

Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation

Line-item 0321-1600

Civil Legal Aid and the COVID-19 Crisis

When the COVID-19 crisis hit Massachusetts, civil legal aid organizations mobilized quickly to help low-income people. Economically disadvantaged people are disproportionately affected by the faltering economy, skyrocketing unemployment, housing insecurity, and other threats to people's health, safety, and stability.

Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation provides crucial infrastructure that connects the network of civil legal aid organizations across the Commonwealth. This solid and longstanding foundation enabled the organizations MLAC funds to quickly begin providing essential, COVID-19-related legal help and information remotely. MLAC's statewide Information Technology and phone networks allowed advocates to switch seamlessly to remote work.

MLAC Provides Funding to: Center for Law and Education; Center for Public Representation; Children's Law Center of Massachusetts; Community Legal Aid; De Novo Center for Justice and Healing; Disability Law Center; Greater Boston Legal Services; Massachusetts Advocates for Children; Massachusetts Law Reform Institute; MetroWest Legal Services; National Consumer Law Center; Northeast Legal Aid; Political Asylum/Immigration Representation Project; Prisoners' Legal Services; South Coastal Counties Legal Services; Veterans Legal Services. Each organization has information on their web sites outlining substantive civil legal need matters.

MassLegalHelp.org is a comprehensive website detailing legal rights and up-to-date COVID-19 emergency notices in Massachusetts. Link: masslegalhelp.org

Legal aid organizations expect the COVID-19 pandemic to cause a significant increase in the number of people who are eligible for services, with record numbers of people losing full-time, part-time, and gig-economy jobs.

What Legal Aid is Doing to Help

Addressing Emerging Cases

- Working with the Department of Unemployment Assistance to assist low-wage workers who do not have computer access and limited English proficient workers file their **unemployment** applications online.
- Providing clarification on **Family Medical Leave Act** rights, information on access to emergency drop in **childcare**, and assisting with an increase in need for **SNAP** benefits.
- Filing an increased number of **domestic violence** restraining orders as people live in close confinement under high stress.
- Providing guidance on **parenting plans, visitation** and **guardianships** and other family law issues complicated by the Governor's stay at home order.
- Aiding tenants facing **evictions** and **foreclosures** who are unsure about their rights.

- **Assisting** with an increased number of **bankruptcy filings, debt collection, price gouging, unfair and deceptive practices, and identity theft** cases.
- Handling an increased number of **immigration cases** as the USCIS remains open for hearings, providing information on **public charge** issues, and assisting immigrants concerned with a myriad of issues including **lack of access to health care, food banks, and social services**.
- Helping parents and students implement **individual education plans** remotely, and students with physical disabilities and mental illness suffering from lack of support.

Engaging in Systemic Emergency Work

Legal Aid lawyers are working on legislation to enact a moratorium on evictions and foreclosures, increase TAFDC and SNAP assistance, increase emergency funding for housing and shelter, and enact emergency provisions for the unemployed.

Activating the Pro Bono Network

A network of MLAC, legal aid organizations, bar associations, and the Access to Justice Commission of the Supreme Judicial Court quickly formed to identify the most pressing areas of legal need to **activate the large number of private lawyers interested in providing valuable pro bono legal services and to provide ongoing training, materials and forms to meet the crush of legal need.**

Self-Help Materials

Self-help resources, educational materials, and forms – often in multiple languages are available. These resources are invaluable not just to low-income people who qualify for civil legal aid, but also to middle-income residents, or any residents seeking **free and up-to-date legal information.**

MassLegalHelp.org, a comprehensive website detailing legal rights in Massachusetts - masslegalhelp.org

Massachusetts Legal Answers Online, a free service that lets people ask volunteer attorneys legal questions - mass.freelegalanswers.org/

National Consumer Law Center, Information on Consumer Protections - www.nclc.org/

Legal Resource Finder, contact information for Legal Aid Organizations by town or type of case - www.masslegalservices.org/findlegalaid

Issue Fact Sheets - on primary issues facing legal aid clients <https://mlac.org/>; <https://equaljusticecoalition.org/>

To qualify for civil legal aid, Massachusetts residents must have incomes at or below 125% of the federal poverty level. That is \$32,750 per year for a family of four.

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