

Civil Legal Aid 101: What is legal aid and how can it help me?

In 2012, the White House and the U.S. Department of Justice launched the Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable (Roundtable) to raise Federal agencies' awareness of how civil legal aid can help low income people.

Ways the Federal agencies can help include:

- Making it easier for low income persons and their families to get healthcare and housing, good education and better employment.
- Helping people with their family stability and helping communities with community well-being.

Providing legal help to people who cannot afford it can also help stop outcomes that would be harmful to them and costly for the larger society.

This article is adapted from a "tool kit" that the Roundtable is providing online for legal services to use. The tool kit gives ideas on how to educate people about civil legal aid and what it can do for them.

What is Civil Legal Aid?

Civil Legal Aid is free legal assistance to low- and middle-income people who have civil legal problems. These problems are non-criminal. That means that civil legal aid helps people get basic needs met such as health care, housing, government benefits, employment, and educational services.

How can Civil Legal Aid help me and my family?

The types of legal help you can get through civil legal aid programs (like Kansas Legal Services) include:

- **Meeting basic needs** including government benefits and disaster services (SNAP, School Lunch Program, SCHIP, TANF, SSI, disability, veterans, FEMA); housing (loans to repair, foreclosure, eviction, unsafe housing, subsidized housing benefits); and health care (Medicaid, Medicare, Affordable Care Act).

- **Making sure you and your family are safe and stable** which includes individual safety (domestic violence, stalking or other harassment, elder abuse, child abuse and neglect); family law (child support, adoption, guardianship, divorce); and keeping children and youth in school (student discipline hearings, accommodations).

- **Supporting individuals' security** including jobs (the right payment for work performed, safe working conditions, securing drivers/professional licenses, accommodations for people with disabilities); taxes (filing and getting low-income tax credits); and consumer protection (consumer fraud and scams, predatory lending, unfair debt collection practices and managing debt).

What type of services does Civil Legal Aid provide?

Civil Legal Aid refers to both free legal advocacy and legal information for low- and middle-income people to help solve the civil legal problems they may face.

This aid can take many forms, including:

- **Direct services** by legal aid attorneys and pro bono volunteers such as legal representation in court, and legal advice to help identify legal issues and possible solutions.

- **Finding solutions** to problems faced by a large number of people. This may take looking at deep-seated problems and gathering information to figure out how to solve the problems.

- **Self-help and community education** for people through workshops, telephone help lines, medical/legal partnerships, online information and chat tools, and downloadable court forms. These things help people understand their rights and responsibilities, when legal aid may be needed and where to find it, and get assistance with self-representation when necessary.

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