Meeting Essential Needs, Restoring Essential Justice
OUR MISSION
To advocate for the legal rights of disadvantaged people to have safe, healthy and independent lives in strong communities.
DEAR FRIENDS,

2009 was a year of uncommon difficulties for Legal Aid’s clients. We’re in the midst of record unemployment rates, a recession that is broader and deeper than anything our nation has seen since the Great Depression, and major cutbacks in resources and services available to the poorest among us.

More than ever, Legal Aid’s services are a critical ingredient in helping Minnesota’s most vulnerable citizens meet their most basic needs. Legal Aid provides legal representation to clients of all ages so that they have adequate access to food, safety, shelter and health care. In 2009, we helped over 11,300 clients representing a wide variety of ages, ethnicities and creeds.

Meeting basic needs is a fundamental purpose behind Legal Aid—and it has been for almost 100 years. In 1913 when Legal Aid opened its doors as a one-person office, it was founded on the idea that Legal Aid would help clients gain access to the services they are entitled to—such as the ability to buy food, maintaining a place to live, being safe from abusive spouses or partners and getting an education for their children. Today, almost 70 lawyers advocate on behalf of thousands of Minnesotans, but the mission—and the need—hasn’t changed.

Legal Aid lawyers have been at the core of legislation that has made great strides in giving people rights to basic needs. For example, 40 years ago Minnesota had no Domestic Abuse Act to ensure safety from violence within the family. Legal Aid lawyers helped write and pass this act, which we now consider a basic human right. A Legal Aid lawyer wrote the first Children’s Code in 1917. That tradition continues to the present. Last year Legal Aid staff drafted and advocated for passage of what is now widely considered the strongest anti-predatory-lending statute in the country. This year Legal Aid advocates have been fighting to preserve access to medical care for the poorest, sickest Minnesotans.

Courtroom advocacy continues to be a need. Preserving access to safety net programs such as unemployment, subsidized housing, and food and medical assistance has been of particular importance in 2009.

While numerous programs exist to provide Minnesotans the help they need, the systems are extremely difficult to navigate. And when someone is faced with the additional challenges many of our clients face—language and culture barriers, significant disabilities, unsafe living environments, lack of education—these systems become even more daunting. The simple truth is that in our complex society, access to justice equals access to a lawyer. The powerful partnership between Legal Aid staff and our generous supporters remains essential if Legal Aid is to continue to help people meet their basic needs. Our sincere thanks for your continued support.

The simple truth is that in our complex society, access to justice equals access to a lawyer.
From Fear to a Future

Legal Aid attorney David Gassoway helps Kia gain access to the benefits she deserves and desperately needs.

THE JOURNEY that led Kia to David Gassoway’s Legal Aid office in the spring of 2008 was a long one, indeed. After fleeing Laos as a refugee, Kia landed on U.S. soil on November 5, 1976 with a new husband, a baby and hope for a better life. She lost both her parents to the war and lived with abusive relatives in an unsafe, war-torn country before being granted entrance into the United States.

Kia immediately found work as a factory worker in California, and over the course of several years, raised seven children on a few steady, minimum wage jobs. But everything changed on February 25, 2008 when Kia lost her job as an assembly line worker because of a hand injury. Several issues were at play in Kia’s situation. First, there was a question as to whether or not she was entitled to unemployment or if she would need to file for disability. Second, the amount of unemployment she was entitled to was unclear for a variety of reasons. And third, Kia’s boyfriend was threatening to kick her out of their home when she was no longer able to pay her share of the expenses. Additionally, because Kia shared a house with her boyfriend, her boyfriend’s income made her ineligible for any food, housing or medical assistance. To put it simply, Kia was in a bind—a big bind.

But then Kia met David Gassoway, a staff attorney at Legal Aid who specializes in helping clients with unemployment compensation, Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and welfare. “When I met David, I knew I had someone on my side,” explained Kia. David brought Kia’s case to a judge, where he was able to successfully prove that Kia was eligible for unemployment compensation. Not only was David able to get her unemployment compensation, but he also helped her attain a $25 per week increase and a 26-week extension available to her through the American Reinvestment & Recovery Act (ARRA).

“When Kia came to me for help, the loss of her income was only one symptom among a myriad of additional challenges she was facing,” explained David. “By helping Kia meet her most basic need—which in this case was access to income—Legal Aid empowered Kia to secure a safer, better future for her and her children.”

