

# The Philadelphia Equal Justice Center

Jessica Hilburn-Holmes 26 March 2019

55 years ago, on the cusp of creating what has become our civil legal aid system, then-Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy remarked in an address at the University of Chicago law school:

*In the final analysis poverty is a condition of helplessness -- of inability to cope with the conditions of existence in our complex society.*

*But we, as a profession, have backed away from dealing with that larger helplessness. We have secured the acquittal of an indigent person -- but only to abandon him to eviction notices, wage attachments, repossession of his goods and termination of welfare benefits.*

*To the poor the term "legal" has become a synonym simply for technicalities and obstruction, not for that what is to be respected. The poor man looks upon the law as an enemy, not as a friend. For him the law is always taking something away.<sup>1</sup>*

Today, Philadelphia's deep poverty continues to be one of the City's most daunting challenges. While the local economy has improved and revitalized many parts of the City, nearly 400,000 Philadelphians live below the poverty

line. Of those, nearly 200,000 Philadelphians live in deep poverty, surviving on approximately \$100 per week.<sup>2</sup>

According to a 2017 Legal Services Corporation report, 71 percent of low-income households experienced at least one civil legal problem in 2016.<sup>3</sup> When civil legal issues arise, 80 percent of Philadelphians facing economic hardship are navigating high-stakes legal situations without a lawyer -- in which their families, homes, and livelihoods are in jeopardy. Although the landmark Supreme Court case *Gideon v. Wainwright* required the government to provide an attorney to defendants in criminal cases who are unable to afford their own attorneys, those facing civil legal issues are not guaranteed legal representation.

The central role of legal aid in community well-being may be under-appreciated, largely because the role of attorneys is often misunderstood. Legal aid nonprofits have such a significant impact on the community because they serve individuals and families who experience three distinct types of problems: (i) legal issues that no other agency can fully resolve, such as complex educational barriers for immigrant children or students with disabilities; (ii) individual or family legal emergencies that could devolve into seriously negative long term consequences for health, safety, or family stability; and (iii) situations where client needs and rights are not adequately addressed by government programs, such as the termination of public benefits or the denial of needed

services.

Legal aid advocates address these crucial issues directly and comprehensively, often integrating their assistance and collaborating closely with other social services and government agencies. In short, the legal services system ensures that individuals and families in need do not fall between the cracks, and that the most challenging client circumstances are addressed before an unresolvable crisis can occur. In addition, some of the most impactful and rewarding work of legal aid staff involves providing community education, written materials, and training for individuals and groups, helping them to proactively deal with situations before legal problems arise.

To better address these problems, a group of civil legal aid non-profits has joined together to create a new non-profit center in Philadelphia called the [Equal Justice Center](#) (EJC), which will improve the basic infrastructure of how legal aid services are delivered to communities. The EJC is a pioneering concept that aims to inspire similar models and will affect how combined legal aid and social services are delivered in communities across the country. While non-profit centers have operated successfully in other industries, the EJC will be the first purpose-built center to co-locate legal aid organizations with the shared mission of equal access to justice. It is anticipated that tens of thousands of people will be served through the work and services provided at the EJC.

The EJC will respond to low-income Philadelphians' dire need for civil legal aid services by offering multiple client-centered services in one centralized location over specialized services at multiple locations. This transformative project will rethink the delivery of civil legal aid through several innovative strategies, by:

- creating operational efficiencies;
- leveraging technology to bring innovative solutions to critical issues;
- providing opportunities for collaborative programming to overcome challenges in the field;
- increasing delivery of direct client services; and
- improving responses to emergent civil legal needs of the community.

## **Creating Operational Efficiencies**

The EJC will provide significant financial advantages for the building tenants by creating building-wide systems and services that will reduce operational costs by as much as 20 percent. These savings will be derived from features such as: group purchasing of office supplies and service contracts; shared infrastructure of printers, phone service, and internet connections; and shared back-office operations of tasks like accounting, human resources, and technology support. These savings can then be re-directed into client programs and services. Further, the EJC will be governed by a board comprised of the building's tenants, such that the agencies will have control

over these features -- further enabling innovation and collaboration beyond what has yet been imagined.

## **Leveraging Technology to Bring Innovative Solutions to Critical Issues**

The EJC will include state-of-the-art amenities designed to leverage technology to benefit legal and social service delivery, including a number of innovative technology features, such as:

- a digital self-help center in coordination with the courts and powered by the collective knowledge and expertise of its members;
- high-speed connectivity and digital resources for the legal and local Chinatown community;
- a collaborative Incubator Project from area law schools to provide services to clients who do not qualify for legal aid;
- a cutting-edge centralized client portal and referral network; and
- a legal self-help center with digital information kiosks.

