



Poetic Justice

Volume 18 Issue 3 Fall 2021

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

Legal Aid's 116th Annual Meeting

United States Attorney General Merrick Garland delivers keynote address

On Thursday, December 9, 2021, The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland held our 116th Annual Meeting. To respect the health and safety of all who wished to attend, the event was presented as a livestream again this year. The entire program was streamed online for free viewing, thanks to the generous support from more than 40 sponsors. Nearly \$200,000 was raised through the virtual event for Legal Aid's services and programs.

The program began with Legal Aid Executive Director and attorney **Colleen Cotter** introducing this year's theme, a truism from the mind of activist and author Helen Keller (1880–1968): "*Alone we can do so little. Together we can do so much.*" Keller's statement was meant to encourage people to care for neighbors in need, and it was selected for how it embodies Legal Aid's philosophy of change. Our organization is known for leveraging and developing diverse partnerships to fuel programmatic growth and reach more families when and where they need civil legal counsel.

**Alone we can do so little.
Together We Can
do so much.**
– Helen Keller

"We, together, can promote civil justice and create change," Cotter went on to say. She explained that "we" means not just the hardworking staff, board, and volunteers at Legal Aid, or even the local legal community. Rather, she said, "we" means the entire community coming together to create systemic change.

Rita Maimbourg, President of Legal Aid's Board of Directors and partner at Tucker Ellis, also spoke about how Legal Aid's work emphasizes the collective "we." This past year, Legal Aid's Board began a new strategic planning process and completed a legal needs assessment to identify new areas for advocacy and new goals for the organization. By building upon 116 years of work and evaluating current community needs, we can move Legal Aid in new directions, where the need is greatest.



The Honorable Merrick Garland

Keynote remarks from **The Honorable Merrick Garland**, United States Attorney General, further emphasized the importance of Legal Aid's work to extend justice. "Without equal access to justice, the promise of equal justice rings hollow," Garland said. He continued, "The partnership between the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Ohio and The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland is a model for what we hope to build in all 94 districts nationwide."

Earlier this fall, under Garland's leadership, the Justice Department restored a standalone Office for Access to Justice and renewed its dedication to improving the federal government's capacity to address the most urgent legal needs of communities across America. In his remarks to Legal Aid's audience, Garland described how our "together we can" theme is especially relevant right now, because working together is vital to advancing the Justice Department's top three priorities: upholding the rule of law, keeping American people safe, and protecting civil rights.

While the uncertainty and stress of the pandemic persisted throughout 2021, The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland continued to achieve success, delivering high-quality legal services and working for systemic solutions to inequities and injustices in our society.

The problems of poverty were only exacerbated by the pandemic, yet the staff and volunteers at Legal Aid provided a beacon of hope and helped thousands of Northeast Ohioans secure basic needs such as safety, shelter, and economic stability. This year, Legal Aid is on pace to help more than 19,000 through legal cases alone – a 35% increase from 2020.

Story continued on page 2...

...story continued from page one

During the Annual Meeting, several Legal Aid staff and volunteers were recognized for their outstanding contributions to the organization.



Andrea Price, Esq.



Tracy Ayers



Erik Meinhardt



Lisa Splawinski, Esq.



Matt Vincel, Esq.



Paige Nofel Kuri



Julie Rabin, Esq.

Andrea Price, a Senior Attorney in Legal Aid's Economic Justice Group who has worked at Legal Aid for more than 35 years, was presented with the **2021 C. Lyonel Jones Lifetime Achievement Award**. Named in honor of C. Lyonel Jones (1932 – 2006), who himself dedicated his entire legal career to Legal Aid, this award is presented to an outstanding staff member in recognition of a career dedicated to Legal Aid and its clients.

Honored with the **Claude E. Clarke Award** for outstanding service through professional performance were **Tracy Ayers; Erik Meinhardt; attorney Lisa Splawinski; and attorney Matt Vincel**. The **2021 Leadership Award** was presented to **Paige Nofel Kuri**. Retiring board member attorney **Barbara Roman** was also recognized for her six years of service on Legal Aid's Board of Directors.

Legal Aid's Volunteer Lawyers Program proudly presented the **2021 Legacy of Justice Award** to attorney **Julie Rabin**, in recognition of her dedication and assistance on more than 70 *pro bono* cases. Finally, the **2021 Access to Justice Awards** were presented to attorneys **Ashley Bailes, James King, and Arthur Smialek** for their contributions to advancing Legal Aid's mission.

A full recording of Legal Aid's 116th Annual Meeting is available online at <https://lasclev.org/2021event/>, and on Legal Aid's YouTube Channel, Facebook page and Twitter feed.

“
When we work together,
we can impact more families
through partnerships,
remove barriers to
opportunity, and elevate
Legal Aid as a catalyst for
community change.
”

– Colleen Cotter, Esq.,
Executive Director,
The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland



Legal Aid's Executive Director Colleen Cotter streams speech for the December 9 Annual Meeting (Left)
Musicians of Opus 216 record "Lean on Me" and "Imagine" for videos shown at Legal Aid's Annual Meeting livestream (Right)



Legal Aid case leads to fairness and better access to justice for those with driver's license issues

Thanks to Legal Aid's successful advocacy on a recent case, Ohio drivers facing non-compliance and security suspensions after an accident will have a clearer understanding of their legal rights. Our recent work led the BMV to re-write its notices informing drivers about these suspensions, which were – according to our complaint – confusing to the point of being indecipherable.