Kia’s situation is a good example of what so many Legal Aid clients face. She was living in a disruptive home environment, and had a language barrier and no education that greatly impeded her ability to advocate on her own behalf for the benefits she deserved and desperately needed.

Today, Kia is still looking for work and David is continuing to help her gain access to the income and the services she needs to meet her family’s needs. While Kia’s long journey continues to bring unexpected twists and turns, with the help of Legal Aid, the road is a little less bumpy.
Home, Sweet Home

Legal Aid attorney Genevieve Gaboriault helped Haja, a low-income senior citizen, keep her home.

THE SCENE at the administrative hearing was heartbreaking. Haja Sheriff was in tears as she was told that she no longer had the right to live in her home. A refugee from Liberia, Haja speaks almost no English and cannot read or write. When she received a notice that she would need to testify as to whether she had the right to her Section 8 housing, she was extremely concerned.

Haja had a Section 8 voucher for several years when a woman unrightfully and illegally claimed Haja’s home as her residence for a home daycare. When Haja tried to defend her case, the court did not provide an on-site interpreter, which greatly impeded her ability to understand what was happening and more importantly, to defend herself. Because Haja did not know how to present evidence that the daycare provider lived elsewhere, she lost the case and her Section 8 voucher of ten years.

But as fate would have it, Haja was soon to meet Genevieve. Through an interpreter, Haja communicated, “The day the Lord wanted me to meet Genevieve, my eyes were full of tears.” Haja was familiar with Legal Aid because she had received assistance when she became an American citizen. After the hearing, a gentleman encouraged her to contact Legal Aid. Genevieve Gaboriault has worked as a housing attorney for Legal Aid for four years and specializes in representing tenants in foreclosure and Section 8 housing cases. On Haja’s behalf, Genevieve filed an appeal at the Minnesota Court of Appeals with the argument that the housing authority did not have enough proof and did not provide an on-site interpreter. She was able to provide the necessary documentation to prove Haja’s right to her home and the case was successfully settled in Haja’s favor.

“I am grateful to all the people at Legal Aid. They change the lives of people.”

—Haja Sheriff

“Housing is a most basic need for all people,” explained Genevieve. “Without a voucher, Haja would have ended up a homeless, low-income senior citizen. In addition to losing her home, the stress of this situation was impacting her health. It was imperative that Haja gain back the rights to her home and her peace of mind.”

Today, Haja and her grandchildren live safely in their suburban home. “Genevieve is an angel. Every time I called her, she comforted me and calmed me down. She was tremendous to me. I am grateful to all the people at Legal Aid. They change the lives of people.”

In reflecting on this case and the work of Legal Aid across all clients, Genevieve observes that “Everyone makes a difference. Whether it’s a financial donation or their time, together, the result is extremely powerful.”
Outreach coordinator Amanda Kotnik-Collins helps a rural Minnesota family seek medical assistance for their son’s life-saving surgery.

AS THEY LOOKED down at their son in his hospital bed at Rice Memorial Hospital in Willmar, Sandra and John Leininger had a lot on their mind. The Leingners adopted Josiah three years ago when he was only three months old. Josiah, originally from Haiti, was in the United States on a medical visa and had multiple severe disabilities, including Dandy Walker Syndrome, a congenital brain malformation that causes developmental delays as well as other physical challenges.

“We didn’t know that Josiah was in our plan until we were at church one day and learned that this boy needed a home,” explains Sandra. “We were just drawn to help him.” The family is no stranger to raising children with special needs. They have six children of their own. Two still live at home, including their youngest son, Joshua, who has special needs due to complications during childbirth. They have also recently adopted a daughter from Haiti following the earthquake—Chelda is eight years old.

Sandra learned about Legal Aid through Rice Hospital. The Leinegers had legally adopted Josiah, but his medical visa had expired and he was waiting for his American citizenship papers to be finalized. Josiah had been fairly healthy until he came down with Respiratory Syncytial Virus (commonly known as RSV), a virus that causes infection of the lungs and breathing passages and is a major cause of respiratory illness in young children. Josiah’s condition worsened and quickly led to a life-threatening situation and a growing mound of medical bills. Sandra needed help. Amanda Kotnik-Collins, a Legal Aid Outreach Coordinator who specializes in helping clients with medical assistance, came to the rescue. “In Josiah’s situation, it was best that the mother stay with her child, so I met them directly at the hospital,” commented Amanda.

