



# Poetic Justice

Volume 21 Issue 2 Summer 2024

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

## *Legal Aid and Client Work Together: Healthy Food Benefits Secured*



*Legal Aid staff Tonya Sams (left) and attorney Jennifer Kinsley Smith (right) with Legal Aid client Brianna Mays (center).*

A mother's love knows no boundaries when it comes to caring for her children – it's more than kissing injuries and tucking them in at night – it's ensuring that all their needs are met. This includes making sure that they always have enough to eat. But what happens when this basic need is threatened? Legal Aid was recently able to help a client facing that very dilemma.

Brianna had a lot on her plate. She was juggling nursing school and raising two children with her fiancée. Brianna adored her children and wanted the best for them. When her SNAP\* benefits were unexpectedly terminated, she quickly went to Job and Family Services (JFS) and placed the requested documentation in the drop box provided. \*Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, provides food benefits to low-income families to supplement their grocery budget so they can afford the nutritious food essential to health and well-being.

After some time passed with no response from JFS, Brianna called their phone line. She patiently waited on hold for nearly five hours before she was completely disconnected. Brianna then went back to the JFS office. Once again, patience was required as she waited in line to speak with a JFS representative. Upon finally making it to the front of the line, the JFS representative told her that they never received her documents. Brianna continued to advocate for her family – re-applying online and again trying to call JFS.

While this burden was weighing heavy upon her shoulders, Brianna met with her doctor at University Hospitals (UH). As part of her health screening, she was asked if she was experiencing food insecurity. When she answered affirmatively, her doctor explained that UH had a Medical-Legal Partnership with Legal Aid. Through Medical-Legal Partnerships, Legal Aid works within the healthcare system to address structural problems at the root of health inequities and provide a streamlined system for patient referrals.

Brianna's doctor referred her to Legal Aid for help with her SNAP benefits, where she was connected to attorney Jennifer Kinsley Smith and paralegal Enya Eettickal. Brianna provided Jennifer and Enya with screenshots of wait times and call attempts to JFS, and Jennifer requested that JFS follow through with the interview that Brianna was due. Brianna and her Legal Aid team refused to give up – they worked together to advocate for the SNAP benefits the family was qualified for.

With Legal Aid's help, Brianna's SNAP benefits were restored. She no longer had to worry about how she would put food on the table. She could now focus on her family and fulfilling her dream of finishing school and becoming a nurse.

*Legal Aid's Medical-Legal Partnership with University Hospitals is funded by a long-term grant from the Benesch law firm. And, the growth of the partnership was supported over the past two years by a grant from the Vorys law firm.*

# Founders' Day: A celebration of 119 years of Legal Aid



Founders' Day panelists and moderator with Legal Aid Development & Communications Director Melanie Shakarian



Moderator Stephanie D. Adams (Sherwin-Williams) has volunteered with Legal Aid for 15+ years



Joe Rodgers (Eaton Corporation) thanks members of the Housing Justice and Right to Counsel Advisory Committees

In late May 2024, Legal Aid supporters gathered to celebrate Founders' Day. This special event honored 119 years of Legal Aid's continued work to extend justice in Northeast Ohio, with a special focus on Legal Aid's work to advance safe, stable housing for all. According to the Legal Services Corporation, **one-third of households with low incomes face a civil legal issue with housing**. This percentage is even higher among households who rent.

During the Founders' Day event, Legal Aid's Executive Director **Colleen Cotter** welcomed the room of nearly 300 supporters, and **Matt Vincel** - Managing Attorney of Legal Aid's Housing Law Practice Group - shared an update on Legal Aid's housing justice work along with details of a client's journey with Legal Aid.

A panel of philanthropic partners who are investing in Legal Aid's housing justice work shared their perspectives on the impact of these investments in a conversation moderated by **Stephanie D. Adams** (Sherwin-Williams). **Keisha M. González Robert** (The Cleveland Foundation), **Elizabeth A. Grove** (The Lubrizol Corporation), **Rob Lockett** (Rocket Community Fund), and **Ken Surratt** (United Way of Greater Cleveland) each spoke passionately about the impact legal services can have as part of the key strategy for improving housing stability.

**Joe Rodgers** (Eaton Corporation) wrapped up the program, sharing a call-to-action from his perspective as Vice President of Legal Aid's Board of Directors. Joe also recognized two key groups of volunteers – the Housing Justice Alliance Committee which helped launch Cleveland's right to counsel in housing, and the Right to Counsel Advisory Committee which helped implement the program.

