

Letter: Making access to justice a reality for all

By: Letter to the editor from: Martin S. Himeles Jr. and Lee H. Ogburn April 28, 2016

One year after the civil unrest that shook Baltimore, poverty and lack of opportunity continue to plague underserved communities in the city and throughout Maryland. Public discourse concerning the anger and frustration that were apparent during the unrest has largely overlooked both a cause of these problems and an opportunity to address them.

As a society based on the rule of law and access to justice, we have failed to provide such access to disadvantaged individuals and families, leaving them powerless to address fundamental problems that are unimaginable to many of us. By honoring the promise of equal access to justice, we will make great strides toward resolving these problems.

Many Maryland residents regularly encounter legal problems that threaten to deprive them of basic human needs and opportunities. They face eviction, often without cause, followed by homelessness; bureaucratic impediments to obtaining affordable health care to which they are entitled; unemployment caused by even minimal criminal records, because a single conviction of a minor offense can be disqualifying; and many other obstacles that stand between them and food, housing, and livable wages. Without the assistance of a skilled lawyer, these legal issues can present insurmountable obstacles, with catastrophic consequences for individuals and families.

For over 100 years, Maryland Legal Aid has worked to expand access to civil justice for the state's most economically disadvantaged and vulnerable individuals and families. Even with 15 locations across the state, however, it cannot reach all those who qualify for its services, in part due to the logistical barriers, including inadequate transportation and physical disabilities, its clients confront.

Maryland Legal Aid's new Community Lawyering Project aims to break down these barriers by providing free legal help to people directly in underserved communities. Through this project, Maryland Legal Aid is able to meet with people where they live, listen to their needs, and provide immediate, on-site assistance with civil legal issues and criminal record expungements, thereby helping clients overcome obstacles that lead to homelessness, hunger, poor health, unemployment, and other problems.

Since last September, Maryland Legal Aid has hosted weekly Lawyer in the Library events at the Enoch Pratt Free

Library Pennsylvania Avenue branch in West Baltimore. Maryland Legal Aid attorneys, volunteer attorneys, law clerks, and law students with a wide range of expertise provide free, one-on-one help for civil legal issues and criminal record expungements in a location that is easily accessible for attendees. Representatives of the U.S. Department of Justice recently visited the weekly Lawyer in the Library clinic as part of the Department's "National Reentry Week," which focused on challenges to and achievements of those returning to their communities after incarceration.

The need for assistance with criminal record expungements is great; approximately 120,000 new cases for which expungements are available are generated each year in Maryland. To respond to the need, Maryland Legal Aid has been hosting expungement clinics around the state. The response illustrates the magnitude of the problem – crowds exceeding 600 people have come to receive help. Expungement of records with minor offenses can be completed on-site in a matter of minutes.

The legal assistance provided at these events empowers attendees to take effective next steps that can open doors to new opportunities and second chances, including access to jobs that simply are not available to applicants with criminal records. These events also enable Maryland Legal Aid to build trust among residents in underserved areas and relationships with other community organizations whose common mission is to eradicate the barriers that cause inequality.

In the coming weeks, the Equal Justice Council of Maryland Legal Aid will contact law firms across the state to seek their financial support for Maryland Legal Aid. As Maryland looks to address its challenges head-on, Maryland Legal Aid's Community Lawyering Project is an important piece of the puzzle, and is one that deserves the support of the community. We encourage Maryland's law firms to help make access to justice a reality for all Marylanders.

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