

# Upholding Justice Together: Our Responsibility to Support Civil Legal Aid

by Kim Cordova

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As attorneys, we are entrusted with safeguarding justice. That responsibility extends beyond our clients to the public and the legal system itself. Justice is not self-executing. It requires access, advocacy, and resources. Access to justice is simply not a desirable goal but a fundamental requirement for fairness, equity, and stability. Courts and legal systems are designed to resolve disputes, uphold rights, and ensure that laws are applied consistently.

Yet in Utah, as across the nation, far too many of our neighbors face life-altering legal issues without the means to secure counsel. They are evicted without a fair hearing, denied benefits that keep their families afloat, or trapped in cycles of abuse without legal protection. The law touches nearly every aspect of life, but justice remains elusive when legal help is out of reach.

This is where civil legal aid steps in. Legal aid, broadly defined, is the provision of free or affordable legal services to individuals who cannot otherwise afford representation. At its heart, legal aid ensures that justice is not a privilege for the wealthy but a right accessible to everyone, regardless of economic status. And so, this is where we, as members of the Utah State Bar, must ask ourselves: what is our role in ensuring that justice is not a privilege reserved for the few, but a right secured for all?

### The Justice Gap in Utah

The numbers tell a stark story. The Utah Foundation reported that 86% of civil legal needs among low-income Utahns go unmet. See Utah Foundation, *The Justice Gap: Addressing the Unmet Legal Needs of Lower-Income Utahns* (April 2020), <https://www.utahfoundation.org/uploads/r776.pdf>. That translates into hundreds of thousands of unresolved problems each year – families losing homes, survivors of domestic violence unable to find safety, seniors denied healthcare or benefits, and people with disabilities left without protections.

Legal aid balances the scales by providing these individuals with the tools and expertise they need to be heard. It is not about winning or losing a case, it is about ensuring that every person has

a fair chance in the legal process. Civil legal aid organizations exist to narrow this gap, but they are stretched thin. They rely on limited government funding, philanthropy, and most importantly, the legal profession's willingness to step up.

### And Justice for All: A Utah Model of Collaboration

Utah is fortunate to have a nationally recognized model in And Justice for All (AJFA). Founded in 1999, AJFA unites three cornerstone providers:

- **Utah Legal Services** – representation in housing, consumer protection, and public benefits
- **Legal Aid Society of Salt Lake** – family law expertise, particularly domestic violence, and child custody
- **Disability Law Center** – protecting the rights of people with disabilities through advocacy and litigation

Together, these organizations serve more than 30,000 Utahns each year. By fundraising jointly, sharing space at the James B. Lee Justice Center, and coordinating services, AJFA reduces overhead and maximizes resources. More dollars go directly to clients.

But even with this efficiency, demand continues to outpace capacity. And now, our core agencies face the possibility of losing up to 50% of their funding if federal cuts move forward. Such a loss would be devastating, and tens of thousands of Utahns could be left without help. That is why the role of our Bar community is not optional. It is urgent, and it is essential.

### Why Civil Legal Aid Matters to the Profession

Supporting legal aid is not just charity; it fulfills our oath. When individuals cannot access the courts, the rule of law itself is weakened. Without representation, our system risks devolving into one where outcomes depend more on resources than on rights. Legal aid strengthens the justice system by ensuring that cases are argued competently and that courts hear both sides of the dispute.



This leads to better informed decision making by the judiciary and a more efficient legal process. When a litigant appears unrepresented, cases often take longer, as judges must take extra care to ensure fairness or correct a procedural mistake. By providing professional assistance, legal aid reduces these inefficiencies and improve overall access to justice.

Civil legal aid also strengthens communities and promotes self-sufficiency. Consider:

- When child support is enforced, children are lifted out of poverty.
- When tenants have counsel, unlawful evictions decline, and housing stability is preserved.
- When benefits like Medicaid are restored, families avoid medical debt and economic ruin.

Every legal aid success story reduces reliance on public assistance, prevents crises from spiraling, and allows individuals to contribute more fully to society. Many legal problems – unpaid wages, unlawful evictions, denial of healthcare, predatory lending practices – disproportionately affect those already living in poverty. Left unresolved, these issues can spiral leading to homelessness, unemployment, or family breakdown. By intervening early, legal aid can prevent problems from escalating. It can empower individuals

by providing them with knowledge and confidence to assert their rights. Over time, this creates stronger, more resilient communities in which people are better able to participate fully in civic life. Consequently, every time legal aid strengthens a family or prevents a crisis, it also affirms the core values of our profession.

Moreover, while legal aid programs require investment, they also produce significant economic social returns. Every dollar spent on legal aid can save multiple dollars in avoided costs, such as emergency housing or medical care. In addition, legal aid supports economic productivity. Workers who secure unpaid wages, tenants who maintain stable housing and families who resolve custodial disputes are better able to contribute to their communities and economies. In this way, legal aid is not simply a charitable service but an essential part of a healthy, functioning society.

### **The Lawyer's Role: Pro Bono, Giving, and Advocacy**

Our profession has a proud tradition of service. But the scale of today's justice gap demands that each of us consider how we can help. Utah Rule of Professional Conduct 6.1 reminds us that this is more than goodwill – it is a professional responsibility. Lawyers are called to devote time, financial support, or programmatic involvement to ensure equal access to justice.

I see three primary avenues:

#### **Pro Bono Representation**

The Utah State Bar's Access to Justice Office, together with AJFA partners, coordinates numerous opportunities – from pro se calendars to virtual legal clinics. Even a few hours of your time can change the trajectory of someone's life.

#### **Financial Support**

Individual attorney gifts and law firm contributions through the Leadership Campaign for Equal Justice provide the steady funding that keeps AJFA's partners serving clients every day. This support is essential; without it, thousands of Utahns would be left without help.

#### **Advocacy and Leadership**

We must also use our voices to advocate for robust public funding of legal aid. Federal and state dollars are at risk, even as demand grows. Legislators, policymakers, and the public need to hear from us that civil legal aid is essential infrastructure, not an optional add-on.

#### **A Call to the Utah Bar Community**

As your Bar President, I view this not only as an invitation but as an obligation. Access to justice is the cornerstone of our legal system, and it cannot be realized without the active participation of the legal profession.



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- Tell legislators and community leaders why legal aid matters.

These are not abstract ideals. They are urgent, concrete steps we must take – together – to strengthen both our profession and our society.

### Building a Just Community

The ultimate measure of our community is how we serve those most in need of legal protection. A society committed to justice must ensure that its most vulnerable members are not excluded from the legal system because of their financial circumstances. Equal justice under the law is not merely a slogan; it is a promise that requires constant vigilance, commitment, and investment.

And Justice for All embodies what is possible when collaboration, efficiency, and compassion meet. But it cannot succeed without us. As lawyers, we carry not only the privilege of practicing law but the responsibility of ensuring justice is accessible to all Utahns.

The importance of legal aid cannot be overstated. It safeguards fairness, protects human rights, breaks cycles of poverty, strengthens the justice system, and yields significant economic and social benefits. Legal aid is more than a service; it is a cornerstone of democratic society and the rule of law. By investing in legal aid, we affirm our shared belief that justice must be available to everyone.

As we enter this holiday season, I am especially mindful of the generosity of Utah's legal community. Your service and support have already changed lives. Yet the needs ahead are great, and the season of giving is the perfect time to renew our shared commitment to justice.

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