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April 2020

Legal Services Team Continues to Serve the Community During Pandemic

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has changed life as we know it for residents of Miami-Dade and Monroe Counties, Legal Services of Greater Miami remains open for business with staff working remotely and serving the community through online and phone intake. In the months ahead, the Legal Services team will continue to work tirelessly to ensure that vulnerable members of our community, who often face disproportionate challenges and harm during a crisis, have access to equal justice and do not get left behind.

"This is an unprecedented time as we all face challenges amidst COVID-19," said Monica Vignes-Pitan, Legal Services Executive Director. "We will face an increased demand for the critical services we provide, and remain steadfast in our commitment to serve the individuals and families directly impacted."

In the midst of this pandemic, the demand for our services will increase because our most vulnerable neighbors—the elderly, homeless and disabled— are now joined by the staggering number of newly unemployed. The number of unemployment applications filed in the State of

Florida is historic, with more than 520,000 applications filed since March 15th, in contrast to 326,653 filed during the entire year in 2019.

Although there is a current moratorium on evictions and the courts are mostly closed, in the months ahead those affected by the pandemic will face legal problems as they struggle to maintain access to healthcare, food, employment, affordable housing and other basic necessities. As the courts reopen, we anticipate a rise in evictions, consumer scams, reemployment assistance and food benefit cases, and issues relating to the CARES Act, among others.

What We are Currently Doing to Help:

Legal Services remains a trusted source for legal advice at a time when policies are rapidly changing and people are concerned about how they will be able to pay the rent, apply for reemployment assistance, or navigate the small business loan application process.

The Legal Services team has been actively reaching out to the community, reinforcing the message that we remain open and

ensuring that the community is aware of their rights and available resources, including:

- **Extensive community outreach to social service agencies** with virtual presentations related to housing and the current moratorium on evictions;
- **Engagement with local television, radio, and print media**, such as [Daily Business Review](#), [The Miami Herald](#), [WLRN](#), [WMBM](#) and including Spanish media— [CNN en Español](#), [Diario Las Americas](#), and Univision;
- **Virtual presentations to local elected officials and their staff** to inform them on our expanded services during this time;
- **Guest speakers on Our Community Cares** broadcasts to address tenant protections, housing protections in the new federal stimulus package, reemployment assistance, and applying for public benefits; and
- **Creation of a COVID-19 web page**, www.legalservicesmiami.org/covid-19, to share information and resources.

For information on how you can help, contact mviguespitan@legalservicesmiami.org.



**From the
Executive Director
Monica Vignes-Pitan**

Looking back on the last decade, we are proud of our many accomplishments and successful advocacy on behalf of our clients and the community, keeping families in their homes and providing access to food and healthcare. Although COVID-19 has changed our world and our community, it has not deterred us from our mission.

Today, our work is more critical than ever. Our goal is to ensure that both our most vulnerable neighbors and those who are temporarily unemployed have access to vital government programs, stable housing, and healthcare that will enable them to weather this storm.

We have relied on our supporters during difficult times, and know that many of you are also enduring this hardship. For those who are able to do so, we ask that you and others in the community join us:

- Help to spread the word that Legal Services is open and serving the community during this crisis;
- Sign up for pro bono work—once the courts open, we anticipate a surge in clients;
- Consider a gift to Legal Services—any and all support will go toward the common goal of equality as we build a fair, just and economically stable community through and beyond this pandemic.

From everyone at Legal Services, we hope that you and your family are staying healthy, and we thank you for being part of the Legal Services family. Together, we will get through this.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AT A GLANCE

In 2010, parts of Miami-Dade were starting to climb out of the Great Recession. Over the past ten years, Legal Services advocacy has focused on ensuring that the recovery reached all of Miami-Dade's neighborhoods. Our accomplishments during that period of time include:

2010-2019

221,107



46,895



\$57,655,154



Today, as we continue our tradition of advocating for social and economic justice, we remain steadfast in our adherence to Chesterfield Smith's edict to "do good by doing right." In 2019 alone, we accomplished the following:

2019

20,162



4,851



\$8.9 M



897





Legal Services Helps Single Mother Recover Tax Credit

Gloria, a single mom with a minor child, came to Legal Services after the IRS disallowed more than \$6,000 in tax credits she was eligible to receive. The IRS also froze her tax refunds, causing a severe financial hardship for this low-income mother who was trying to provide for herself and her child. Legal Services helped Gloria sue in Tax Court to recover the money, and represented her throughout the Tax Court process.

