



# Poetic Justice

Volume 18 Issue 1 Spring 2021

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

## New Program Benefits All in Community

The COVID-19 pandemic has been incredibly hard on renters who have lost income and jobs. The threat of eviction and homelessness looms large for thousands of families across Northeast Ohio. Meanwhile, landlords are struggling, too. Landlords rely on their tenants' rent for their own bills and financial stability.

Recently, Legal Aid attorney Lauren Hamilton secured a positive outcome for her client, Mr. Burns, that also benefited his landlord, Ms. Harris (*names changed to protect privacy*).

Once the case closed, the landlord Ms. Harris wrote a note to Legal Aid. She described feeling frustrated when she first learned the eviction hearing would be postponed because her tenant was entitled to an attorney through Cleveland's new Right to Counsel law.

Ms. Harris was representing herself *pro se*. Mr. Burns had missed several months of rent payments at this point, and further delays in the case created an added burden for Ms. Harris. However, after the second hearing date, Ms. Harris spoke with Attorney Hamilton on the phone and found out that, "all this time [Mr. Burns] thought I had received rental assistance, because he was working with a nonprofit organization that he thought had helped him." Ms. Harris explained that she had not received any rental assistance funding, and Lauren reassured her she would figure out what had happened.

Mr. Burns is a father who had just welcomed back his five children after they spent some time in foster care. Injuries he sustained from a gunshot wound to the head had made steady work difficult, but he was doing his best to provide for his family. He had applied for rental assistance funds through CHN Housing Partners, but missed an email, and his application was declined. Attorney Hamilton connected with CHN and arranged for the application to be reconsidered. Soon after, Ms. Harris says she received notice from CHN that the rental assistance funds were approved.



Lauren Hamilton, Esq

"This was all due to Attorney Hamilton," Ms. Harris writes "She represented my tenant and was also able to help me to get the funding I needed to keep this property. I can honestly say that Attorney Hamilton is an excellent attorney; she has the passion to take care of all people and she is trying to make a difference in people's lives."

Ms. Harris shared further that she is happy Mr. Burns, who now has stable employment, was able to stay in his home. "[Attorney Hamilton] created a new foundation for us to better communicate... there are not enough words to say about how much she is appreciated."



United Way of  
Greater Cleveland  
and Legal Aid are  
working together to implement  
Cleveland's new Right to Counsel  
in Housing.  
Learn more about the program at  
[www.FreeEvictionHelp.org](http://www.FreeEvictionHelp.org)

## Pro Bono Profile

### Access to Education & Say Yes to Education volunteer



In addition to her service as a Say Yes volunteer, attorney Kathleen Valdez is a proud graduate of CMSD, serves on the CMSD Board and is a parent of a CMSD student.

Attorney Kathleen Valdez always knew she wanted to dedicate her career to serving people. While working in a school district on the outskirts of Atlanta, Georgia, Kathleen learned about the intersection of education and law, and how legal professionals could make an impact on the opportunities afforded to children in lower-resourced schools.

After law school, Kathleen worked at Ulmer & Berne before starting her own education law practice. Kathleen began volunteering at Legal Aid's brief advice clinics because, in her own words, "I wanted to take every

opportunity to connect with the community I was going to serve." She was specifically interested in taking cases that came through Legal Aid's Access to Education program and its partnership with Cleveland's chapter of Say Yes to Education. Legal Aid is the official legal services provider for Say Yes to Education Cleveland, which now includes 46 schools. Each school has a designated Family Support Specialist, who connects families with local assistance to help them access basic needs such as food, shelter, and safety.

Kathleen knows that every time a family comes to Legal Aid with a problem, that problem affects the children in the household and their education. "Even though a lot of the cases are about housing issues - an area of law I don't normally practice - I was eager to learn, and Legal Aid made it easy," she says. "And the clients have been so collaborative." To follow Kathleen's lead and take on a pro bono Say Yes case, visit [www.lasclev.org/volunteer/sayyes](http://www.lasclev.org/volunteer/sayyes).