The BMV mails suspension notices to drivers who do not have car insurance and allegedly damaged another vehicle in an accident.

“We filed a case with the Cuyahoga County Court of Common Pleas on behalf of our client Mr. Pryor, whose license was suspended in 2019,” says Legal Aid attorney Mike Russell. “We argued that the BMV's notice to Mr. Pryor about his suspensions was so complicated and poorly written that it was impossible for him to understand he had rights to challenge the decision by requesting a hearing.”

Specifically, the old notices failed to clearly convey two required points: 1) Mr. Pryor had a right to request a hearing for both suspensions, and 2) Mr. Pryor could present evidence at the hearing that might prevent the BMV from suspending his driver's license.

With help from an expert in forensic linguistics, Legal Aid argued it was impossible for a layperson unfamiliar with legal jargon to understand how and when to pursue a hearing to challenge a security suspension. Hearings give drivers the chance to prove an accident was not their fault, potentially avoiding loss of their license for a period that could last as long as two years.

During the process of litigation, Legal Aid attorneys, the linguistics expert, and Mr. Pryor worked together to submit revised versions of the suspension notices to the BMV for its consideration. The BMV accepted nearly all of the proposed changes and began issuing the new notices with simplified language this fall. Separate notices are now being mailed about the two types of suspensions drivers face (to reduce confusion. Both notices more clearly inform drivers of their rights and the steps they can take to set up a hearing and prevent a suspension.

Under both the United States and Ohio constitutions, the BMV cannot suspend a driver's license without “due process of law.” And, “at its most basic, due process requires both adequate notice and a meaningful opportunity to be heard,” says Mike. “Adequate notices must be complete, informative, and stated in plain language, especially when intended for recipients who may not have the resources to hire counsel or navigate complicated bureaucracies to correct an error.”

The result of this case has implications beyond BMV notices; indeed, it could be applied to any number of legal notices sent to individuals about their rights and responsibilities under the law.

Mr. Pryor gets much of the credit for this positive outcome, which will impact more than 10,000 people a year in the state of Ohio. “He could have settled for an agreement that addressed his suspensions many months ago,” says Mike. “Instead, he delayed his remedy to give Legal Aid more time to work with the BMV and improve the process at the systemic level.”



“
This case should compel the state to
be more thoughtful about how it
communicates with the public, so the
public can understand their rights and
how to exercise them.
”

– Mike Russell, Esq.



The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland Since 1915

JAM FOR JUSTICE 2021 LIVE FROM THE LAKEFRONT

Since 2008, The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland has hosted an annual summer event to raise funds for its mission. Known today as "Jam for Justice," this festival-style concert brings Legal Aid supporters from across the region together to enjoy live music from local law students, attorneys, judges, and their professional friends who moonlight as rock stars.

Originally planned as an outdoor event on the front lawn of the Great Lakes Science Center, the wet weather combined current COVID-19 health concerns required a quick format change. To ensure safety, the Legal Aid team, event vendors, and band members worked quickly to transition the event from an outdoor show to a virtual livestream.

The 2021 participating bands who kept the viewers singing along the entire evening (listed in order of appearance) were: Razing the Bar, The No Name Band, Luke Lindberg & The Hung Jury, Faith & Whiskey, SIX sometimes SEVEN, State Road, and Out of Order. Stephanie Haney from WKYC Channel 3 and Brad Wolfe from DJ Wolfe Entertainment co-hosted the event.

If you missed the live-streamed performances on September 22, you can watch a full recording of Jam for Justice 2021 on our YouTube page.

Jam for Justice 2021 raised more than \$110,000 to help Legal Aid protect shelter, safety, and economic stability for Northeast Ohio residents. The fundraising success was due in part to the generosity of Paul Harris, Retired General Counsel and Corporate Secretary of KeyCorp, who offered a special challenge match in honor of the event, and all the responsive donors who stepped up to meet (and exceed) the challenge!



1. Luke Lindberg and the Hung Jury; 2. Legal Aid Board President Rita Maimbourg Esq.; 3. Brad Wolfe Esq and Stephanie Haney from WKYC; 4. SIX sometimes SEVEN; 5. Razing the Bar; 6. Vince Ruffa Esq of Out of Order; 7. Ohio Supreme Court Justice Mike Donnelly; 8. The No Name Band

Together We Can create real change

Legal Aid staff and volunteers continue to be COVID safe, and we are back in neighborhoods handling legal issues, providing community legal education, and advocating for community change.



GIVE NOW!

Remember to make your annual gift to Legal Aid by 12/31!

