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April 2021

Building a Community of Equal Justice: Ensuring Access to Economic Recovery

It has been one year since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and throughout that time, Legal Services has continued to play a vital role in ensuring access to justice for marginalized communities.

The legal needs of low-income families have only grown during the crisis but Legal Services' has stepped up to the challenge of assisting clients with their evolving needs amidst an ever-changing legal landscape. Legal Services has been educating the community about their legal rights and the various financial programs available and advocating for the legal rights of those most impacted to mitigate the financial effects of the pandemic on them, their families, and our community.

Legal Services handles a wide range of legal issues that focus on eradicating barriers to economic and social justice. Keeping families in their homes and avoiding homelessness is always important but became even more critical during this crisis.

Legal Services' attorneys have been working tirelessly to help tenants avail themselves of the COVID-19 eviction moratoria. Tenants like Anitra, who lives with her disabled son, began to fall behind on rental payments after losing her job as a security guard. The landlord served Anitra

with an eviction during the moratorium. Legal Services got the eviction dismissed which allowed her and her son to remain in stable housing until she found other security work.

Maintaining stable income has also been crucial and challenging during the crisis. The widespread loss of employment coupled with the well documented barriers to accessing Reemployment Assistance (RA) made it even more difficult for families to keep their heads above water. Compared to the previous year, Legal Services experienced a 1,124% increase in demand for assistance in RA cases. Our team worked to ensure that clients' applications were processed and critical benefits were awarded.

In June, Silvia* contacted Legal Services after her life changed overnight at the age of 60 when she found herself unemployed after working for years as a full-time nanny. She immediately filed for RA but was denied and started falling behind on rent so she moved in with a friend temporarily. Legal Services appealed the RA denial and Silvia started receiving benefits dating back to her application date. Due to our advocacy, Silvia received over \$6,500 in retroactive benefits, which helped her get current on her bills and find a suitable home.

Legal Services also provided income security for Mary and her husband, who were both furloughed. Mary had worked for a cruise ship vendor for over 20 years, and her husband worked for an airline. Both are industries deeply impacted by the pandemic. Despite receiving RA benefits, it became increasingly difficult to keep up with their existing bankruptcy plan payments. They were at risk of falling further into debt and ultimately losing their home through foreclosure. Legal Services successfully modified the plan and reduced the monthly payment by over 40%. As a result, they are current on their bankruptcy payments, will not lose their home, and can now keep this valuable asset in their family.

Legal Services is empowering community members with information and resources, collaborating with partners, and advocating for clients to ensure access to justice for our entire community. While we cannot be certain what lies ahead, Legal Services is responding to the needs of our community and advocating for their rights. **Our commitment to Building a Community of Equal Justice envisions a more resilient community where every resident is afforded access to the opportunities of the recovery.**

** Name changed to protect client's confidentiality.*



From the Executive Director Monica Vignes-Pitan

In just a few months, Legal Services celebrates 55 years of building a community of equal justice. We are proud of our many accomplishments over the years and successful advocacy on behalf of our clients and the community, ensuring access to safe and affordable housing, healthcare, education, vital government assistance and greater economic opportunity.

Looking back there have been sentinel years of trials and tribulations. Although 2020 had more challenges and sadness than many of us can process, we served our community while it was enduring the pandemic, economic and racial crises, which demonstrated our resilience, ingenuity and commitment to improving our community.

Legal Services attorneys protect the rights of our neighbors when they face unlawful evictions, loss of income, or denial of access to health care services, breaking down the barriers to economic stability and a path forward out of poverty. Their unwavering dedication to our clients has resulted in the following advocacy outcomes for 2020:

- **\$868,868** Government and Safety Net Programs funds recovered,
- **\$1,648,371** Wrongfully claimed payments avoided,
- **\$4,241,935** Value of Homes Saved, and
- **\$802,312** Value of subsidized housing preserved for clients at risk of losing their home.

This past year, the economic, social and racial inequities endured by many in our community have been laid bare. The clear picture that has emerged is an opportunity to engage in dialogues, advocacy and partnerships that would not have been possible a short time ago. At Legal Services, we remain committed to challenging systemic inequities and advocating for social, racial and economic justice for all.