Ultimately, **Legal Services successfully obtained a full concession by the government, and the IRS released the refunds to Gloria with interest.** Gloria was very pleased with the outcome in her case. *"My attorney and the staff were so professional and always kept me informed. I feel very satisfied with the results."*

The Low Income Taxpayer Clinic is directed by **Senior Attorney Mary Ann David**, and utilizes both law student and pro bono attorney volunteers. The Clinic is funded in part by the **Stephen Cypen/Jerome A. Yavitz Charitable Foundation**. For more information on the Clinic please contact mdavid@legalservicesmiami.org.

Legal Services Helps Elderly Woman with Identity Theft

Caridad became very nervous when she was sued by a private student loan company for over \$52,000. She was 80 years old when she was served, and her only income was a small pension and Social Security Retirement benefits.

She did not take out this loan, but she knew who did. Her deceased daughter had earlier forged Caridad's signature as a co-borrower on a student loan application. Caridad learned of the loan in her name much later when, before her daughter's passing, her daughter admitted to doing this.

Senior Attorney Mandy Mills litigated the case, arguing the defense of identity theft, among others. Mills hired a hand-writing expert to help establish that Caridad's signature on the loan application was a forgery. **With this information, after discovery and mediation, the student loan company agreed to dismiss the lawsuit with prejudice so no one can sue Caridad on this debt again.**

Pro Bono Champion Seeks Justice for New Mother

The right to exercise maternity leave often becomes a fight to keep your job. Anna*, whose part-time job was protected under the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, went above and beyond the Act's requirements, keeping her employer informed during her pregnancy and while on leave, and giving appropriate notice of her return to work. However, when Anna returned she was told she had been replaced with a new temporary employee. To make matters worse, her employer also challenged her Re-employment Assistance Benefits Claim.

Unemployed and responsible for a small family, Anna turned to Legal Services for help. **Pro bono attorney Mark Berrios-Ayala accepted the challenge. With his help, Anna now has a "right to sue" letter from the EEOC and can pursue her employment discrimination claim.**

"If you fight with all your might, there is a chance of life; whereas death is certain if you cling to your corner," said Berrios-Ayala, quoting Sun Tzu. Thank you to the champions who come out of their corner and provide pro bono legal assistance to clients who otherwise would not have a fighting chance!

*Client's name changed to protect her identity.

We're Here For You

Our work is made possible through the generous support of our **Leadership Circle Donors**

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Wells Fargo – *Neighborhood Entrepreneurs Project*

Donor Levels Reflect Cumulative Giving for the Campaign Period from January 1, 2017 through March 31, 2020.

Legal Services Receives Cy Pres Award Thanks to Levine Kellogg Lehman Schneider + Grossman LLP



LKLSG Managing Partner Jeff Schneider served as local counsel in *Schreiber v. Ally Financial Inc.*, a consumer class action. At the conclusion of settlement distribution efforts, U.S. District Court Judge Darrin P. Gayles ordered the remaining funds be distributed to a certain cy pres recipient. Legal Services extends a heartfelt thanks to Jeff, and to Jason Kellogg, Legal Services Campaign Committee Co-Chair, for their leadership in selecting Legal Services of Greater Miami to receive these unexpected and greatly needed funds, which will make it possible for us to bring equal justice to hundreds of vulnerable individuals and families in our community.

Build Your Legacy and Support A Community of Equal Justice



THE
LEGACY
SOCIETY

Legal Services' **Legacy Society** was established to promote the economic stability of our most vulnerable neighbors and build a stronger community for generations to come. When you make a bequest to Legal Services, you leave a legacy of empowerment, placing individuals and families on a stable path to the future.

These are some of the ways you can create a legacy at Legal Services:

- Designate Legal Services as a beneficiary of your last will and testament or trust.
- Establish Legal Services as a beneficiary of your life insurance.
- Create a Charitable Remainder Trust.
- Direct IRA transfers.

You can make a difference for generations to come by placing a family on the path to economic stability. Your planned gift to Legal Services will serve as testament to your legacy of care, concern and compassion, creating a brighter future for the entire community.

Connect your compassion and concern to your financial and estate planning and transform the future for someone in need. Become a member of The Legacy Society.

