

# Utah Bar.® JOURNAL

Volume 38 No. 5  
Sep/Oct 2025



# An Urgent Call to the Legal Community: Protect Access to Justice in Utah

by Justice Christine Durham and Amy Sorenson, co-chairs of the Utah State Bar Access to Justice Commission

Utah's cornerstone civil legal aid providers – Legal Aid Society, Utah Legal Services, and Disability Law Center, who together make up the “and Justice For All” (AJFA) partnership – are facing an existential threat. Proposed federal budget cuts, the expiration of pandemic-era relief, and reductions and eliminations in long-standing grant programs are converging to create a funding crisis that threatens not only these time-tested programs, but the operation of our civil justice system itself. If we allow the safety net these organizations provide to unravel, we will all feel the consequences – in our courts, in our communities, and in the integrity of the legal profession itself.

For decades, Utah's three primary legal aid organizations have quietly and effectively provided critical legal services to those who cannot afford private representation. These organizations are often the only resource available for low-income individuals navigating complex legal problems like domestic violence, unlawful eviction, guardianship for children or vulnerable adults, denial of disability benefits, employment and housing discrimination and financial abuse of senior citizens. These organizations also support the work of additional partners across the state through a collaborative grantmaking program, maximizing their impact.

Incredibly, because of their efforts, expertise, and programming, Utah's AJFA organizations serve more than 25,000 Utahns with free or low cost legal services each year.

Yet federal funding is a large and therefore critical part of how these organizations are able to do so much good. Our legal aid

providers rely on funding from the Legal Services Corporation, from the federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA), and from a number of other federal programs that support housing and disability advocacy, among others. To say these programs are facing steep cuts borders on understatement – **and Utah's legal aid agencies stand to lose up to 50% of their already modest budgets in the next year alone as a result.**

For decades, Utah has relied on our AJFA organizations to provide legal clinics, family law advice and representation, and disability rights advocacy, in traditional and limited scope representations. They reduce court congestion and support fair outcomes. Their work makes our legal system more efficient, more effective, and more fair. Every legal aid attorney and paralegal contributes to stability in the courts by ensuring that litigants are prepared, informed, and better equipped to engage in the process, and to accept and honor its outcomes.

And these benefits aren't charity, they make good financial sense. Specifically, **for every \$1 invested in legal services** for victims of domestic violence and families in crisis, **Utah taxpayers save an estimated \$13 in costs**, including savings as to law enforcement, hospital care, and public assistance. A recent analysis estimated that the family law services provided by just two of AJFA's core agencies – Utah Legal Services and Legal Aid Society – result in **at least \$48 million in savings to Utah taxpayers each year.**

Simply put, the loss of this funding means the loss of these programs. Experienced pro bono lawyers will be laid off. Clients will be

*JUSTICE CHRISTINE DURHAM (ret.) and AMY SORENSON are Co-Chairs of Utah's first state-wide Access to Justice Commission, a standing committee of the Utah State Bar tasked with advancing access to the Utah courts through its support for non-profit legal aid and social services organizations, sponsoring innovative pro bono projects, and overseeing data-driven research as to effective legal outcomes for underrepresented communities and litigants.*



turned away, left to navigate personal risk and the court system, if they can, alone. Our legal aid organizations will be forced to reduce services drastically and to close critical programs entirely.

As members of the Utah legal community, the community which founded AJFA, we cannot allow this to happen.

Since its founding in 1999, AJFA has united the courts, the State Bar, law firms, and individual attorneys around a shared mission: to fulfill the fundamental promise of our justice system – equal access to justice regardless of income. The three legal aid organizations comprising AJFA have more than delivered on our investment and commitment.

In this extraordinary moment, they are now in need of extraordinary help.

So what can we do?

**Of course, we must give our time.** Take a pro bono case; sign up for free legal answers; staff a clinic; encourage our colleagues to do the same. Recognize those in our firms and community who give of their time and skills in this important way and reinforce a culture of service.

**But we also must educate our friends, colleagues and elected officials about the importance of legal aid.** Tell them that in the Utah courts, 87% of people in civil cases cannot afford a lawyer and attempt to go it alone. Tell them that as bad as this statistic is, without our AJFA organizations, it will get worse. **Tell them that litigants without lawyers lose important**

**rights – rights like access to their children, benefits, pay, work and housing, often regardless of the merits of their cases.** Tell them that we as a state have been effectively and efficiently righting this wrong through the work of AJFA legal aid lawyers for years.

All of this is **necessary, admirable, and personally fulfilling.** And it is **not nearly enough.**

**We must also attempt to close the funding gap ourselves,** at whatever financial level we can, and we must do so now. The Utah State Bar has 14,638 active and inactive members. We are a force.

- If we contribute to AJFA, we will help pay for the salaries of full-time legal aid attorneys who handle high caseloads and complex legal issues with efficiency and expertise.
- If we contribute to AJFA, we will help our AJFA organizations continue to represent literally **dozens** of pro bono clients each **day**.
- If we contribute to AJFA, we will help ensure our state and our state courts remain efficient, accessible, and fair.

Please join us in expanding your support for AJFA and help ensure that 25,000 Utahns each year will continue to receive critical legal help.

**To donate:** Go to [andjusticeforall.org/donate](http://andjusticeforall.org/donate)

**To volunteer:** See opportunities at [joinpaladin.com/utahprobono](http://joinpaladin.com/utahprobono)

**To advocate:** Reach out to your legislators at <https://le.utah.gov>

## Free, confidential help is just a phone call away!

Utah Lawyers Helping Lawyers is committed to rendering confidential assistance to any member of the Utah State Bar whose professional performance is or may be impaired because of:

- **mental illness,**
- **emotional distress,**
- **substance abuse, or**
- **any other disabling condition or circumstance.**

LHL matches those it assists with one-on-one volunteer peer mentors and conducts continuing legal education.



**LAWYERS  
HELPING  
LAWYERS**

**801-900-3834**  
[contact@lawyershelpinglawyers.org](mailto:contact@lawyershelpinglawyers.org)