

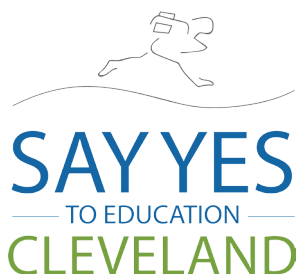


Poetic Justice

Volume 21 Issue 1 Spring 2024

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

Legal Aid improves Access to Education



Success in school is a crucial building block for future success.

Legal Aid's Access to Education program takes a multi-faceted approach. First, our education law practice removes barriers that keep children from excelling at school, protects the rights of students with disabilities, prevents expulsions for students, and helps families remain stable so kids can stay in school and thrive.

Additionally, Legal Aid is an important collaborator with Say Yes Cleveland, a partnership with the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD).

Say Yes Cleveland provides scholarships for CMSD graduates to continue their education after high school and comprehensive support services to help students and families navigate challenges.

Family Support Specialists (FSS) are the point of contact to connect families to these free services so that students can stay on track for success. Legal Aid is proud to partner with Say Yes Cleveland to provide free legal services.

Sarah Days, LSW, MSSA, is the Family Support Specialist at CMSD's Campus International School. When asked about her experience working with Legal Aid, Sarah said, "Without fail, Legal Aid is the first organization to which I make referrals. It feels good to know that when Legal Aid gets involved, I am fully confident that my students and their families will be taken care of."

Sarah went on to praise the partnership, saying "Every single person I have worked with at Legal Aid has been kind, helpful, and extremely knowledgeable. Without Legal Aid, I would often be at a loss when trying to help families navigate difficult situations. Legal Aid's commitment to working with families in Cleveland is invaluable, and I will always turn to them when families are in need."

Spread the word: share our Say Yes Legal Services info card:
lasclev.org/SayYesLegalServices

Legal Aid's Access to Education work is supported by Say Yes Cleveland, CareSource Foundation, the Frank Hadley Ginn and Cornelia Root Ginn Charitable Trust, the Callahan Foundation, The Eric and Jane Nord Family Fund, the Harry K. Fox and Emma R. Fox Charitable Foundation, and the Reakirt Foundation.



Family Support Specialist Sarah Days (left) with Legal Aid paralegal Elias Najm (right).

Sarah notes how Elias "Has always been available to answer any questions... whenever I make a referral, he lets a [Legal Aid] intake specialist know there is a family that needs support. The families I work with are always contacted within minutes of a referral being made."

Legal Aid welcomes new board leadership



Quo Vadis Cobb speaks at Legal Aid Founders' Day Celebration at Playhouse Square in 2022

Elected in December, Legal Aid is pleased to announce the following new executive committee leadership on its Board of Directors for 2024:

President - **Quo Vadis I. Cobb, Esq.**, Jacobs

Vice Presidents - **Harlin Adelman, Esq.**, University Hospitals; **Gwen Graffenreed**, Community Representative; and **Joe Rodgers, Esq.**, Eaton Corporation

Secretary/Treasurer - **Jason Bristol, Esq.**, Cohen Rosenthal & Kramer LLP

Previous Board President, **Jonathan Leiken, Esq.** is now *president emeritus*. Legal Aid extends heartfelt appreciation to **Hugh McKay, Esq.** (6 years of service) and **Michael N. Ungar, Esq.** (8 years of service) who concluded their terms on the Board of Directors at the end of 2023.

President **Quo Vadis Cobb** is a dynamic and accomplished attorney who currently serves as Vice President Internal Audit for Jacobs. She is active in the community. In addition to her service with Legal Aid, Quo Vadis is also involved with the Cleveland Play House, Cuyahoga County Library Foundation, and Lord of the Harvest Ministries. Learn more about her at lasclev.org/QuoVadisCobb.

Family Law Practice Group advocates for women and children



When families are threatened by domestic violence, child endangerment and other safety issues, they need someone who will advocate for them and help bring positive change in their lives. Legal Aid's Family

Law Practice Group aims to do just that.

The attorneys, paralegals, and volunteers that make up the Family Law group share one common goal – to ensure that survivors of domestic violence have the tools and legal resources to create stability for themselves and their families. In practice, this can mean legal representation to help a client obtain a divorce, a civil protection order (CPO), custody, spousal and/or child support and more. It can also mean helping victims of human trafficking and those who may be experiencing elder abuse.

