



MARYLAND
LEGAL AID

Advancing
Human Rights and
Justice for All

For Immediate Release

Media Contact: Ashley Cheatham
acheatham@mdlab.org
443-651-0507

Maryland Legal Aid continues to provide critical legal assistance to state's most vulnerable during coronavirus pandemic

BALTIMORE, Md., (March 30, 2020) – Despite a number of statewide closures and suspensions of services reported throughout Maryland, due to the coronavirus (COVID-19), Maryland Legal Aid (MLA) is still operating and assisting clients. Under Governor Hogan's order for nonessential businesses to close on March 23, MLA and its subsidiary, Maryland Center for Legal Assistance (MCLA), as non-profit organizations providing essential services to low-income persons, and as a law firm supporting the judicial system, are allowed to remain open.

"These are unusual and uncertain times, and it is unclear when the immediate threat of the coronavirus will end," said Wilhelm H. Joseph, Jr., MLA's Executive Director. "As unfortunate and disruptive as this situation has been for clients, MLA and MCLA staff, and their families, MLA is committed to continuing its advocacy on behalf of clients in a meaningful and substantive way."

While all MLA and MCLA facilities are closed to the public, and staff, where possible, are working remotely, individuals in need of civil legal services can access those services online and by telephone. MLA staff are available to accept new cases and are able to respond to current client needs via telephone, email, text, and fax. In certain cases, MLA staff may meet with clients face-to-face, if necessary and appropriate. "In many ways, it feels as if the world has stopped," Executive Director Joseph added. "However, we want our clients and those who may need civil legal assistance to know that MLA and MCLA are here to help."

Even though the vast majority of court proceedings have been postponed until after May 1st, there are still legal issues that can be addressed during this challenging time. Sabrina Wear, Supervising Attorney in MLA's Metropolitan Maryland office in Landover, said, "We continue to receive calls about debt collection. There is no moratorium on debt collection, so we can still review and send debt dispute letters or cease-and-desist notices for those who are exempt from collection. Although courts are physically closed, filings by creditors may still occur and consumers can continue to face wage garnishments, or have their bank accounts frozen in existing cases."

In addition to debt collection, MLA continues to assist clients with a variety of civil legal issues like bankruptcy, unemployment and public benefits, including denials or termination of benefits. Although Department of Social Services and Social Security Administration offices are physically closed, the agencies are still operational. MLA can also assist individuals with issues that may become even more pressing during this difficult time, such as filing emergency protective orders and emergency custody hearings. "Having to quarantine or stay at home for an extended period of time can be a nightmare scenario for victims of domestic violence and abuse," said Bobbie Steyer, MLA's Director of Advocacy for Family Law. "If you're in an abusive situation, you can contact MLA online or by telephone for legal assistance."

As MLA continues to provide direct legal assistance during the coronavirus pandemic, the organization is also preparing a series of *Know Your Rights* communications for the general public with information about statewide moratoriums, such as the one on evictions. It is critical that people understand their rights during this period and obtain information about how to prepare for the pandemic's aftermath, such as budgeting for increased utility bills that may occur due to increased time spent at home.

"Legal problems do not go away during a time of crisis. In fact they may even worsen or increase," said Attorney Wear. "Despite staff working remotely, MLA's commitment to advance its mission remains stronger than ever."

Income-eligible individuals seeking legal assistance can apply for civil legal assistance online at https://mdlaboilegalserver.org/modules/matter/extern_intake.php?pid=129&h=daa817&, or contact the MLA office that provides services in the county in which they live. A full list of MLA offices and phone numbers is available at <https://www.mdlab.org/contact-us/>.

Individuals seeking self-help legal assistance can visit www.mdcla.org, or call 410-260-1392.

###

About Maryland Legal Aid

Maryland Legal Aid (MLA) is a private, non-profit law firm that provides free, civil legal services to people who are in Baltimore City and Maryland's 23 counties from 12 offices. The firm handles cases involving a wide range of issues, including family, housing, government benefits, healthcare, education, employment, and consumer law. MLA also represents children in CINA (Child in Need of Assistance) proceedings in 14 jurisdictions. Other vulnerable populations, such as homeowners facing foreclosure, migrant and seasonal farm workers, people with developmental and mental health disabilities, nursing home and assisted living residents, and veterans seeking benefits and assistance with related legal issues also receive representation through special projects. MLA's Community Lawyering Initiative, which includes its *Lawyer in the Library* program, assists with expunging criminal records to remove barriers to obtaining housing, employment, and child custody through clinics held in libraries, community centers, non-profit organizations, places of worship, schools, medical facilities, and other gathering places.

Visit www.mdlab.org and follow Maryland Legal Aid on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).