Housing matters continue to be the largest concern among the clients Legal Aid serves. **In 2023, Legal Aid saw a 20% increase in the number of intakes from people struggling with housing issues**. Legal Aid handled 3,452 housing cases in 2023 – an increase of 410 cases from 2022. Every day, through legal representation, research, and advocacy, Legal Aid helps people across Northeast Ohio resolve legal threats to their most important asset – their home.

*Collaboration is key to tackling large, systemic problems like housing insecurity. Legal Aid's housing work in 2024 is supported by both government investments and philanthropy – including individuals, law firms, and corporations. Want to get involved? Contact Melanie at 216.861.5217 or email [melanie.shakarian@laslev.org](mailto:melanie.shakarian@laslev.org)*

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## Staff Spotlight: Client Support Specialists

As Legal Aid works for and with our clients to resolve legal issues that impact basic needs, Client Support Specialists are an important internal team, helping to ensure positive outcomes for clients Legal Aid serves.

Client Support Specialists are social workers on Legal Aid's staff who help clients engage with their legal cases and get connected with community resources. To learn more, we checked in with our Client Support Specialists – Aisha Midgett, Amber Jackson and Mariah Powers:



Legal Aid Client Support Specialists (l-r):  
Mariah Powers, Amber Jackson and Aisha Midgett

### What or who inspires you?

**Mariah:** The clients inspire me every day. The things they go through - extreme highs and lows. I have the privilege of riding along with them in that journey which is very inspiring.

### What is your favorite thing about working at Legal Aid?

**Aisha:** My favorite aspect is the opportunity to closely engage with clients. Building meaningful relationships, empowering individuals to find their voices, and aiding them in becoming more resilient are the most rewarding parts of my role. It's incredibly fulfilling to witness their growth and to be a part of their journey of justice and self-advocacy.

### What drew you to a career in the legal profession/public service?

**Amber:** I have always known that I wanted to work in a nonprofit environment because it feels like I'm doing more good. In my prior experience, I saw people treated poorly in the court system. They didn't get the same respect that we give our clients at Legal Aid. I always wanted to help people and now I get to do both legal and social work together, it's a great combination.

### Can you describe a case that really stands out to you as having a big impact on the client?

**Amber:** It was a recent case working with a family law attorney. The client was experiencing domestic violence and was trying to get a divorce. The attorney asked me to help the client navigate the housing system, while the attorney helped the client finalize the divorce. Because her husband handled everything, the client did not know how to find housing on her own. I was able to help her move temporarily to a shelter so that she would not be in the same house as her abuser until she was able to find permanent housing. I also helped the client obtain a housing voucher for subsidized housing, provided her with resources for mental health services, as well as information about where to get help with her taxes.

### What is the most rewarding part of your job?

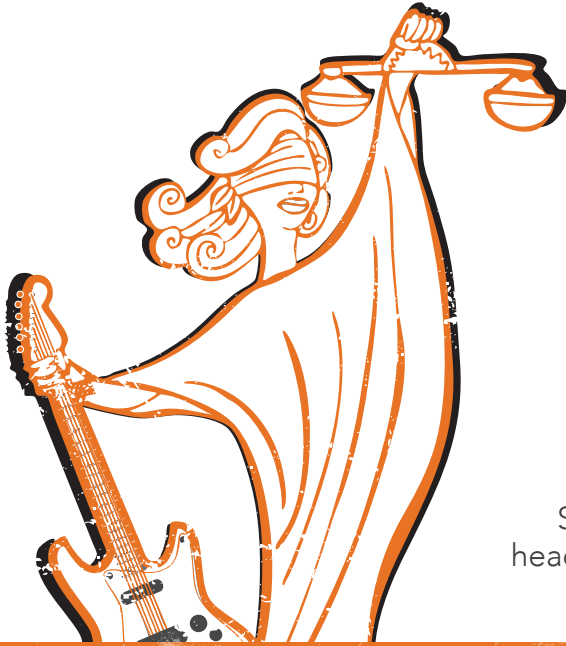
**Aisha:** The ability to be part of systemic change while directly impacting individual lives. Every day, I have the privilege of empowering clients, helping them find their voices, and witnessing their resilience. This work goes beyond individual cases; it's about fostering a more just and equitable society. Seeing the positive change ripple through our organization and the communities we serve reinforces my commitment to this vital work.

**Mariah:** It's tough to say because there are so many rewarding parts of my job, but I would have to say the most rewarding part is being part of an organization that prioritizes the client. Legal Aid focuses on reducing barriers and making sure the client has access to resources.