## Insight from a Family Support Specialist



Alexandra Mora is a Family Support Specialist who says the Legal Aid/Say Yes partnership has been "really powerful for the community." Alexandra explains that families in her assigned school reach out to her via phone, email, or a Say Yes Google form. She says Legal Aid's referral portal for Family Support Specialists is simple and easy to use, because it is straightforward and she can enter information on behalf of parents if they consent. This removes a barrier for families who do not have the time or ability to fill out the online form themselves.

A licensed social worker, Alexandra was used to making referrals to a variety of local service providers, but during the pandemic she's also been connecting people with computers, hot spots, and other technology needs that have become critical.

"I'm learning new subject areas to adapt to people's needs - I will do whatever it takes to help these families," says Alexandra. "And I shine in my role because I have all these strong programs behind me, including Legal Aid."

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The Cleveland International Film Festival (CIFF) is virtual for 2021! Legal Aid is proud to be a community sponsor of the film "Down a Dark Stairwell," which explores the complex intersections of racial tensions and police violence by unpacking an incident in 2014 that shook a New York City community.

Legal Aid applauds CIFF for elevating films that highlight issues of justice and equity.

Learn more about CIFF and Legal Aid's sponsored film at: [www.lasclev.org/ciff45](http://www.lasclev.org/ciff45)

## *New Leadership for Legal Aid's Volunteer Lawyers Program and Intake Group*



Lauren Gilbride, Esq.

When Lauren Gilbride applied for a summer associate position at Legal Aid in 2006, Legal Aid's Volunteer Lawyers Program (VLP) was only two years old. Lauren was assigned to work in the VLP group and earned a front-row seat to the development of what has become a national model for volunteer engagement in civil legal aid.

"We were very careful to make online intake user-friendly and personal; we had to strike a balance of simplifying questions and collecting enough data to make the process efficient and valuable."

Very early into the COVID-19 crisis, Lauren and her colleagues recognized that Legal Aid's client community would have a surge in needs for help with issues related to employment and unemployment compensation.

"We put out a call for volunteers and set up Virtual Advice Clinics to connect them with clients. Since mid-April, we've consistently had several volunteers each week advising clients on these cases related to economic justice issues."

Lauren says the volunteers have even started connecting with one another to provide mentorship and assistance. At a virtual Brown Bag lunch this winter, Legal Aid attorneys took turns with seasoned volunteers to present about common issues faced while working on pro bono cases. The most common types of cases handled by volunteers in 2020 were related to housing or employment, a reflection of the increased needs around those issues in our region.

Looking ahead, Lauren says she is exploring how to integrate some of the new virtual programs designed in response to COVID-19 into the regular activities of VLP and Intake at Legal Aid.

Building a better, brighter future for Northeast Ohio is what drives Lauren in her work every day. A lifelong Clevelander who lives in Shaker Heights with her husband and three children, Lauren says one of the things she loves most about this area is that, "people are really proud of their city and want it to do well. Supporting our clients is really about bettering the community – because everyone deserves to have their dreams and hopes fulfilled."

Lauren was promoted to Managing Attorney of Legal Aid's VLP and Intake Group on January 1, 2021, having spent the previous 12 years at Legal Aid, including eight years as Supervising Attorney for the Group. The Intake Group fields requests for Legal Aid assistance and facilitates an appropriate response. If the case is a fit for representation, it may be assigned to a staff attorney or a volunteer.

"The connection between VLP and Intake has always been important," says Lauren. "I've learned so much from the intake staff, including the needs of our clients and why they were reaching out to Legal Aid which informed what kinds of trainings we wanted to offer our volunteers."

Lauren is focused on growing impact through technology to better engage volunteers and serve Legal Aid clients. She is an administrator of the case management system Legal Aid uses to track all case and client data. She has worked on numerous projects to improve user experiences and track and analyze the data that comes from the system. Lauren also led the creation of Legal Aid's online intake system, which launched in 2019. The system became a critical way for clients to apply for help under COVID-19 restrictions, when in-person meetings and appointments were not possible.

