain County 2018-2019 Community Partnership Award for its impact on the community through the Lorain County Free Tax Prep Coalition.

Congratulations to all of the staff and dedicated volunteers who are part of our successful and impactful LITC!

Legal Aid's LITC is funded through an IRS matching federal grant program focused on providing representation to low income taxpayers in controversies with the IRS and provide education and outreach to taxpayers who speak English as a second language (ESL).

New Report Shows Ripple Effect of Legal Aid



We often say Legal Aid changes lives, families, and communities. But how do we know the lasting impacts

of our services? Earlier this year, The Center for Community Solutions (CCS) surveyed more than 1,200 former clients from the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland and Community Legal Aid about their experiences with civil legal aid. The results showed a lasting, positive impact on stability. Many respondents credited legal aid with improving their lives in areas separate from, but related to, their original legal problem. For example: Avoiding eviction helped children stay in school with no interruptions to their academic development.

The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland (serving Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake and Lorain counties) and Community Legal Aid (serving Medina, Summit, Portage, Trumbull, Mahoning, Columbiana, Stark and Wayne counties) jointly commissioned this report.

Our client's own words are the true testaments to our impact:

"It gave me the strength to keep fighting to survive the cancer without the burden of financial stress." (Client from Cuyahoga County, Income and Benefits, 2 to 5 years ago)

"My children and I left an abusive father and husband. Now w/ an amazing man that treats the children and I very well. Currently back in school for medical billing and coding. The kids are doing great." (Client from Wayne County, Family Problems, 6 to 10 years ago)

"Sons [sic] behavior resolved, he graduated HS with a year of AP credit, went to University (in final year) via honors program with substantial aid resulting in zero loans and already admitted to grad school. Convinced all this would have been much harder and less likely with an expulsion on his record." (Client from Cuyahoga County, School Related Problems, 6 to 10 years ago)



Visit
www.legalaidimpact.org
to learn more.



Volunteer Profile: Attorney

Daniel Tirfagnehu, Esq., a 2014 graduate of Case Western Reserve School of Law, has a funny story about how he became one of more than 3,000 volunteer attorneys for Legal Aid. "Legal Aid was holding a clinic for attorneys on how to handle expulsion hearings," he says. "I went for the free lunch." Joking aside, Tirfagnehu says he saw a connection between expulsions and his own law practice. "I'm a criminal defense lawyer," Tirfagnehu says. "Expulsions are kind of a natural expansion of that because it's people facing discipline."

One such student facing discipline was "Evelyn," a 7th grader with intellectual disabilities who was attending a local school. On a day when class got rowdy, Evelyn joined in the fray and threw a book at another student. Her teacher overstepped and physically restrained her. When Evelyn defended herself, the school moved to expel her.

Evelyn's parents got in touch with Legal Aid, and the case was referred to Attorney Tirfagnehu.

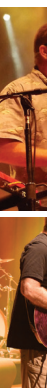
"The stakes are really high in these expulsion hearings," Tirfagnehu says. "Expulsions can hurt kids for the rest of their lives."

Research supports this assertion. In 2014, the Department of Education published a series of resources for schools that linked exclusionary policies (suspensions and expulsions) with increased likelihood of dropouts, substance abuse, and involvement with the criminal justice system.

Jam for Justice Returns to House of Blues

On June 19th, 2019, Legal Aid held its 11th annual Jam for Justice at the iconic House of Blues in downtown Cleveland. Seven bands and a DJ performed for a lively crowd of nearly 900 supporters. In total, more than \$80,000 was raised for Legal Aid's important work.

We sincerely thank all who attended or donated, with a special thanks to our photographer, Brynna Fish, the staff at House of Blues, and of course, our musical talents: DJ Wolfe Entertainment, Faith & Whiskey, First Offenders, Luke Lindberg and the Hung Jury, The No Name Band, Out of Order, Rule 11 & the Sanctions, and SIX sometimes SEVEN. Check out more photos from this year's Jam on our Facebook page.



by Daniel Tirfagnehu

"It's good to have lawyers in these cases where students are getting into really serious trouble and are looking at getting expelled," added Tirfagnehu.