Read the full interview with Legal Aid's Client Support Specialists at [lasclv.org/MyLegalAidStory-CSS](https://lasclv.org/MyLegalAidStory-CSS)

# JAM FOR JUSTICE

## WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 21, 2024



5:00 p.m. – doors open

5:20 p.m. – first band

Beachland Ballroom & Tavern  
15711 Waterloo Road, Cleveland

**Jam out to a staggered schedule  
of bands on two stages!**

Support Legal Aid while enjoying a variety of musical acts  
headlined by local attorneys, judges, law faculty, & law students.

## Thanks to our sponsors:

(as of June 28, 2024)

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*All proceeds support Legal Aid's work to ensure shelter, safety, and economic security for people throughout Northeast Ohio.*

**Join us in person on Wednesday, August 21, 2024 - \$60 ticket**

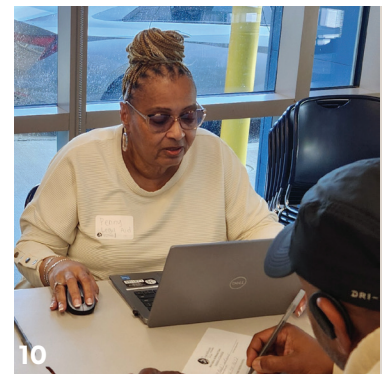
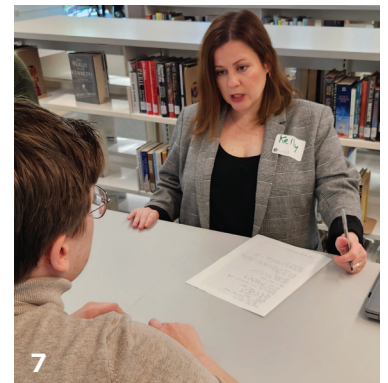
This is an all-ages event: Children under 18 get in free with adult ticket. To request a child ticket, call 216.861.5144



[lasclev.org/2024Jam](https://lasclev.org/2024Jam)



## Legal Aid in the Community



1. Former Legal Aid Community Board Member **Delores Gray**, Legal Aid Staff Attorney **Robert Morris**, and Ideastream host **Jenny Hamel** discuss housing and rental assistance on "Sound of Ideas" in March 2024. 2. **Nathalie Dibo, Esq.** (Yourkitch & Dibo) volunteers at a Legal Aid clinic at the West Park Campus of Cleveland Public Library, May 2024. 3. Cleveland Browns recognized their social justice partnership with Legal Aid at a May 2024 team event, from l-r, **Coach Kevin Stefanski** with Legal Aid Deputy Director **Tom Mlakar**, Economic Justice Managing Attorney **Katherine Hollingsworth**, and Development & Communications Director **Melanie Shakarian**. 4. Legal Aid Board President **Quo Vadis Cobb, Esq.** (Jacobs Engineering) and Legal Aid Executive Director **Colleen Cotter, Esq.** at the Legal Services Corporation 50th Anniversary event in April 2024. 5. Legal Aid employees and volunteers prepare for the Cleveland PRIDE march in June 2024. 6. **Ryan Hooper, Esq.** (University Hospitals) volunteers at a Legal Aid clinic at the Langston Hughes Campus of Cleveland Public Library, June 2024. 7. **Kelly King, Esq.** (Cleveland State University) volunteers at a Legal Aid clinic at the Memorial Nottingham Campus of Cleveland Public Library, April 2024. 8. OH State Representatives **Bride Rose Sweeney** (l) and **Juanita Brent** (r) tour the Legal Aid office with Executive Director **Colleen Cotter**, May 2024. 9. **Terry Szmagala, Esq.** (Eaton Corporation) volunteers at a Legal Aid clinic hosted by McGregor Home. 10. Legal Aid Intake Specialist II **Penny Gooden** helps at a Legal Aid clinic in Lake County, May 2024.



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

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Legal Aid is growing to better serve Ashtabula County



Visit [lasclev.org/AshtabulaUpdate](https://lasclev.org/AshtabulaUpdate) to learn more and get legal help.



## Grab your calendar!

» Legal Aid is hosting meet-and-greet events in Lorain, Chardon, Jefferson, and Painesville this September.

Learn more:  
[lasclev.org/2024MeetAndGreet](https://lasclev.org/2024MeetAndGreet)

» We'll be celebrating all things pro bono in October, leading up to the American Bar Association's national Celebrate Pro Bono Week.

Learn more:  
[lasclev.org/2024ProBonoWeek](https://lasclev.org/2024ProBonoWeek)