## Legal Aid Extend Justice in Suburbs



Poverty touches urban, rural, and suburban communities in Northeast Ohio – including inner-ring suburbs of Cleveland. Recently, the Healthy Lakewood Foundation invested \$25,000 in Legal Aid. The funding will be used to help spread the word about Legal Aid’s services to Lakewood residents with low incomes and serve a growing population in need. In 2020, Legal Aid handled 80 cases for clients in Lakewood, impacting a total of 380 people. We helped many more through our online resources and educational outreach programs (which have been “virtual” since the spring of 2020).

Since the COVID-19 crisis began, we have also been publishing regular articles in the Lakewood Observer detailing how Legal Aid can help with a variety of issues and how to contact us. This year, thanks to the partnership of the Healthy Lakewood Foundation, we will be able to do even more representation, outreach, and education in the City of Lakewood.

## Community Partner Spotlight



**United Way  
of Greater Lorain County**

### **An interview with Christine Matusik-Plas, Community Impact Director at the United Way of Greater Lorain County.**

#### **How would you describe your job?**

My job focuses on assisting our Community Collaboratives to meet the goals they’ve set that will improve lives in Lorain County. Community Collaboratives consist of representatives of nonprofit

agencies, businesses, community groups, and individuals that are working together around a set of common goals.

My role is to help these collaboratives work together more effectively. This includes identifying gaps in services and developing projects to fill those gaps, measuring and reporting short-term and long-term results; and assuring funding needs are met. Legal Aid is a partner in the Community Collaborative called United Community Assistance Network (UCAN).

#### **Tell us more about the UCAN Community Collaborative and your work with Legal Aid.**

UCAN consists of about 10 nonprofits that provide emergency financial assistance to families in crisis in their neighborhoods.

The Legal Aid team provides frequent updates on legal issues occurring out in the community, so that the other UCAN partners are prepared when community members start to seek their services on that issue. At the same time, Legal Aid provides support and answers on legal questions.

#### **What are the benefits of partnering with local services like Legal Aid?**

The greatest benefit of this type of collaboration is that individuals receive better and faster services to resolve their crises. Also, the systems that have led to the problems in the first place can be systematically improved.

# OVER THE PAST YEAR, LEGAL AID GREW TO MEET COMMUNITY NEEDS CREATED BY COVID

## *In 2020, Legal Aid...*



**14,551**

Helped  
14,551 people via  
cases handled



**358**

Provided assistance  
on 358 calls to our  
Worker Info Line



**1,679**

Provided assistance  
on 1,679 calls to our  
Tenant Info Line



**57**

Held 57 Virtual Advice  
clinics to connect  
clients with  
volunteer attorneys



**\$6.96 M**

Increased assets and  
income and reduced  
debt for clients by  
over \$6.96 million



**Prevented 91%  
of evictions**



**55,000**

COVID-19 "Know Your  
Rights" info cards distributed



**500**

COVID-19 legal FAQs door  
hangers distributed



**500**

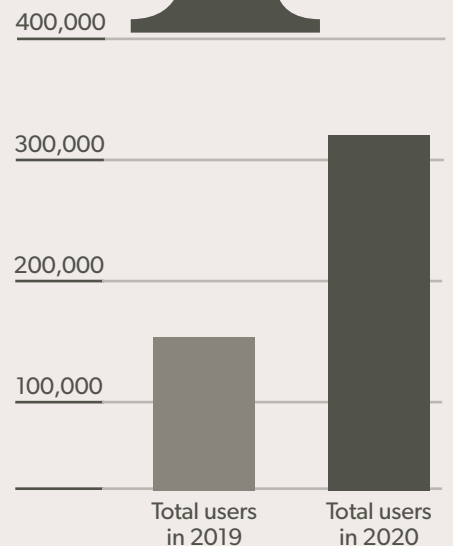
COVID-19 "Know Your Rights"  
postcards distributed



**190,000**

COVID-19 questions  
flyers distributed

**Website  
traffic more  
than doubled**



Secured  
safety in  
**88%** of  
relevant cases



Reduced debt  
in **90%** of  
relevant cases





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