

A Positive Outlook

Justice for All

For the uninitiated, the legal system can be stressful, intimidating and confusing. Thankfully, for most of us, a trip to the courtroom is a rare occurrence, and we can rely on the network of trained and experienced lawyers in Southern Nevada to shepherd us through the legal labyrinth. But for hundreds of thousands of our community's most vulnerable residents, hiring a qualified attorney is beyond their financial means, leaving them with no option but to navigate the system on their own or to simply give up—absent recourse, absent justice, absent the protections that are the very foundation of enlightened society.

The saving grace for many are the committed professionals at the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada, a nonprofit organization dedicated to assisting those in need. Founded in 1958, the Legal Aid Center serves more than 125,000 clients each year, helping them face their own unique legal crises. The vast majority of these clients are people with limited means, living at or near the poverty level. They include foster children, victims of domestic violence, senior citizens, and families facing foreclosure, bankruptcy, eviction or other financial catastrophes.

Under the leadership of Executive Director Barbara Buckley, the Legal Aid Center employs more than 60 staff attorneys, about as many support staffers and a network of 1,000 private lawyers who volunteer their time and expertise to serve clients through a number of programs. The Children's Attorneys Project ensures that abused and neglected children have a voice in court, the Family Justice Project provides a range of services for victims of domestic violence and other crimes, and the Consumer Rights Project offers help across many types of consumer issues, including landlord/tenant law, bankruptcy, debt collection and health insurance. The Legal Aid Center also runs two self-help centers for family and civil law, hosts community classes and holds regular Ask-A-Lawyer events, all of which extend the center's ability to provide its services with those who need it.

And that need is only growing. In 2007, the Legal Aid Center served a total of 13,500 clients; today that number is nearly 10 times higher. While the center has grown along with the community it serves, adding lawyers and staff to accommodate higher demand and building a \$16 million headquarters in 2013, it is still not enough.

A 2018 report commissioned by the Nevada Supreme Court Access to Justice Commission

found that the state's five primary legal aid services employ about one lawyer for every 6,000 residents living below the poverty line, far lower than the ratio of 15 lawyers for every 6,000 residents serving the community at large. The report also estimates that the legal needs of low-income Nevadans exceed the capacity of the state's legal aid providers by a wide margin, creating a "justice barrier" that leaves three-quarters of those legal needs unmet. Notably, that same report found that the state's legal aid programs generated \$128 million in economic impact, equating to a return on investment of \$7 for every \$1 spent. For the record, I think those estimates are low.



Jeremy Aguero, Principal Analyst

Capacity challenges notwithstanding, Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada is among the best of its kind in the country. And, if you have ever met Barbara Buckley, you know exactly why. For the past 30 years, she has not only been dedicated to the proposition of justice for all, but she has done so with compassion and humanity. Unless, of course, you chose to prey on the vulnerable; in which case, she will be relentless, tireless and unwavering (i.e., your worst nightmare). I am sure Ms. Buckley would be quick to say that she does not stand alone, and that her colleagues, policymakers, and benefactors all make the good work of the Legal Aid Center possible. A fair point, with due respect to the tone and tenor set from the top.

I certainly hope for the day when its services become unnecessary; but, until that day comes, I take comfort in knowing that the Legal Aid Center will be there for those who need it most. The service that they provide is not only to our most vulnerable citizens, but to each and every one of us. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once wrote from a jail cell in Birmingham, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

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