How You Can Help

At this time last year, there was a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety about where we were headed. We provided advice and guidance to our corporate clients on how to best position their businesses to grapple with the financial effects of COVID. However, our firms and clients had the resources and skills to adapt and, for many, even thrive in a new environment. The same is not true for everyone in our community. **We saw the miles-long food lines, the distress over a broken unemployment system, the challenges for children attending virtual school, and the racial inequities impacting many in our community.** Thousands of our neighbors required legal advocacy to access food, healthcare, safe and affordable housing, vital government assistance and education.

As lawyers, we know that our legal rights require the most protection when they are vulnerable due to a crisis. **Your support for Legal Services ensures that the most vulnerable members of our community have access to justice and achieve greater economic stability.** I, along with the Campaign Committee, am extremely grateful for those of you who actively support Legal Services' mission through your pro bono service and are assisting with the high demand of COVID-related cases. And, for those of you that are unable to volunteer but would like to fulfill your obligation to do more, **I kindly urge you to join my firm and I in making a financial contribution to Legal Services of Greater Miami. Let's stand together to make a greater impact in the community!**

Click [here](#) to make a gift today.

Brigid Cech Samole



Brigid F. Cech Samole

Shareholder, Greenberg Traurig Miami Office



From Campaign Committee Co-Chair Brigid F. Cech Samole



Erin Hoover, Esq.



Legal Services Champions VA Benefits for Disabled Vet

William Sims is a 34-year old Army Veteran who came to Legal Services for assistance with his Veterans Affairs (VA) compensation benefits. He enlisted at the age of 22 and served as a Combat Medic. After his Honorable Discharge, he had difficulty integrating back into civilian society. **Due to his mental health difficulties, he had trouble maintaining a steady job and was homeless for some time.**

In 2019, Mr. Sims enrolled in mental health treatment at the VA Healthcare System and filed a claim for compensation benefits. His claim of service connection for Major Depressive Disorder was granted and rated as 70% disabling. Later, **he enrolled in their Residential Program for further treatment, and although he was hospitalized for a service-connected disability, his claim was denied.**

Legal Services Attorney Erin Hoover assisted him **by filing an appeal challenging the VA's denial and representing him at an informal conference.** In 2021, the VA issued a favorable decision granting his appeal and awarding Mr. Sims a lump sum of \$6,640 for past-due benefits. He's grateful that Legal Services helped him navigate the complex VA system and persisted until he received the benefits he rightfully deserves.



Legal Services Secures Settlement for Mobile Park Residents

In late 2019, all residents in Elm Shade Park* received a Notice of Park Closure for change of use of land evicting them by May 2020. This **park closure was going to leave 14 working families with nowhere to go.** Many have resided there for over 20 years and would lose their home if it could not be physically moved. If they left their home on the property, they would only be entitled to \$1,375.

Legal Services assisted them in forming a Homeowners Association and then filing a lawsuit on its behalf. Ultimately, **Legal Services was able to negotiate an extra 6 months to relocate, 3 months of free rent, and \$6,500 for each homeowner.** This amounts to 4 times what each one would have been entitled to under the statute! Through this effective advocacy, the homeowners and their families **avoided forced homelessness as well as being displaced in the midst of COVID when having a home matters that much more.**

*Name changed to protect client's confidentiality.

Pro Bono Attorneys Prevent Wrongful Eviction & Secure a Safe Home For Cancer Survivor

In the summer of 2020 at the height of the pandemic, **Ms. Harris*, a disabled cancer patient, had massive sewage back up that filled her entire studio apartment.** She reported the unlawful unsanitary conditions to the City, and the landlord was fined. However, the building management did not relocate her even though the sewage filled the home for days and refused to pay hotel expenses or allow her back in although she had a standing lease.