Amanda helped Sandra and her family navigate the complex systems for accessing the medical assistance they needed. “It can cost up to $5,000 just to complete the forms for citizenship, and that doesn’t even address the additional forms for medical assistance,” explained Sandra. “Amanda personally handled our case for us, which was wonderful. She was positive, hopeful and very clear about the processes and the outcomes we should expect. With her help, I could focus on Josiah and helping him get better.”

For Amanda, the Leininger’s story struck a chord. “They have huge hearts to provide a home for children whose homelands and families have been destroyed. It is rewarding to be able to help people like the Leinegers, who give so much of themselves.”

Josiah’s life literally depended on the surgery and the financial assistance to fund it. But Amanda points out that, “Everyone has a story. Whether it’s like Josiah’s story, or it’s a young adult looking for health care, access to affordable medical care is a fundamental need for quality of life for my clients. Legal Aid provides an invaluable service and resource for people who really need the help.”

“Access to affordable medical care is a fundamental need for quality of life for my clients.”

—Amanda Kotnik-Collins
Down But Not Out

Peter partners with Legal Aid attorney Justin Page to fight for essential health care coverage.

IN AUGUST OF 1973 Peter was in a serious car accident, which left him paralyzed from his neck down. He relies on the Personal Care Assistance (PCA) program to help him stay in his home and live independently. Peter was notified that the hours for his PCA were being reduced. No stranger to cutbacks with his medical care, Peter immediately picked up the phone to call Legal Aid.

After a brief intake session, Peter was introduced to Justin, an attorney for the Minnesota Disability Law Center (MDLC), a division of Legal Aid. Justin Page has worked for Legal Aid for five years, helping clients navigate the complex world of disability benefits and enforcing civil rights.

“Clients like Peter don’t come to us with minor issues,” explained Bud Rosenfield, a legal supervisor for the statewide MDLC practice. “The system is very broken and the barriers are significant, yet the needs are critical. We focus on helping our clients get around those barriers and get a basic amount of assistance that allows them to stay in their communities and improve their quality of life.”

In Peter’s case, Justin identified the issues that needed attention. First, Peter did not receive proper notice explaining his rights prior to the cut taking place. In fact, he received a notice dated four days after the effective date, which gave him no time to challenge the decision or make alternative plans. The second issue involved whether or not the assessment for the number of hours Peter needed was fair and reasonable. As a quadriplegic living alone, Peter relies on his PCAs to help him perform the vast majority of basic daily routines. Justin represented Peter, arguing both issues on his behalf through a hearing. At the time of publication Justin and Peter were awaiting a decision from the court.

“Justin can get more insight and be a lot more effective than I can,” explains Peter. “Whether it’s the Department of Human Services or another agency, they are much more receptive to a call from Legal Aid than they are from me. I simply can’t do it by myself.” Peter also appreciates that Justin takes the time to clearly understand the issue at hand, the proposed resolution and the final outcome. With the myriad of complex regulations, it is virtually impossible to navigate the system without an advanced understanding of the available resources and the systems in which you must work.

For Justin, his work with Peter is a clear example of what inspires him most about working at Legal Aid and specifically within the disability law discipline. “I like knowing that our work at Legal Aid makes a difference for our clients. We have the tools and the means to act as their voice, advocate on their behalf and get them the services they deserve.”

When it comes to helping clients meet their basic needs, Legal Aid employs a multi-level approach, explains Bud. “First, we work at the policy level to prevent cuts and influence policies that protect our clients. Then we work with clients individually to attain the best possible outcomes. Legal Aid is concerned about not casting anyone on the side of the road. In our work, 95 percent effective just isn’t good enough.”

“Whether it is the Department of Human Services or another agency, they are much more receptive to a call from Legal Aid than they are from me.” —Peter
SAVE GAMC
PLEASE
MANY OF LEGAL AID’S clients suffer from serious physical and/or mental disabilities. Legal Aid attorney Anne Quincy works with many clients who lack the health care coverage necessary to deal with these disabilities. As an example, Legal Aid client Brenda has a serious mental health issue and has been hospitalized following multiple suicide attempts. Brenda, with the help of the health care program called General Assistance Medical Care (GAMC), has received treatment for her condition and has secured an apartment in a Group Residential Housing (GRH) program. With regular medical care, Brenda is on the road to recovery with hopes of soon returning to work. Anne has offered Brenda and many others individualized advice about how to access health care coverage that is fundamental to helping them improve or retain their quality of life.

