



# Poetic Justice

Volume 20 Issue 1 Spring 2023

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

## *Legal Aid provides tax relief to family, with unique help from Dolly Parton's Imagination Library*



Legal Aid clients Rich and Crystal with their children at a local library



they packed up to move, their children brought some of their most beloved possessions with them: a vibrant library of books tailored to each of their interests and ages, provided by Dolly Parton's Imagination Library monthly by mail.

When Rich and Crystal, long-time Dolly fans, learned that the beloved celebrity had created a program to help kids discover a love for reading, they knew they had to take part. First launched in 1995, today 1 in 10 children under the age of five in the USA receives

Rich and Crystal are loving parents and passionate artists. They were pillars of their community in Indiana, where they lived their dream of operating a theater company. Unfortunately, like many other arts programs, theirs was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. Their situation was further complicated when Crystal lost her income after giving birth to their second child, as her employer did not offer paid parental leave.

During this uncertain time, Rich and Crystal decided to relocate to Ohio to be close to Crystal's family. As

Imagination Library books. Rich and Crystal never realized how important it would be that their children would be counted among that number.

When they moved to Ohio, Rich became the primary wage earner as Crystal shifted away from full-time work. Rich began claiming his children as dependents on his tax form. To his shock, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) rejected his tax filing and demanded proof of his custody. To make matters worse, rather than disbursing the refund to which Rich was entitled, the IRS claimed Rich owed taxes. After failed attempts to seek clarification or a way forward, Rich noticed something in the materials the IRS had sent him: a referral card for Legal Aid's Low Income Taxpayer Clinic. Through this clinic, Legal Aid assists low-income taxpayers in resolving their disputes with the IRS about federal income tax matters.

Together with Legal Aid's help, Rich and Crystal came up with an ingenious solution – Dolly Parton's Imagination Library had been sending their children books their entire lives, both while they lived in Indiana and after their move to Ohio. They gathered the books and mailers addressed to the family, and provided them as evidence to the IRS, helping to prove Rich's long-standing custody of the children.



Legal Aid Attorney Michelle Frazier

Rich spoke warmly about his experience with Legal Aid, and of his attorney, Michelle Frazier, "She just kind of befriended me and made me feel a little more at ease. How many other people go through this? How many people throw up their hands and say, 'I don't know what to do?'"

Thanks to Dolly's belief that "you can never get enough books into the hands of enough children," Rich and his Legal Aid attorney were able to employ an especially imaginative solution to a difficult tax problem.

**Join us - #ExtendJustice**  
use enclosed envelope or give at [laslev.org](http://laslev.org)

# Legal Aid's New Strategic Plan

Legal Aid's Board of Directors, in partnership with staff and informed by community input, spent much of 2022 developing a new Strategic Plan. This plan, approved by the Board on September 7, 2022, went into effect on January 1, 2023 and will carry the organization forward through 2026.

The plan builds on the work accomplished during the last decade, and challenges Legal Aid to be more responsive to individual and systemic issues and foster new and deeper partnerships. And, the planning process led us to an updated mission statement:

*Legal Aid's mission is to secure justice, equity,  
and access to opportunity for and with people who have low incomes  
through passionate legal representation  
and advocacy for systemic change.*

The plan outlines Legal Aid's vision – communities in which all people experience dignity and justice, free from poverty and oppression. It elevates core values that shape our culture, support our decision-making, and guide our behavior:



**We pursue racial justice and equity.**



**We treat everyone with respect, inclusion, and dignity.**



**We do high-quality work.**



**We prioritize our clients and communities.**



**We work in solidarity.**

Legal Aid will continue to understand the needs of our clients and client communities, and refine and focus our services to meet those needs within these four areas:

- **Improve safety and health:** Secure safety for survivors of domestic violence and other crimes, increase access to health care, improve health and safety of homes, and mitigate the social determinants of health.
- **Promote economic security and education:** Increase access to quality education, increase income and assets, reduce debt, and reduce disparities in income and wealth.
- **Secure stable and decent housing:** Increase availability and accessibility of affordable housing, improve housing stability, and improve housing conditions.
- **Improve accountability and accessibility of the justice system and government entities:** Increase meaningful access to courts and government agencies, decrease financial barriers to the courts, and increase access to justice for self-represented litigants.

The new strategic plan highlights how Legal Aid will (1) make systems better for our clients, (2) build our skills and capacity to better fulfill our mission, and (3) leverage the resources around us to amplify our impact through these six new organizational goals:

1. Establish the infrastructure for systems change work to achieve long-term equity and justice.
2. Become more human-centered, trauma-informed, and responsive to our clients and client communities.
3. Establish an anti-racist practice.
4. Align our culture and infrastructure with our core values, impact areas, and strategic goals.
5. Establish reciprocal relationships and partnerships with our clients and client communities to increase impact.
6. Deepen reciprocal relationships and partnerships with organizations to increase impact.

