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OP-ED: KENTUCKY'S CIVIL LEGAL AID PROGRAMS BRACE THEMSELVES
FOR UNPRECEDENTED NEED FOR LEGAL HELP

As we begin the process of reopening the economy and emerging from the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic, health, and social/emotional hardships facing our communities will become clearer. COVID-19 will leave countless Kentuckians with new and unanticipated challenges. Many of the challenges will involve civil legal issues: keeping one's home, protection from abuse, securing benefits like unemployment, and much more.

We must use every available resource to provide relief during the COVID-19 recovery. Lawyers, specifically civil legal aid lawyers, will play an integral role in our front-line response.

Civil legal aid must be a crucial component of the Commonwealth's comprehensive approach to the recovery. Unlike in criminal cases, people dealing with the civil justice system are not guaranteed representation from a public defense attorney.

In every county in Kentucky, legal aid programs and volunteer lawyers have quickly adapted to serve as many people as they can through remote client consultations, virtual clinics, and representation in telephonic emergency hearings.

Kentucky's legal aid programs are looking for new and innovative ways to serve those in need. The programs have launched **Together Lawyers Can**, a statewide pro bono project to connect Kentucky lawyers with people in crisis as a result of the pandemic. Over 200 lawyers from across the Commonwealth have volunteered so far.

But this is the calm before the storm, and our programs need much more support to handle what will be an overwhelming need for our services. This support will become even more of a necessity as civil legal problems surge when protections put in place by the Governor and Kentucky Supreme Court expire.

Historic numbers of workers will need help with unemployment and family-leave benefits, as well as appealing wrongfully denied claims. Most have never before had to navigate the public-benefits system and without legal assistance, far too many will not obtain their rightful benefits to endure job losses, reduced hours and illness.

We likely all know someone unable to pay their rent or mortgage due to missed paychecks and strained household finances. Civil legal aid programs have already been inundated, and will continue to be, with requests for help from tenants and homeowners worried about how they will avoid eviction or foreclosure when they will be months behind on their payments. Without timely access to civil legal aid, a dispute with a lender or landlord can easily lead to homelessness.

Thanks to increased support from Congress over the past several years, civil legal aid front line responders are in a better position to respond to the crisis. However, with economically vulnerable populations growing exponentially due to the COVID-19 crisis, more resources from the state, local, and private sector are needed to serve these hard-working Kentuckians in the weeks and months to come.

The current crisis is generating a tsunami of needs that will overwhelm our legal aid system. Even before the outbreak less than half of low-income Kentuckians received the civil legal help they needed. And now, with so many more in need, Kentucky's leaders must redouble the Commonwealth's commitment to justice for all.

Additionally, civil legal aid programs provide a tremendous return on investment for our cities, counties and Commonwealth. Whether through cost savings such as domestic violence prevention, eviction and foreclosure prevention and increased court effectiveness, or direct economic impact like restoring income streams from Social Security, child support, wages and unemployment insurance, legal aid services benefit the taxpayer. Support for civil legal aid must be part of our government's short- and long-term policy responses to COVID-19 at all levels.

We can see the needs now, and we know what's coming. Kentucky's civil legal-aid programs are on the front lines. We will meet the crisis head-on, but increased support throughout the Commonwealth will be needed to ensure that together we can get through this.

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