Use this envelope or visit laslev.org



1. Earlier this year, the NFL Foundation and Cisco presented grants to Legal Aid and the Cleveland Public Library to increase access to justice for families with children. Soon, "Justice Hubs" will be available in certain libraries for legal consultations, virtual hearings, and brief advice clinics.
2. Hazel Remesch, Esq., managing attorney of Legal Aid's housing group, presents at Cleveland Councilwoman Jasmine Santana's monthly community meeting.
3. Alex Bolden, Esq. and Mitch Thompson, Esq. (Squire Patton Boggs (US)) provide Brief Advice at the Carnegie West Branch of the Cleveland Public Library
4. Legal Aid staff Susan Stauffer, Esq., Kim Barnett-Mills, Esq., Abby Connell, and Dan Natalie, Esq. ahead of organizing volunteers at a Brief Advice Clinic.
5. Paralegal Marc Huff interviews a client at a Brief Advice Clinic at the Glenville Branch of the Cleveland Public Library
6. Michael Zadd, Esq. and Michael Meehan, Esq. (both from the Cleveland Clinic law department) volunteer to provide advice at the Rice Branch of the Cleveland Public Library
7. David King, Esq. of Legal Aid's housing right to counsel team is interviewed during an information phone bank on Channel 19.

Partnership to Extend Justice in Lorain County

Connect to a Cause with the Community Foundation of Lorain



Legal Aid raised \$1,354 through this year's "Connect to a Cause" fundraiser, an all-day, virtual event that brought a total of \$277,000 to 50 organizations that serve residents of Lorain County. The event, hosted by the Community Foundation of Lorain County, serves as a showcase of community programs that serve Lorain County.

This second annual event was held on September 16, and included a Facebook Live featuring guests from participating organizations - including Legal Aid. The Community Foundation of Lorain supports Legal Aid not only through Connect to a Cause, but also through its responsive grantmaking and an special endowment fund for Legal Aid in Lorain County.

Housing Justice Advocacy for Lorain Residents



Dinola Phillips, Esq. Jessica Baggett, Esq.

In September, Legal Aid attorneys Jessica Baggett and Dinola Phillips penned an opinion editorial that was published in the Lorain Morning Journal. Jessica and Dinola advocated for the rights of people who live in the Bruce Towers Apartments complex, a building that the City of Lorain recently declared a "nuisance." An excerpt of the piece is below; read the full article at lasclev.org/09172021-2

...the City began a chain of legal proceedings that may culminate in the evacuation of all residents and potentially a building demolition. Despite the best efforts of local nonprofits, some residents will be left without housing. The costs to the City of Lorain from increased homelessness, increased COVID exposure, and the building demolition are substantial...

Bruce Towers tenants have specific rights in this situation. As a community, we must work collectively and thoughtfully to create solutions to this housing problem that respect the dignity of all people.

For example, instead of allowing residents to be displaced, the community could call for a receivership of Bruce Towers. A receiver is a person or organization appointed by a court to temporarily manage a property. Tenants can petition a court to obtain a receiver.

Displacing Bruce Towers residents is a mere Band-Aid that perpetuates the power imbalance between absent landlords and vulnerable tenants... We can and should work with the tenants in Bruce Towers to hold their landlord accountable and support their right to safe housing. Calling for a receivership of Bruce Towers Apartments is a strong first step.

Brief Advice Clinics are back for Lorain residents!



After a 20 month pause, Legal Aid reinstated in-person Brief Advice and Referral clinics. These events have traditionally been an opportunity for people to meet one-on-one with an attorney and get advice at a trusted neighborhood location. El Centro hosted the first in-person clinic in Lorain County on October 26. Both Legal Aid staff and volunteer attorneys met with people who needed brief advice on a variety of civil legal topics. These events will continue to have virtual options alongside the traditional in-person clinic model. For more on upcoming clinics, go to lasclev.org/events

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"Alone we can do so little; Together We Can do so much." – Helen Keller

Together We Can impact more families through partnerships



Community partnerships bring Legal Aid to where families live, work, go to school, and seek other services. **Kira** (*alias used to protect client privacy*) shared her housing struggles with the Say Yes Cleveland representative at her daughter's school: a stranger had shown up at her home, claiming to be the new landlord. Through a referral to Legal Aid, Kira was connected to an attorney who helped her avoid eviction, secure more affordable housing, and avoid any period of homelessness. "Words cannot express my sincere gratitude to my attorney," says Kira. "I would 1,000 times over recommend calling Legal Aid."

Legal Aid is the official legal services hub for Cleveland Metropolitan School District students in participating Say Yes Cleveland schools.

Together We Can remove barriers to opportunity

Legal Aid lawyers play an instrumental role in helping families overcome barriers to employment, education, security, and housing. **Martin** (*alias used to protect client privacy*) came to Legal Aid for help with a criminal record issue. He had been working for more than a year in a good and steady job as an exterminator. But, he was concerned that if potential clients knew about his criminal record, they would not hire him. Martin's Legal Aid attorney represented him through a process to seal his record. Now, Martin's past mistakes will not hinder him from moving forward in his career. He looks forward to starting his own business one day.



Together We Can elevate Legal Aid as a catalyst for community change

Join us! Add your name to our list of supporters at lasclev.org/ExtendJustice.



#TogetherWeCan #ExtendJustice



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