Pro Bono Attorney Juan Enjamio, who specializes in complex employment disputes, mentored **Associate Attorney Daniel Butler to defend Ms. Harris against the illegal eviction which would render her homeless.** They both immediately intervened and resolved the matter through legal research and solid negotiation skills. As a result, the **lease was cancelled and the security deposit was transferred to a new lease for a different unit.** Additionally, the landlord agreed to provide **rent abatement for over 2 months** and issued a **credit for 1 month's rent; therefore, Ms. Harris did not have to resume paying rent until January 2021.**

*Name changed to protect client's confidentiality.



Juan C. Enjamio, Esq.

Daniel Butler, Esq.

"I found working with Legal Services and helping Ms Harris to be professionally and personally enriching.

...It is great to see the fruits of your work have a tangible positive impact on someone's life.

The staff helped me navigate an area of the law that is outside my typical practice. I will gladly take more cases to help tenants such as Ms. Harris who need professional assistance when facing difficult and life-altering situations."

Juan C. Enjamio, Managing Partner at Hunton Andrews Kurth and a true Law Firm Partner for Equal Justice

"Working with the Eviction Defense Project was immensely rewarding. Not only was I able to help a fellow Miami resident, I also gained insight into a new practice area. Eviction can be devastating.

...I encourage all attorneys to volunteer their time to the project so that they can help someone truly in need."

Daniel Butler, Associate Attorney, Hunton Andrews Kurth

SUPPORT EQUAL ACCESS TO JUSTICE THROUGH PRO BONO SERVICE

Follow Juan and Dan's lead as well as countless other pro bono attorneys who give of their time and skills to create a meaningful impact on someone's life. Now more than ever, there is a huge critical need for pro bono attorneys to help fill the gaps that will arise out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

PRO BONO OPPORTUNITIES

On demand CLE training in the following areas:

- Remote Tenants' Equal Justice Clinic
- Remote Consumer Equal Justice Clinic
- Remote Income Equal Justice Clinic
- Eviction Defense Project

Mentorship and malpractice insurance provided.

Our work is made possible through the generous support of our
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Donor Levels Reflect Cumulative Giving for the Campaign Period from January 1, 2020 through December 31, 2022.

Making the Case in the Business Community

The Hospitality Workforce: A Cornerstone of Our Local Economy

PHOTO (top left to bottom right):

MODERATOR:

Lee Schrager, Senior VP, Communications & Corporate Social Responsibility, Southern Glazer's Wine and Spirits; Founder of South Beach & NYC Wine & Food Festivals

PANELISTS:

Jocelyn J. Armand, Advocacy Director, Legal Services of Greater Miami

Wendy Kallergis, CEO & President, The Greater Miami and the Beaches Hotel Association

Laura Drosdowech, Hospitality Institute Manager, Miami Hospitality Center, Miami Dade College

Nourbese A. Joseph, Founder, People Strategy Reimagined

Susana Fernandez, Director of Human Resources, Loews Miami Beach Hotel

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

Jason Kellogg, Partner, Levine Kellogg Lehman Schneider + Grossman; Legal Services Community Outreach Committee Chair



The Legal Services Community Outreach Committee together with the Greater Miami & the Beaches Hotel Association recently held a groundbreaking panel discussion with Miami's hospitality leaders.

The discussion opened the doors to a greater understanding of the critical need to support the hospitality workforce at this time. The largest hospitality sectors in S. Florida – hotels and restaurants – have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Many of these businesses have been forced to lay off most or all employees, reduce hours, or shut down entirely, which has in turn affected low-wage, minority hospitality workers most and left them even more vulnerable.

Lee Schrager, who moderated the discussion, emphasized that the workforce is critical to the success of the hospitality industry and having trained, qualified employees who are ready to serve as businesses reopen will be key.

Susana Fernandez explained that because Loews employs several members of the same family, entire households were affected when they were forced to furlough or lay off. She noted the Loews has been a strong proponent of lateral service since before the pandemic and that has been the “secret sauce to their success” as it has allowed them to be nimble and adaptable throughout the pandemic. Cross-utilized staff so employees can fulfill multiple functions can be highly effective to balance labor costs with the quality of service offered.