After taking on Evelyn's case, Tirfagnehu spoke to Evelyn's mother to gather more details about the incident. He then went to work advocating for the girl's rights, arguing in her defense at school administrative hearings and in meetings with the superintendent. The school district eventually agreed to dismiss the expulsion proceedings. The district also agreed to set Evelyn up for success by providing her with the supports she'd need because of her disability. Thanks to Tirfagnehu, Evelyn was able to stay in school and continue on her path to high school graduation.

When asked why he continues to represent students, Tirfagnehu says it's because people need assistance and he has the skillset to help them. "If I was a baker," he says, "I would hope that every once in a while I would give out a cake for free to someone who couldn't afford it... If you have a couple of hours to help people that need help, why not?"



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*Jam for Justice Photos
courtesy of Brynna Fish*

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In the News: Legal Aid Staff and Board Members



Celebrating Barbara Simmons's 50 years of service

This year marks a major work anniversary for Barbara Simmons: 50 years! Barbara is a tireless champion for our clients. As a member of our intake group, she is often the first to speak to those in our community who are at a difficult, if not impossible, crisis point in their lives. Barbara's calm, confident, and constantly positive demeanor is a salve to our clients and often our staff as well. We are grateful for her years with Legal Aid and for her continued service. But, most of all, we are thankful for Barbara herself.



Patrick Haggerty Honored with Legal Eagle Award

Former Legal Aid Board Member Patrick F. Haggerty is the 2019 recipient of the St. Edward High School Legal Eagles Man of the Year Award, given to a graduate who has made a significant contribution to the Cleveland legal community. Pat is Chair of Frantz Ward's Litigation Practice Group. Pat also served as a member of the Board and Chair of the Pro Bono Committee of The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland. He regularly provides *pro bono* representation to those unable to pay for legal services. Congratulations, Pat!



Marley Eiger retired in June after 41 years with Legal Aid. Marley joined Legal Aid in 1978 and has handled just about every kind of case that's passed through our doors. She assisted thousands of clients and mentored scores of attorneys both within and outside of Legal Aid.



Bettina Kaplan retired in July after 32 years with Legal Aid. She's served as Director of Finance and Administrative Operations for 11 years. A critical leader in every major move at Legal Aid, Bettina has kept us on track with our strong financial position.



Legal Aid's Data Leadership

In June, Legal Aid's Data & Evaluation Manager David Johnson participated in a "Computing, Data Science, and Access to Justice Workshop" sponsored by Georgetown Law and the National Science Foundation in Washington DC. This invitation-only event was attended mostly by academics. David presented on two topics: legal aid services (who receives service and how we make those decisions) and how we use data (e.g. our work on vulnerable populations and outcomes). This event is another step on Legal Aid's journey to learn from our data about ways to increase efficiency and effectiveness.



Matt Nakon, Esq. -
2019 Legal Aid President



Executive Director Colleen Cotter (left)
and Matt Nakon (right) in Washington
DC to update Legal Aid's congressional
delegation about Legal Aid's great work.

Legal Aid's 2019 Board President is Matthew Nakon, Esq., of Wickens Herzer Panza.

Matt has been a tireless champion of Legal Aid for his entire career – taking *pro bono* cases and promoting Legal Aid in Lorain County. He joined Legal Aid's Board of Directors in 2013 and leads as President this year.

Matt serves on Wickens Herzer Panza's Executive Committee and Board of Directors, is Chairperson of the firm's Health Care Practice Area, and is the Assistant Chairperson of the Litigation Department.

**SAVE THE DATE:
LEGAL AID'S ANNUAL LUNCHEON**

November 25th, 2019

Limited tickets still available: www.lasclev.org/2019Event





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of Cleveland

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EXTENDING THE REACH OF JUSTICE



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**WE'RE WORKING TOGETHER
TO EXTEND JUSTICE**

By creating the Housing Justice Alliance, an innovative program for the Cleveland Housing Court, we're ensuring fairness when evictions and housing conditions threaten a family's safety or well-being.

JOIN US, AND LET'S EXTEND THE REACH OF JUSTICE EVEN FURTHER.

ExtendJustice.org #ExtendJustice