

Securing Stability: Legal Aid's Lasting Impact

A report by The Center for Community Solutions

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Legal issues related to civil law often impact low-income individuals and families negatively and contribute to the perpetuation of poverty. For civil cases, as opposed to criminal cases, individuals and families are not guaranteed the help of an attorney, and can face high stakes and dismal odds when they must navigate the civil legal system alone. If they lose one civil case, additional legal problems, other challenges and expenses can quickly multiply. Civil legal assistance, like that provided by legal aid nonprofits in the United States, is meant to address these problems.

The Center for Community Solutions was engaged by The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland and Community Legal Aid to examine whether civil legal assistance has a lasting impact. Community Solutions¹ utilized a mixed-methods approach to collect primary qualitative data from former clients from two Legal Aid nonprofit organizations serving a total of 13 counties in Northeast Ohio. More than 1,250 former clients responded to a survey which asked several open-ended questions about the client's experience with Legal Aid and their lives since. Researchers also interviewed 20 former clients to explore their experiences in more depth, and conducted an extensive literature review.

Legal Aid's assistance allows individuals and families to secure stability in a variety of different areas years after court cases conclude. These long-term impacts could be divided into six categories: financial, family, health, housing, education and civic involvement. Former clients attributed the improvements in their lives since interacting with Legal Aid to the legal assistance they received. Overall, we found that **54 percent of clients who responded to the survey reported an improvement in at least one area of stability.**

Legal aid assistance has lasting impact. Across all 11 legal problem categories, clients whose cases were resolved between two and five years ago were most likely to report a stability improvement. **More than half of clients whose interaction with Legal Aid was more than a decade ago attributed changes in at least one stability area to civil legal aid assistance.**

When asked open-ended questions, many former Legal Aid clients identified aspects of stability that had improved due to civil legal aid assistance that were unrelated to the civil legal problem for which they sought help.

¹ The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland and Community Legal Aid engaged The Center for Community Solutions to examine whether civil legal assistance had lasting impact. The Center for Community Solutions is a nonpartisan think tank focused on solutions to health, social and economic issues.



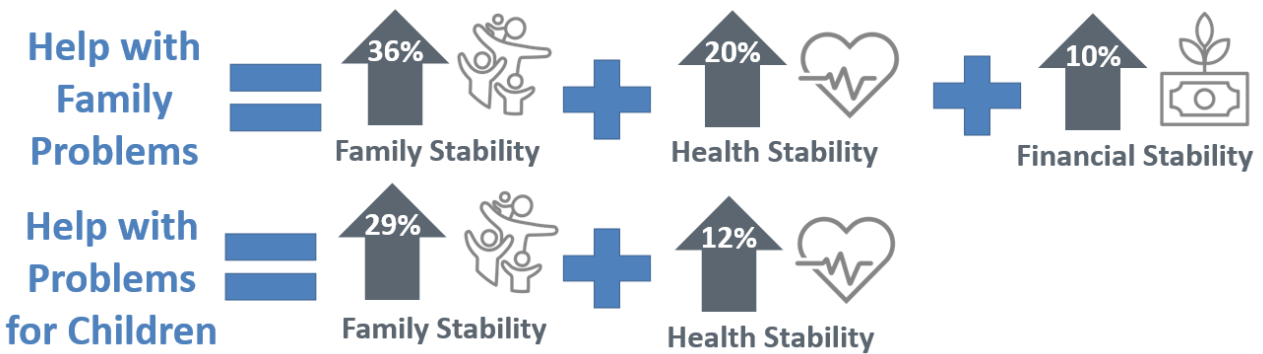
Financial Stability: Working with Legal Aid improves a client’s financial well-being for many years following a case. Community Solutions found this occurred regardless of a client’s original legal problem. One out of every four Legal Aid clients surveyed reported an increase in financial stability. This impact peaks six to 10 years after case resolution. **Clients reported improved financial stability including better jobs, higher wages or the ability to make ends meet.** In addition, clients who sought Legal Aid’s help with financial problems, such as income and benefits or debt problems, reported improvements in areas beyond finances.



Family Stability: Assistance from Legal Aid appears to have a positive impact on family stability that increases over time. **Services from Legal Aid can reduce chaotic experiences including residential mobility, volatile relationships and rotating custody arrangements.** In the survey of former Legal Aid clients, 15 percent of respondents

reported an increase in family stability overall, but this impact appears to only grow with time. While 11 percent of clients who received help less than two years ago reported an increase in family stability, 24 percent of clients who worked with Legal Aid 10 or more years ago reported increased family stability.

More than Half of Clients Who Sought Legal Aid’s Help for Family Problems Reported Improvements in Areas Beyond Family



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Health Stability: Former Legal Aid clients reported an increase in health stability regardless of their original legal problem. Research suggests removing legal issues can improve health outcomes and the benefit is cumulative over time. **Clients said their health improved after seeking help with many legal problem areas – ranging from income and benefits, to problems for children and end-of-life planning.** During this survey, many clients reported an immediate improvement in mental health, most often via a reduction in anxiety.



Housing Stability: The space between homelessness and permanent housing is familiar to many low-income individuals and families, and that space can have long-lasting ripple effects. Eleven percent of former Legal Aid clients reported their housing stability improved no matter why they initially needed legal help, but this stability appears to fluctuate and declines at the 10-year mark. **When they sought help specifically for a housing legal problem, such as discrimination, public housing and landlord/tenant relationships, 40 percent of people reported an increase in housing stability** and 14 percent reported an increase in financial stability.



“Returned our credit rating to a realistic level saved our home and probably our marriage restored our faith in the justice system allowed us to retire only a few years later than planned removed the stress so my husband could heal from a massive heart attack.”

(Client from Summit County, Housing & Utilities, Six to 10 years ago)



Educational Stability: Intervention from Legal Aid can help students receive the education they are entitled to. Clients go to Legal Aid for help with legal problems like discipline and special education. While only 2 percent of former Legal Aid clients reported an improvement in educational stability, 1 in 5 clients who had an improvement in education also reported positive impacts on family stability or housing stability.



Civic Engagement: Legal interventions to remove barriers that consume individuals' time can increase the likelihood of civic engagement. In particular, clients who sought help for a discrimination problem experienced an increase in civic involvement. Access to social resources increase when people are engaged in their communities and the odds of being employed increased over time for those who were civically engaged.

Clients attribute widespread stability improvements in their lives to assistance from civil legal aid. Other research has demonstrated links between the types of problems civil legal assistance addresses and a range of benefits for individuals, families and society.