Making the Case In the Business Community for Healthcare



PHOTO (left to right):

Dr. Panagiota Caralis, Special Assistant Chief of Staff, Miami VA Health Systems, Professor of Medicine UMMS (PANELIST)

Dr. Janisse R. Schoepp, Vice President of Operations & Strategy, Health Foundation of South Florida (PANELIST)

Congresswoman Donna E. Shalala, U.S. House of Representatives, 27th District (PANELIST)

Monica Vignes-Pitan, Executive Director, Legal Services of Greater Miami

Jaret Davis, Co-Managing Shareholder – Miami Office, Greenberg Traurig (MODERATOR)

The Legal Services Community Outreach Committee recently held a groundbreaking panel discussion with Miami healthcare and civic leaders. The discussion opened the doors to a greater understanding of the need to improve the social determinants of health — economic stability, education, family and community support, and housing — which together constitute 50% of the factors impacting health outcomes. Panelists agreed that leadership by the business community is critical to improving those social determinants.

Congresswoman Shalala emphasized that in order to understand healthcare, we must first understand and learn about people's lives, and how they are impacted by the social determinants of health.

Dr. Caralis explained that because her patients increasingly need services that go beyond medicine to support their wellness, she is unable to simply prescribe a pill to make them healthier. She relies on organizations such as Legal Services to serve as a vital link in the continuum of social and medical services for the poverty and low wage population.

Dr. Schoepp elaborated on innovative solutions being implemented by the Health Foundation of South Florida to address the root causes of social determinants of health. The Foundation currently funds a **Medical-Legal Partnership (MLP)** — a collaboration between medical teams and legal services organizations designed to remove legal barriers to better health. For example, medical teams refer patients to attorneys who help them access public assistance and preserve their housing. MLPs are increasingly popular because of their positive impact on patient care, combined with the fiscal impact and improved efficacy of hospitals and health centers.

Legal Services addresses the social determinants of health by providing assistance to over 20,000 members of our community each year — the vast majority of them women, children, and low-wage workers. These hardworking members of our community turn to Legal Services for help when they face legal barriers that deny them access to housing, healthcare and education — issues that directly impact their health. For information on our services, please visit www.legalservicesmiami.org.

Maintaining a Healthy Workforce: The Impact on Your Business's Bottom Line

We Extend a Special

Thank You

to our 3rd Annual Business Breakfast Panel attendees,
host, and esteemed participants for a successful
groundbreaking discussion on February 21, 2020.

Panelists:

Congresswoman Donna E. Shalala
U.S. House of Representatives, 27th District

Panagiota Caralis, MD, JD, FACP
Special Assistant Chief of Staff, Miami VA Health Systems

Janisse R. Schoepp, MPH, PhD
VP of Operations & Strategy, Health Foundation of South FL

Moderator:

Jaret L. Davis, Esq.
Co-Managing Shareholder - Miami Office, Greenberg Traurig

Our utmost appreciation for the efforts of our event organizers:

Jason Kellogg
Levine Kellogg Lehman Schneider + Grossman
Community Outreach Committee Chair

Alex Jimenez
Grove Bank & Trust
Business Breakfast Panel Chair

Many thanks to our generous sponsor and host:

GT GreenbergTraurig



TOP PHOTO (left to right):

Stephen F. Rosenthal, Partner, Podhurst Orseck, Lilly Ann Sanchez, The LS Law Firm,
Jason Kellogg, Partner, Levine Kellogg Lehman Schneider + Grossman, Alex Jimenez, Vice President, Grove Bank & Trust

MIDDLE PHOTO (left to right):

Dr. Panagiota Caralis, Special Assistant Chief of Staff, Miami VA Health Systems, Professor of Medicine UMMS (PANELIST),
D. Porpoise Evans, Partner, Perlman Bajandas, Yevoli & Albright, P.L., Jesika Diaz Munar, Munar Law, Ida Wright, Legal
Services Board Member, Juanita Alvarez, Legal Services Board Member, Yanick Landess, Legal Services Board Member

BOTTOM PHOTO:

Monica Vignes-Pitan, Executive Director, Legal Services of Greater Miami addresses the room

Have Wheels, Will Travel For Equal Justice



Collaboration, camaraderie, and community engagement were three outcomes of the Akerman/Legal Services Traveling Justice Project. For a second time, in February 2020 associates and partners from Akerman volunteered pro bono time to serve clients in the Florida Keys alongside Legal Services Staff Attorneys.