"We are a human-centered, trauma-informed organization committed to its mission and values of cultivating a culture that respects clients as the experts of their own experiences," said Tonya Whitsett, Managing Attorney of the Family Law group. "We listen carefully to our clients,

acknowledge their needs, but also look beyond the primary concern and strive to provide holistic solutions. We respect the autonomy of our clients and will first ask what they believe they need, or think is best for them."

In 2023, the Family Law Group helped 1,506 people through 526 cases. Of these cases, over 87% involved households led by women.

To ensure success for each client, the Family Law team works closely with other Legal Aid departments, including Intake and Client Support Specialists.

"We consider short-term and sustainable solutions through open discussions about case progression, and specific case support services," said Tonya. "We regularly review and refine case acceptance guidelines to ensure they appropriately reflect the most pressing needs in the community, and we explore ways to distribute opportunities across and within teams."

Learn more about Legal Aid's resources on child and family-related issues: lasclev.org/get-help/family



In Memoriam

Legal Aid mourns the passing of Jessica Baggett, retired Legal Aid attorney. Jessica practiced law for 30 years in Ohio and served as a managing attorney at Legal Aid from 2007-2023.

Legal Aid Updates

Legal Aid celebrates the accomplishments of **Danielle Gadowski Littleton**, Supervising Attorney, who was recognized as "40 under 40" by Crain's Cleveland Business; **Jessica Baaklini**, Senior Attorney, and **Kaitlyn Dibble**, HR Administrator, who were both voted on to the Associate Board for Shoes and Clothes for Kids; and **Catherine Donnelly**, Senior Attorney, who joins the Board of Directors of Northwest Neighborhoods Community Development Corporation.

During Legal Aid's 118th Annual Meeting in November 2023, the following staff awards were presented:



45 years and is passionate about providing support for Legal Aid's clients.

Penny Gooden, Intake Specialist II, received the 2023 Lyonel Jones Lifetime Achievement Award. Penny has been a dedicated employee for

David Johnson, Data & Evaluation Manager whose data expertise improves outcomes and operations for Legal Aid staff and clients, received the 2023 Leadership Award.

Tammy Adams, David King, Emily Murphy, Krystle Rivera, and Michael Russell were honored with the Claude E. Clarke Award for outstanding service through professional performance. Read more about their outstanding contributions on our website: lasclev.org/2023StaffAwards.

Growing Impact, Preventing Evictions



(l-r) Colleen Cotter (Legal Aid), Council President Blaine Griffin (Cleveland City Council), Ashleigh Dandridge (Rocket Community Fund), Laura Grannemann (Rocket Community Fund), and Mayor Justin Bibb (City of Cleveland) at the December 5, 2023 press conference announcing the special investment.

ROCKET Community Fund

In December 2023, Rocket Community Fund, the philanthropic arm of Rocket Mortgage, announced a \$1.25 million investment in Legal Aid's housing work. This five-year investment will further strengthen Cleveland's Right to Counsel resources and aims to collaboratively build sustainable solutions for housing justice in Cleveland neighborhoods.

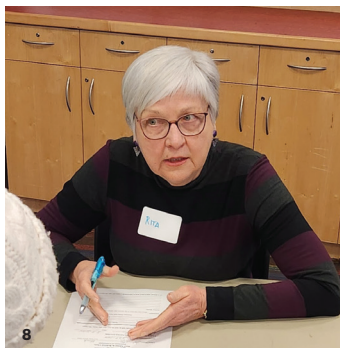
In January 2024, an independent evaluation of Cleveland's Right to Counsel was presented to the City of Cleveland and Cuyahoga County leaders, highlighting the continued success of Cleveland's Right to Counsel in eviction cases. Among the highlights: last year, Legal Aid assisted 4,519 Cleveland residents in 1,234 housing Right to Counsel cases. According to the evaluation, 81% of people helped through Right to Counsel prevented an eviction or an involuntary move.

Learn more at FreeEvictionHelpResults.org.

CLE
INT'L
FILM
FEST

Legal Aid is proud to be a community partner with the Cleveland International Film Festival. CIFF48 will take place April 3-13, 2024 at Playhouse Square, followed by CIFF48 Streams, which will run online from April 14-21. Legal Aid applauds CIFF for elevating films that highlight issues of justice and equity. Learn more at clevelandfilm.org and at lasclev.org/ciff48.