**To learn more about Legal Aid's Strategic Plan, visit [laslev.org/StrategicPlan](https://laslev.org/StrategicPlan)**

## *Legal Aid helps newcomers with civil legal issues*

Legal issues hold people, families, and entire communities back from opportunity. Immigrant families are especially vulnerable and are at more risk of being denied access to shelter, safety, and economic stability. Recent crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine brought more immigrants to our area, and many of these newcomers have civil legal needs that they cannot afford to resolve by paying a private attorney.

Legal Aid helps newcomers in two ways – both with legal work related to immigration, and through other civil legal cases to help ensure shelter, safety and economic security for newcomers.

Thanks to philanthropic support from the **Cuyahoga County Immigration Legal Services Fund**, and the **Ohio Access to Justice Foundation**, Legal Aid's immigration practice has grown in recent years. Legal Aid serves immigrants who are low income who are refugees, domestic violence survivors, victims of trafficking and other serious crimes, detainees, lawful permanent residents, and other immigrants with status. Immigration cases Legal Aid handles include: U Visas for victims of serious crimes; T Visas for victims of human trafficking; special Immigrant Juvenile Status and other relief for unaccompanied minors; Violence Against Women Act petitions for survivors of domestic violence; family petitions; deportation; naturalization and citizenship.

With other support from **Cuyahoga County**, as the community works to be a more welcoming place for newcomers, Legal Aid is growing its practice to help immigrants in other areas such as housing; domestic relations; consumer rights; public benefits; obtaining special education services; and other civil legal problems. Additionally, Legal Aid has a special focus on advocacy for those with limited English proficiency.

In these efforts, Legal Aid works closely with community partners, including our medical-legal partnership sites (MetroHealth, Cleveland Clinic, St. Vincent Charity Medical Center, and University Hospitals), the local church community, Catholic Charities, and other immigrant and refugee-serving organizations.

Legal Aid is dedicated to continuing our work to help immigrants gain more stable immigration status in the United States, reach more immigrants with important legal information, and represent more immigrants in civil legal cases about issues that impact their basic needs.

## *Staff Profile: Hilda Hernandez*



When Cleveland native Hilda Hernandez felt called to serve her community, she knew that joining Legal Aid would empower her to make a difference.

Hilda first joined Legal Aid in 2014 in the Intake and Volunteer Lawyers Program, helping to gather key information to determine if people had a legal case and were eligible

to receive help from Legal Aid. Being an intake specialist helped Hilda learn about the variety of cases Legal Aid handles, and gain experience communicating with potential clients. Since 2020, she has worked as a paralegal in Legal Aid's Health and Opportunity Practice Group.

Hilda shared, "I have been fortunate enough to meet clients from many different ethnic backgrounds, and to learn about their language, culture, and traditions. This has helped me to understand our clients' views, and to develop more empathy regarding the traumatic events that led to their desire to immigrate to the U.S." Hilda's recent work is focused on immigration cases and Legal Aid's Medical-Legal Partnership Program.

Katie Feldman, Managing Attorney of Legal Aid's Health and Opportunity group, notes "Hilda is an integral part of our immigration practice: not only is she passionate about Legal Aid's mission and leaving no stone unturned to assist clients, but she also finds ways to connect her extensive community involvement to her legal work."

As she celebrates her 9-year anniversary with Legal Aid, Hilda notes "Anyone considering supporting Legal Aid should do so because we have a truly special group of employees that are skilled, kind, and in constant search of new ways to work jointly to reach a common goal: to provide high quality legal assistance to low-income and vulnerable clients, and to make systemic changes for the greater good."

## Legal Aid Welcomes New Board Officers

Elected in December, Legal Aid is pleased to announce the following new executive committee leadership on its Board of Directors for 2023:



Jonathan Leiken, Esq.

President - **Jonathan Leiken, Esq.**, Diebold Nixdorf

Vice Presidents - **Quo Vadis I. Cobb, Esq.**, Jacobs Engineering; **Joe Rodgers, Esq.**, Eaton Corporation; and **Sonya Shakir**, Community Representative

Secretary/Treasurer - **Doug Wang**, Retired, Northern Trust Bank

Previous Board President, **Stephen M. Fazio, Esq.** is now *president emeritus*. Legal Aid extends heartfelt appreciation to **Rita Maimbourg, Esq.**, who concluded her term after 6 years of service.