The attorneys boarded an Akerman sponsored bus before dawn and traveled two hours to Marathon, where they hosted a mobile legal clinic. The volunteers partnered up and counseled clients throughout the day, providing advice and counsel on family law matters, consumer matters,-

public benefits and economic stability, and stable housing.

Marathon was chosen because of its central location in the Keys, and because legal access is limited with no courthouse and few attorneys. Marathon and the surrounding Keys were also the hardest hit in 2017 during Hurricane Irma, which resulted in the destruction of 1,179 homes and major damage to another 2,977 homes. Today residents are still dealing with widespread legal consequences.

The ripple effect of this Akerman sponsored event goes far beyond offering clients legal

advice. It also strengthened collaboration, camaraderie, and our community, which are priorities for the Legal Services Pro Bono Unit.

*"It is a complete privilege to have the opportunity to do pro bono legal work, especially through Traveling Justice, which allows lawyers to go into the community rather than requiring clients to come to us," said **Gina DelChiaro, Partner, Director of Pro Bono Initiatives, Akerman.** "Akerman stands proudly alongside the lawyers and staff at Legal Services in our shared dedication to pro bono and increased access to justice."*

HARVARD STUDY OF EVICTION DIVERSION BEGINS IN MIAMI RENTERS SEEKING REPAIRS CAN GET LEGAL ADVICE AND INFORMATION TO AVOID EVICTION



Legal Services recently launched a first-in-the-nation study of an eviction diversion program, in partnership with Harvard Law School's Access to Justice Lab. The Tenants' Equal Justice Clinic will help renters enforce habitability rights without facing a retaliatory eviction by their landlord.

This long-term study will evaluate how effective the diversion program is at keeping people out of court—and in their homes. It will also help Legal Services determine how to use its resources most effectively.

*"When tenants challenging poor conditions come to Legal Services after their landlords file an eviction in court, it is often too late to help," said **Jeffrey Hearne, Legal Services Director of Litigation.** "The Clinic will provide early legal intervention before the parties end up in court."*

In 2019 there were an estimated 17,000 evictions filed in Miami-Dade County—nearly 50 evictions per day. This number fails to capture the scope of the "forced move" crisis whereby landlords fail to repair properties until they are no longer habitable, and the tenant has no choice but to move out.

Clinic participants will receive either a Legal Services designed self-help brochure or an appointment. The Harvard-led team will use a randomized evaluation to make a conclusive determination about how well the Clinic helps participants avoid eviction. Researchers will also study participants' housing security over a period of years.

"This study is the first we know of that will show whether a project can prevent a dispute over repairs from becoming an eviction," said Jim Greiner, Faculty Director of the A2J Lab. "If this program helps people maintain secure housing, it could offer a path forward for other similar legal services providers across the country."

To learn more about the Tenants' Equal Justice Clinic, call the Legal Services intake hotline at (305) 576-0080 or visit www.legalservicesmiami.org/contact-hours.



Guerby Noel Selected for Community Scholars in Affordable Housing 2020 Cohort

Legal Services Staff Attorney Guerby Noel

was recently selected to participate in the 2020 Cohort of the Community Scholars in Affordable Housing. The program is designed to identify emerging leaders, and connect and familiarize them with community development and affordable housing policy and practice in South Florida. Each year the Program selects professionals working in the nonprofit, for profit, and government sector who are looking for ways to address the issues surrounding the affordable housing crisis in South Florida. Cohort members will each come up with a capstone topic to present to local professionals from the non-profit, for profit, and government sector.

Guerby is well positioned to create a captivating capstone to present at the end of the program. He began his career with Legal Services as an intern with the **University of Miami Tenant's Rights' Clinic** and as an **H.T. Smith Law Clerk Fellow**. From there, Guerby delved into the numerous housing issues facing the low income community, which range from fighting evictions to stopping the loss of naturally occurring affordable housing. These experiences inspired Guerby's desire to explore other means of addressing the affordable housing crisis that South Florida faces.

"During these COVID-19 times, we have seen legislative protections put in place for those in affordable housing. The goal of the cohort is to ensure these types of protections are considered and presented to the local government in order to avoid the chaos that ensues in a time of crisis."

Guerby Noel, Esq.



THE ELEVENTH ANNUAL

HEART OF GIVING
CELEBRATION AND JUDICIAL RECEPTION

*The Eleventh Annual HeART of Giving Celebration is postponed
in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Now more than ever, the community will need our help.

*We hope we may count on your continued support,
so we can work through this unprecedented period, together.*

*Further information will be provided
as it becomes available.*