Legal Aid in the Community



1. The law firm of **Perez Morris** with Legal Aid's Volunteer Lawyers Program staff. The firm came to Legal Aid for a clinic at which they got training and then met one-on-one with pre-screened clients. Email probono@lasclev.org to have your firm do a similar volunteer outing. **2.** Legal Aid intake specialist **Heather Lynch** staffs a legal advice clinic at the Lake County Free Clinic. **3.** **Carol Szczepanik** of the **Geauga Bar Association** at a legal advice clinic at the **Chagrin Falls Park Community Center**. **4.** Legal Aid executive director **Colleen Cotter** presents to a **Cleveland City Council** caucus on the success of **Right to Counsel** in **Cleveland Housing Court**. **5.** (l-r) Attorneys **Chris Jethrow** (Pearne & Gordon), **Ben Cooper** (Nicola, Gudbranson & Cooper), **Joyce Dodrill** (retired, **Cleveland Public Library**), and **Rinda Vas** (American Greetings) volunteer together at a recent clinic. **6.** The Legal Aid team showing support for **Ashtabula United Way** at their recent "Valentine's Day" event. **7.** Attorney **Mitch Thompson** (Squire Patton Boggs US) at a legal advice clinic at the **Carnegie West Campus** of the **Cleveland Public Library**. **8.** Attorney **Rita Maimbourg** (Tucker Ellis) at a legal advice clinic at the **Warrensville Heights Branch** of the **Cuyahoga County Library**. **9.** Legal Aid is proud to represent a tenant group from **Granada Gardens** in their fight for better housing conditions. Here the tenant group is using their voice to highlight their issues with the media.

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Supporter profile: Sylvester Brooks

Longtime advocate continues to invest in Legal Aid



Sylvester Brooks, Esq.

In 1973, fresh out of law school, Sylvester Brooks joined Legal Aid as a Staff Attorney. He remembers his first day fondly.

"I walked through the door, right up to the front desk, and no one was expecting me," Sylvester laughs. "I sat in the waiting room with the clients, watching them come and go. The employees were trying to figure out what to do with me. I

would later realize that they were a very talented staff, and absolutely dedicated to the mission."

More than 50 years after his employment first began with Legal Aid, Sylvester and his wife Semanthie remain steadfast supporters, making donations using his IRA.

He explains that when someone reaches 73 years of age, the IRS requires them to take a minimum distribution from their IRA account. In 2023, he decided to use those funds to make a qualified charitable distribution (QCD) to Legal Aid – an option where your IRA funds go directly to a nonprofit organization. The donation is not taxed, making it a win-win for both Legal Aid and the Brooks family.

"I chose to donate to Legal Aid because I continue to believe in the mission. And because this is a time when the rights of low-income citizens, and especially people of color, are under siege," Sylvester said.

Sylvester urges others to support the work of Legal Aid. IRA giving is easy to do – you don't need to be a billionaire like MacKenzie Scott to give back (referencing the single largest gift Legal Aid has ever received – a \$2.5 million dollar gift in 2023).

"When I look back over my many years in legal services, I am reminded of the songwriter's words - 'we were moving mountains, long before we knew we could.' Yet still today, challenges remain," Sylvester said. "So, I urge you to move these mountains – mountains of injustice, mountains of inequality, mountains of poverty and despair. And in that spirit, I encourage each of you to support Legal Aid and its mission of hope and effective enthusiastic representation for all people."

A longtime advocate for legal services, Sylvester knew in high school that he wanted to be an attorney. "I believed that if I became a lawyer, I could help bring about significant change," said Sylvester.

Indeed, throughout his employment with Legal Aid, his career with UAW Legal Services, his volunteer work, and his financial support of change-making organizations, Sylvester continues to be a positive force for change.

Want to explore different ways to support Legal Aid, such as giving through your IRA or donor advised fund? Call Camille Dickson, Development Manager, at 216.861.5590.

Legal Services Corporation celebrates 50th anniversary

The Legal Services Corporation (LSC) has been promoting equal access to justice since 1974 when established by Congress. LSC distributes funding to 131 nonprofit legal organizations that provide free civil legal representation, including The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland. Legal Aid's Executive Director **Colleen Cotter** and Board President **Quo Vadis Cobb** will participate in LSC's 50th anniversary events this spring. Learn more at lsc.gov/Celebrate50.



**Protecting
the Promise**



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A special thank you to our early commitment sponsors in 2024, including:

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lasclev.org/2024sponsorship