### Attorney appointed to the board of The McGregor Foundation



Deborah Dallmann, Esq.

**Deborah Dallmann**, Senior Attorney with Legal Aid's Health and Opportunity Practice Group, has been appointed to the board of **The McGregor Foundation**. Dallmann joined Legal Aid in 2008 and specializes in public benefit cases. The McGregor Foundation, a private grantmaking foundation, supports seniors and those who serve them throughout Cuyahoga County.

### Right to Counsel Creates Significant Benefit for Community

In late January, Legal Aid and the United Way of Greater Cleveland delivered an independent evaluation to City of Cleveland leaders highlighting the success of Cleveland's Right to Counsel in eviction cases.

Since the implementation of Right to Counsel in 2020, Legal Aid has been successful in avoiding disruptive displacement for 90% of Right to Counsel clients facing eviction. Learn more about the impact of Right to Counsel at [FreeEvictionHelpResults.org](https://www.freeevictionhelpresults.org).

### Legal Aid Defends Student Debt Cancellation Before the U.S. Supreme Court



In early January, an historic coalition of cities, states, experts, and advocates filed more than a dozen amicus curiae briefs with the U.S. Supreme Court in support of the Biden Administration's student debt relief program. The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland filed the brief on behalf of more than 70 legal services and borrower advocacy organizations. Legal Aid was among more than twelve amicus briefs in support of the cancellation policy, arguing that student debt relief is lawful and urgently needed to address the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The City of Cleveland - City Hall also was one of the signatories on the city amicus filed. Read the brief: [iasclev.org/01112023](https://iasclev.org/01112023).

In late February, Legal Aid attorneys Eric Zell and Josh Rovenger and paralegal Kristen Nawrocki (pictured above) traveled to Washington, D.C. to listen to the oral arguments.

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## Legal Aid in the Community



1. Attorneys from **Jones Day** and **Diebold** at the first Legal Aid clinic of 2023. This January brief advice clinic was at the Carnegie West Branch, and marks the start of the 11th year of Legal Aid's formal partnership with **Cleveland Public Library**. 2. **Brittany Howard, Esq.** (Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service) 3. **Teresa Mathern**, Legal Aid Intake Specialist 4. **Anastasia Elder, Esq.** (Case Western Reserve University) and **Shashelia Degraffinried, Esq.** (Spitz Law Firm) 5. **Emily Murphy**, Legal Aid Paralegal; **Russell Hauser**, Legal Aid Attorney; **Honor Wolfe**, Legal Aid in-house volunteer 6. **Scott Heasley, Esq.** (Myers Roman Friedberg & Lewis) 7. **Judge Terri Stupica** (Chardon Municipal Court), **Barbara Moser, Esq.**, **Dennis Coyne, Esq.**, **Michael Hurst, Esq.** (Geauga County Court of Common Pleas), **Carol Szczepanik, Esq.** and **Judge Mary Jane Trapp** (Court of Appeals, Ohio 11th District) at a Legal Aid clinic in Geauga County. 8. **Dena Kobasic, Esq.**

## Volunteer Lawyers Program grows to promote safe and healthy housing



Thanks to a grant from the **Legal Services Corporation (LSC) Pro Bono Innovation Fund**, The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland is recruiting and training more volunteers to address the housing safety needs of tenants with low-incomes. In addition to eviction defense, this project will focus on building volunteer capacity to assist with issues that relate to unsafe living situations: poor housing conditions, rent deposits, lockouts and utility shutoffs. To learn more and get involved, visit [lasclv.org/SafeHousing](https://lasclv.org/SafeHousing) or contact Bobbi Saltzman, Staff Attorney, at [bsaltzman@lasclv.org](mailto:bsaltzman@lasclv.org).

Ben Dormus, Bobbi Saltzman, and Lauren Gilbride of VLP



*The*  
**Legal Aid Society**  
*of Cleveland*

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The Cleveland International Film Festival (CIFF) 47 will take place at Playhouse Square in downtown Cleveland March 22 - April 1, 2023 and online as CIFF47 Streams April 2-9, 2023.

Legal Aid is proud to be a community partner for the film "Rise and Rebuild: A Tale of Three Cities," which portrays individuals in three cities who confront the destruction of Black wealth in their communities and devise strategies for building a more prosperous future for all. Legal Aid applauds CIFF for elevating films that highlight issues of justice and equity.

**Learn more about CIFF47 and Legal Aid's sponsored film at: [laslev.org/ciff47](https://laslev.org/ciff47)**

**CLE**  
**INTL**  
**FILM**  
**FEST**  
**47**  
**LOOK CLOSER**  
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APRIL 2-APRIL 9, 2023

