

## In Their Own Words: The Urgent Case for Legal Aid

THIS MONTH I WANT TO OPEN THIS SPACE so you can hear directly from the highly effective nonprofit legal aid organizations supported by the Philadelphia Bar Foundation. You may know some of these dedicated leaders. They all deserve your attention and assistance.

Urgent increases in client demand for services and potentially significant cuts in federal and state funding are affecting the full range of local legal aid providers receiving Foundation grants. This serious situation will continue and possibly expand over the next several months and beyond. Additional resources and philanthropy are necessary to allow legal aid staffing to expand – and certainly not decline – to protect the basic rights of our neighbors in need on issues ranging from education to employment, from health to housing, from youth to seniors, and from people with disabilities to immigrants.

I hope the following heartrending details about this legal aid crisis will inspire you to contribute to our Special Circumstances Campaign to ensure program continuity and strengthen vital services for people in need. Act now by donating at [www.philabarfoundation.org](http://www.philabarfoundation.org).

The following examples are from leaders of a variety of the 38 organizations that receive support from the Foundation. You can see more from our nonprofit partners on our website.

As always, thank you for getting engaged in safeguarding access to justice for all.

**Reggie Shuford, ACLU of Pennsylvania:** We can no longer count on support from the Department of Justice, and our work protecting immigrants, Muslims, and other vulnerable communities has expanded greatly. We are committed to moving forward with both our defensive agenda and our proactive agenda for criminal justice reform. This will test our resolve and our resources.

**Shira Goodman, CeaseFirePA:** We need to react to multiple developments at the state and federal levels. Playing defense against bad policy initiatives makes it difficult to advance a proactive agenda for change. Holding the status quo and not going backward are actually important successes.

**Deborah Freedman, Community Legal Services** – The proposed federal

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budget cuts would throw CLS and our clients into an unprecedented crisis. With the federal funding we receive, CLS stops foreclosures, preventing homelessness; helps youth in crisis and abused women access housing; helps families access many different benefits and programs; and allows sick people to receive healthcare and families to avoid hunger.

**Deborah Gordon Klehr, Education Law Center:** We are finding that districts are not enrolling refugee students into schools and do not provide translation services to families. In addition, some districts, including Philadelphia, are severely underfunded, with large class sizes, teacher shortages and crumbling facilities.

**Mary Clark, Esperanza Immigration Legal Services:** We have been deluged by calls for help. Parents are seeking to ensure care of their children in the event of an immigration raid; immigrant crime victims are fearful of seeking legal remedies; and lawful permanent residents are rushing to apply for citizenship after living with their current status without worry for decades. We are only scratching the surface.

**Meredith Rapkin, Friends of Farmworkers:** Immigrant communities are facing new and different legal issues every day, and the requests for help are increasing at a rate that we cannot match with services. The unpredictable legal landscape is presenting challenges for our advocates, who can no longer easily predict the trajectory of a case. We feel challenged on all fronts.

**Cathryn Miller-Wilson, HIAS Pennsylvania:** Torture victims are terrified of being sent back to the violence they had escaped. Parents are panicked about what

would happen, if they got detained, to their U.S. citizen children. Immigrant victims of domestic violence are fearful about getting suddenly picked up and the abuser may be there to collect the children. The national budget proposal confirmed our fears of losing 70 percent of our funding.

**Marsha Cohen, Homeless Advocacy Project:** Under the new administration, HAP is fearful that its clients, the poorest of the poor, could lose access to benefits including SSI and Medical Assistance, affordable housing and even emergency shelter. If the homeless shelter system dissolves, thousands of mothers and children will be relegated to the streets.

**Susan Vivian Mangold, Juvenile Law Center:** The leadership of DOJ, HHS, DOE, and HUD are no longer partnering with us on many issues. Reforms such as education rights for youth in foster care are uncertain. Possible harmful actions include the elimination of Medicaid to 26 states, and the denial of services to LGBTQ youth by private providers who accept federal funds.

**Linda Peyton, Legal Clinic for the Disabled:** Our medical legal partnerships in seven diverse communities in Philadelphia are threatened by proposed cuts to federal funding. In addition, undocumented clients are afraid to apply for benefits their citizen children are entitled to, such as SSI and SNAP.

**Margaret O'Sullivan, Nationalities Service Center:** Immigrant and refugee communities are uncertain of what the new policy changes mean for their daily lives and are fearful that their families may be torn apart. We have been overwhelmed with requests for information and legal representation.

**Laval Miller-Wilson, Pennsylvania Health Law Project:** The Affordable Care Act has helped more than a million Pennsylvanians gain health coverage. Congressional opponents of ACA should accept that it has become a fundamental part of our nation's health care system, work to strengthen it, and cease seeking to undermine it or repeal its key elements.

**Mary Studzinski, Pennsylvania Immigration Resource Center:** We are seeing

a major increase in the need for legal services for immigrants in detention and many requests for family law legal assistance for parents to designate a caregiver.

**Marissa Bluestine, Pennsylvania Innocence Project:** The small pool of federal funds supporting innocence work is threatened. The attorney general dissolved the National Commission on Forensic Science, putting the initiative within the control of the Department of Justice. The move will lead to reliance on outmoded forensic evidence – the same faulty techniques that have convicted half of all exonerated individuals.

**Anita Santos-Singh, Philadelphia Legal Assistance:** What does the proposed elimination of the federal Legal Services Corporation and related funding mean to the 700,000 eligible Philadelphians living in poverty? Without legal services, battered women would have nowhere to turn for help extricating themselves and their families from abusive relationships, families would lose their housing and the elderly, the disabled and veterans would not be able to protect against the wrongful denial of benefits.

**Elaine Petrossian, Philadelphia VIP:** Philadelphia faces a civil justice crisis. New pressures on clients, plus potential elimination of legal aid funding through Legal Services Corporation and Community Development Block Grants, may create new threats and new needs for pro bono service.

**Molly Callahan, Women Against Abuse:** Immigrant victims of domestic violence do not feel safe to call the police and seek court intervention and other services, because they are afraid they will be deported or targeted. This leads to further isolation and victimization. Lawmakers have called for de-funding sanctuary cities like Philadelphia and this creates uncertainty for organizations, such as ours, that rely on federal funding to assist victims.

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