## **Providing Opportunities for Collaborative Programming**

The EJC will have two shared amenity floors in the building dedicated to client service and member collaboration. Bringing together agencies and staff from

different organizations can stimulate an environment ripe for new connections and collaborations, creative thinking, and innovation. These connections will come from:

- informal conversations in common spaces;
- community events such as “Lunch and Learns”;
- resource and information sharing;
- legal action convenings such as Take Action Philly (TAP); and
- collaborative governance of the building.

## **Increasing Delivery of Direct Client Services**

The EJC will enable its tenant organizations to implement more client-centered best practices to deliver better, more efficient, and more effective answers to families who need housing, food, education, and healthcare. Most importantly, the EJC will directly impact clients of legal aid organizations. Typically when clients reach out to one legal services program, they discover that an interlocking issue must also be addressed by a different program. At the EJC, clients are more likely to receive comprehensive and coordinated legal services. The EJC will provide a single point of access for many services to resolve legal problems more easily and more rapidly.

## **Improving Responses to Emergent Civil Legal Needs of the Community**

Philadelphia’s legal aid community is renowned for its

collaborative efforts: its legal aid agencies have been meeting regularly for more than 40 years in an effort to identify and address the civil legal needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of the Philadelphia community. They strive every day to provide high-quality representation, to advocate for systemic improvements to reduce inequality, and to shape a safer society characterized by opportunity. Collaboratively, this group of organizations has achieved deeply effective innovations in legal aid including partnering with courts and housing agencies to create the Residential Mortgage Foreclosure Diversion Program, an award-winning initiative to help thousands of Philadelphians keep their own homes, as well as the Landlord/Tenant Legal Help Center, an innovative project that provides immediate legal advice, counsel, information, referrals, and pro se assistance to unrepresented low-income tenants facing eviction, rental housing crises, and homelessness in Philadelphia. Co-location in the EJC will ensure continued and closer partnerships within this active community.

Furthermore, because of its size and scope, the EJC will raise awareness for legal aid. It will stand as a symbol of the City's commitment to the promise of equality under law, and as an enduring structure that continues to give back to the City and the greater Philadelphia region.

## **Conclusion**

Unfortunately, because resources are scarce, the demand

for civil legal aid in Philadelphia far exceeds the ability of legal aid providers to deliver those services. Philadelphia is the very birth place of the nation. To combat poverty and to bring Philadelphia closer to delivering on the bedrock promise of "Equal Justice Under Law" in the United States, it is critical that we expand access to civil legal services for all members of the community regardless of an individual or family's background or financial status. Civil legal aid agencies are the driving force behind real change in the lives of millions of people, providing answers to families who need food, housing, education, and healthcare. By permanently transforming the capacity of the city's legal aid system to sustain its operations and meet client needs, the EJC will support the empowerment of Philadelphians in poverty and disrupt the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

## **Works Cited**

<sup>1</sup> Kennedy, Robert F. Address, Law Day, University of Chicago, Chicago, May 1, 1964. [www.justice.gov/05-01-1964.pdf](http://www.justice.gov/05-01-1964.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> "American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates," American Community Survey, U.S. Census, 2016, [www.census.gov/philadelphiacountypennsylvania](http://www.census.gov/philadelphiacountypennsylvania).

<sup>3</sup> The Justice Gap: Measuring the Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-income Americans. Washington, DC: Legal Services Corporation. 2017. Accessed March 12,

## Author Bio

**Jessica Hilburn-Holmes** serves as Executive Director of the [Philadelphia Bar Foundation](#), the only foundation solely dedicated to supporting Philadelphia's legal aid community. As Executive Director, she collaboratively manages the Foundation's many fellowships, awards, and activities while overseeing annual grantmaking efforts to nearly 40 civil legal aid non-profits. In addition, Ms. Hilburn-Holmes works to effectuate the reality of the Philadelphia Equal Justice Center (EJC) -- a social justice initiative that will centralize, integrate, and streamline the provision of legal aid and related social services for many of the non-profits that receive grants from the Bar Foundation. A former diplomat and international lawyer, Ms. Hilburn-Holmes holds more than 35 years of legal, managerial and diplomatic experience, and a life-long commitment to working for equal access to justice. Jessica is a graduate of Brandeis University and the Georgetown University Law Center.