GAMC provides vital health care coverage for Minnesotans living on 75 percent of the federal poverty standard (approximately $8,400 per year) or less. At the close of the 2009 legislative session, Governor Pawlenty took two significant actions to decrease the funding of GAMC. First, the Governor, by line-item veto, struck over $300 million from the second year of the biennial budget for GAMC, which would have resulted in the program ending in the summer of 2010. Second, the Governor used “unallotment” to remove an additional $15 million in GAMC funding, moving the end date for the program up to March 1, 2010.

Anne Quincy, working with Legal Aid’s legislative advocates Maureen O’Connell and Lisa Fink from the Legal Services Advocacy Project (LSAP), began immediately to reach out to GAMC enrollees and other community organizations interested in working to find a solution to the loss of this vital program.

With the impending elimination of GAMC, Anne, Maureen and Lisa began attending community gatherings with outreach workers and concerned enrollees to talk about the elimination of GAMC. The trio also began working on behalf of individual enrollees to reshape legislation proposed to replace GAMC to ensure it worked for all affected enrollees. Legal Aid’s advocates met frequently with community groups such as the Catholic Charities Office for Social Justice, Saint Stephen’s Human Services Program, the Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless and the Minnesota Nurses Association, and helped form the SAVE GAMC Coalition. More than 50 organizations met over the summer to help forge an effective alliance that would bring the needs of GAMC enrollees to the attention of their representatives. Working with provider organizations and the hospitals, the alliance has helped shape a new program. Researching, reviewing, and commenting on proposed legislation to replace GAMC, Legal Aid’s advocates blended their experience of on-the-ground work with enrollees and their public policy experience to help redesign a new program that would better serve GAMC enrollees.
TOTAL CASES CLOSED

11,298*

Cases Closed By Category
- Consumer rights: 955
- Keeping kids in school/Helping special education students: 287
- Preventing homelessness, protection, safe & affordable housing: 3,036
- Securing basic needs/self-sufficiency opportunities: 1,130
- Access to health care: 1,401
- Family law: 1,428
- Helping immigrants: 1,667
- Mental health and other individual rights: 606
  - Youth law: 262
  - Other: 526

Cases Closed By Region
- Minneapolis: 5,201
- St. Cloud: 3,401**
- Willmar: 1,411
- Minnesota Disability Law Center: 1,284

Cases Closed By Primary Language
- English: 9,078
- Somali: 1,003
- Spanish: 519
- Not Known/Not Applicable: 128
  - Not Specified: 102
    - Oromo: 87
    - Hmong: 75
    - Other: 74
    - ASL: 45
    - Russian: 45
    - Vietnamese: 38
    - Arabic: 26
    - French: 18
    - Laotian: 12
    - Bosnian: 9
    - Tigrinya: 7
    - Mandarin: 6
    - Cantonese: 5
    - Creole: 4
    - Serbo-Croatian: 4
    - Cambodian: 3
    - Korean: 3
    - Polish: 3
    - German: 1
    - Japanese: 1
    - Swahili: 1
    - Yoruba: 1

* This includes all cases for Mid-Minnesota Legal Assistance, including the Minnesota Disability Law Center.
** Now includes Chisago and Isanti Counties
### Revenue

- **Government Grants and Contracts**: $7,451,407 (60.7%)
- **United Ways**: $1,044,653 (8.5%)
- **Foundations**: $874,833 (7.1%)
- **Fund for the Legal Aid Society**: $1,100,000 (9.0%)
- **Lawyers Trust Account Board**: $679,687 (5.5%)
- **Miscellaneous Revenue**: $201,468 (1.6%)
- **Court Awarded Attorney Fees**: $197,863 (1.6%)
- **Interest/Endowment Earnings**: $69,241 (0.6%)
- **Other legal services program to support MLSC & LSAP**: $490,452 (4.0%)
- **Fellowships and Clerks**: $170,026 (1.4%)

**Total Revenue**: $12,279,630 (100%)

### Expenditures

- **Poverty Law Services**: $8,137,500 (63.6%)
- **Disability Law Services**: $2,053,632 (16.1%)
- **Administration**: $1,155,404 (9.0%)
- **Fundraising Expense**: $420,479 (3.3%)
- **State Support Services**: $534,977 (4.2%)
- **LSAP**: $483,171 (3.8%)

**Total Expenditures**: $12,785,163 (100%)

**Prior Reserve**: $3,458,162

**Year End Reserve**: $2,952,629
Legal Aid’s success depends on the generosity of those who support us. We are grateful, particularly in today’s challenging economic times, for the support of individuals, law firms, corporations and foundations who have provided gifts to The Fund for the Legal Aid Society, The Legal Aid Society of Minneapolis, St. Cloud Area Legal Services, Western Minnesota Legal Services, and the Minnesota Disability Law Center.

