Why Voices?

Civil legal aid is a best-kept secret when it comes to ensuring fairness in the justice system and addressing some of our country’s most serious problems.

Whether challenging the unconscionable wait times veterans endure to obtain hard-earned benefits and medical care, advocating for fair treatment of tenants as inflated rents and rising evictions leave more and more families without affordable housing options, or partnering with physicians to help patients whose illness is due to conditions that require legal intervention to remedy, civil legal aid lawyers are often an important but unrecognized part of the solution.

Civil legal aid levels the playing field by providing legal assistance and representation, self-help centers, and access to information and forms so people can know their rights. It is essential to fulfilling our nation’s fundamental promise of justice for all – not just for the few who can afford it. The trouble is, almost no one is aware of it.

That’s why Voices for Civil Justice came into being. Voices is a new, national, non-partisan communications hub dedicated exclusively to raising awareness of the vital role of civil legal aid in helping people protect their livelihoods, their health and their families. Voices seeks to deliver three things: 1) increased visibility for civil legal aid in the national media; 2) increased capacity for media advocacy across the civil legal aid sector; and 3) a new and strengthened “brand” of civil legal aid.

The Context

Recent opinion research by Lake Research Partners and the Tarrance Group confirmed that the public is still largely unaware of the existence – and therefore the importance– of civil legal aid. This is hardly surprising, since civil legal aid receives scant coverage in the media. When journalists do cover it, many simply report that the sector is underfunded and facing yet another round of cuts. Scattered coverage of state initiatives and legal aid providers suggests that a comprehensive narrative of what civil legal aid is and why it matters has yet to take hold.

Typical media coverage also fails to convey that civil legal aid today encompasses more expansive and diversified activities and actors than it did even a few years ago. In the face of repeated funding crises, the sector has broken new ground, devising significant innovations that are serving more people and proving to be game changers. Access to justice commissions, judicial leadership, self-help centers and other court-based services, web-based access to information and forms, medical legal partnerships, expanded pro bono models and more – all comprise a broader and more effective sector that continues to be anchored by community-based legal aid organizations serving low-income people across the country. While these innovations have received some limited coverage, primarily in the legal media, they have rarely been presented as part of a narrative about an innovative sector on the move.
A Silver Lining

Fortunately, civil legal aid’s lack of visibility can also be its strength and opportunity in media terms: Voices for Civil Justice can bring journalists and the public fresh, previously untold stories about this growing, underreported crisis threatening our democracy. The opinion research suggests that we will find a receptive audience. The public believes it is important – in fact critical – to have access to legal expertise to navigate the complexities of the civil justice system. A majority of those polled in the national telephone survey, when presented with arguments both pro and con, supported increased funding for civil legal aid. In an engaged debate, we win.

By casting a constant spotlight in the media on the work of civil legal aid, Voices for Civil Justice aims to strengthen the brand identity of this growing and diversified sector; garner deeper recognition by key audiences including policy makers, opinion leaders and donors; and ultimately help increase resources for civil legal aid.

The Role of Voices for Civil Justice

Voices provides a dedicated, collective communications capacity for the civil legal aid sector, complementing the communications work of the sector’s key national organizations – among them Legal Services Corporation, National Legal Aid & Defender Association, American Bar Association and National Center for State Courts – as well as state and local legal aid organizations.

Our small staff is bolstered by the consulting services of BerlinRosen, a national communications firm; by JusticeVoices, our emerging network of spokespeople and messengers; and an advisory committee of legal aid leaders and innovators. Judges, business and civic leaders, and other allies, as well as messengers and experts drawn from the ranks of civil legal aid advocates and innovators nationwide, are being recruited and trained to help generate media coverage of civil legal aid.

The key results Voices seeks to achieve over the next two years are 1) measurably improved quantity and quality of media coverage of civil legal aid, as gauged against a baseline media analysis conducted by BerlinRosen in January 2014, and 2) measurable improvements in communications capacity within the sector, as gauged against a baseline assessment now under way. In the longer term, we seek to strengthen and broaden the brand identity of civil legal aid and to establish, via a drumbeat of media coverage, a comprehensive narrative of what civil legal aid is and why it matters. Ultimately, the measure of our success will be the growth of resources and support for civil legal aid.

Add Your Voice

Voices for Civil Justice needs the involvement of our most valuable asset – impassioned, knowledgeable and well connected advocates nationwide. Opportunities for involvement range from simply receiving our twice-monthly Voices updates, to participating in the JusticeVoices network as a member of the email discussion list, as a Connector, and/or as a spokesperson-issue expert. Visit http://voicesforciviljustice.org/sign-up to learn more and add your voice.