According to **Laura Drosdowech**, companies should support the educational goals of their staff in order to recruit and retain employees who are versatile and qualified. She pointed to several creative ways companies can provide support for career mobility — some include tuition reimbursement, small scholarships, paid time off and flexible work schedules to accommodate trainings and class schedules.

Prioritizing the safety of workers is also crucial, so Miami Dade College (MDC) worked closely with **Wendy Kallergis** to provide robust trainings to hotel employees on how to safely reopen based on guidelines issued by the Mayor. MDC also received a federal grant which allowed them to offer an 8-hour training to displaced hospitality workers along with

\$1,000 stipend upon completion. This program was well-received and approximately 2,500 hospitality workers participated.

The panelists also agreed communication with staff has been imperative during these uncertain times. For example, Susana maintained open and transparent communication with furloughed staff in their preferred language though a texting platform. Also, **Nourbese Joseph** stressed the importance of having authentic conversations with staff about Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in order to drive meaningful change in the industry. To address some of the challenges amplified by the pandemic, she discussed how it is important for companies to tie their business strategy to their DEI efforts because it will contribute to continued sustainability and success.

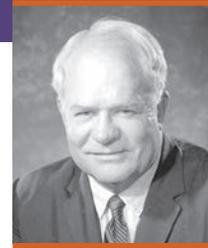
Jocelyn Armand shared how Legal Services has remained a resource for the hospitality workforce, by continuing to provide free, civil legal assistance to over 20,000 members of our community each year—the vast majority of them women, children, and low-wage workers. These hardworking members of our community turn to

...the workforce is critical to the success of the hospitality industry.

Legal Services for help when they face legal barriers that deny them access to housing, healthcare and income stabilization—all issues that the hospitality workforce have been facing. Additionally, Legal Services continues to provide reliable and accurate information on changes in the law and financial relief available. She also detailed that the recently enacted American Rescue Plan is a comprehensive attempt to help combat the economic crisis including stimulus payments, expanded unemployment, child tax credit, rent and food assistance as well as assistance directed to restaurants and bars. By addressing the effects of the financial impact created by the pandemic on hospitality workers, companies can regain stability, and we can lay the foundation to create a fair and equitable community.

To view the event on demand, please visit [here](#).

Chesterfield Smith Society



Chesterfield Smith devoted his life to making certain there is a level playing field for everyone and that the rights of the most vulnerable among us are protected with the highest quality of legal advocacy. Your membership in the Chesterfield Smith Society places one more family on the path to economic stability.

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Engagement + Investment = Impact

Donor Levels Reflect Annual Gifts for the Period Beginning May 1, 2020 * Sustaining Donors Pledges and Gifts as of 4/7/2021



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The Young Professionals Council consists of members of diverse backgrounds and professional careers who are dedicated to Legal Services' mission of providing high-quality, free civil legal services to low-income individuals and families in Miami Dade and Monroe Counties.

Welcomes all committed to making an impact on our community
and seeking opportunities to Build A Community of Equal Justice by:

 Raising Money	 Serving as Ambassadors in the Community	 Volunteering Time & Services	 Hosting Events
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YOPRO MEMBERSHIP:

A minimum annual contribution \$100 (\$50 for students).
The contribution supports Legal Services' advocacy efforts.

Benefits include:

- ▶ Reduced ticket pricing for HeART of Giving Celebration
- ▶ 2 CLEs or Conversations with Leaders in Miami's Legal, Business & Civic Community
- ▶ 3-4 Happy Hours with reduced pricing
- ▶ Invitation to Chesterfield Smith Society events & Holiday Appreciation Event
- ▶ Recognition on Legal Services Website & Newsletter

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP TERM STARTS JANUARY 1ST



YOUNG PROFESSIONALS COUNCIL
CONVERSATIONS WITH LEADERS

Featuring
Senior U.S. District Judge for the Southern District of Florida
PATRICIA SEITZ

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Wednesday, May 19, 2021

6:00 PM-7:00 PM

Save the Date



THE TWELFTH ANNUAL
HEART OF GIVING

September 30, 2021
6:00 pm

PRESENTATION OF

2021 EQUAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP AWARDS



**MAYOR
DANIELLA LEVINE CAVA**
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