Legal Aid makes every effort to properly acknowledge each of our donors. If we have misspelled or inadvertently omitted your name, please let us know. We will correct it in future publications.

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The Fourth Annual Santa, Dreidel and Elf Run was a huge success. Legal Aid extends a special thank you to the St. Louis Park High School National Honor Society for their help managing another successful event!

And the 2009 winners are…

The most runners in a large firm: Faegre & Benson LLP

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In 2009, Legal Aid served clients speaking more than 27 languages.
A Record of Service

Each year Legal Aid helps thousands of disadvantaged Minnesotans find much needed assistance in securing adequate access to safety, shelter, food, clothing and health care. We couldn't provide this service without the help of those who generously donate their time, money and skills to Legal Aid's mission. There is perhaps no better example of such generosity than the one set by Bruce Blackburn, a partner at Oppenheimer Wolff & Donnelly LLP. Bruce has been involved with Legal Aid for half a century. He was introduced to the organization his second year in law school in 1957 when a student Legal Aid clinic was started. He volunteered to be one of the student lawyers and has been involved ever since. He served on the Board of Directors for a record-setting 36 years and is currently the co-chair of the Planned Giving Campaign Steering Committee.

“It has been clear to me from the beginning in law school years ago that a lawyer has a responsibility to provide assistance to disadvantaged people whenever he or she can—whether it’s a contribution of money or time or both. Legal Aid is fundamental to aiding Minnesotans who need help in a society that is sometimes difficult to live in and be a part of.”

We gratefully acknowledge Bruce’s life long devotion to Legal Aid and to social justice and are proud to honor his dedication.
Partners With Passion

In 2009, four members of the Legal Aid staff received awards that serve as a testament to the dedication and quality of Legal Aid’s work. Congratulations to these women who have made a tremendous difference in the lives of the people and organizations they support every day.

> **Ann Cofell**, a Deputy Director of Mid Minnesota Legal Assistance (MMLA), was recently honored by **Anna Marie’s Alliance** as a part of their “30 Who Made A Difference” program. In honor of their 30th anniversary, Anna Marie’s Shelter publicly recognized 30 individuals or organizations that have made a difference in providing safety and shelter for battered women and their children. Ann, who has worked at Legal Aid’s St. Cloud office for 29 years, was honored specifically for her work in continuing to strengthen the relationship between Anna Marie’s shelter and Legal Aid.

> **Anne Henry**, an attorney with the Minnesota Disability Law Center, received the 2009 Access Press Charlie Smith Award. Anne has advocated for the rights of people with disabilities for more than 30 years. Early in her career, Anne was part of a trial team that resulted in Minnesota’s deinstitutionalization of persons with developmental disabilities. Anne’s advocacy at the legislature has improved the lives of countless individuals and families by ensuring that people with disabilities have opportunities to live as independently as possible in community settings while receiving needed services.

> **Karla Krueger**, supervising attorney, was awarded the 2009 Bernard P. Becker Award by the Minnesota Bar Association. Karla received the award in recognition of her dedicated service and outstanding achievements in providing legal services to low income and disadvantaged clients. Karla has worked at Legal Aid’s St. Cloud office for 22 years. She specializes in elder law and currently supervises the senior law project.

> **Irene Opsahl**, supervising attorney of the Youth Law Project, has been awarded the Hennepin County Bar Association’s 2009 Distinguished Service Award. The award is given in recognition of public service work throughout an attorney’s career. Irene was acknowledged for her efforts in working with children before they become embroiled in the juvenile justice system or the child protection system. Along with her team, she has helped hundreds of children return to and stay in school, and to find housing, health care and a real possibility for a future.
In 2009, Legal Aid assisted 130 people with legal issues associated with unemployment insurance.
Law Firms Giving $200 or More Per Lawyer to the One Hour of Sharing Campaign

Legal Aid is grateful to the following law firms supporting The Fund for the Legal Aid Society’s One Hour of Sharing Campaign at the $200 per lawyer level, or more, in 2009.

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Suite 101B
Midtown Commons
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Telephone: (651) 228-9105

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Suite 101B
Midtown Commons
St. Paul, MN 55114
Telephone: (651) 222-3749

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Minneapolis, MN 55401-1780
Telephone: (612) 332-1441

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