

## 2018-2019 Initial Statewide Communications Plan

### Overview

The Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network (PLAN) is the state's coordinated system of organizations providing civil legal aid for those with nowhere else to turn. PLAN offers a continuum of critically needed legal information, advice and services through direct representation for low-income individuals and families who face urgent civil legal problems. These problems affect basic needs such as food, shelter, employment, consumer issues, health care, and family safety.

Although Pennsylvania does not have an official access to justice commission, the state has a long history of statewide coordination of advocacy for civil legal aid and a resulting strong record of expanding and diversifying funding for legal aid. PLAN leadership identified media advocacy as a high priority for developing a coordinated statewide approach and for building capacity to implement it. Voices for Civil Justice staff has since assisted with training, coaching of key staff, and development of media placements.

Pennsylvania undertook an audit of its communications efforts using a media placement tracking tool developed by Community Legal Services. We learned that varying messages were being used and communicated. At the time of the audit in 2016, Community Legal Services in Philadelphia had developed a strong media presence in a variety of news publications through earned media placements while most of the news coverage generated by PLAN programs appeared in bar association publications and focused on funding and/or staff news. Since then, several PLAN programs have devoted staff resources to the communications efforts to increase visibility for civil legal aid and civil justice reform.

### **Why have a statewide Communications Plan?**

All of the PLAN programs are working hard to increase funding and resources for client service. Media and communications can be a powerful tool for raising awareness of our work and building the foundation for increased and diversified funding. The vitality and reach of PLAN civil legal aid programs will benefit greatly from an increased awareness of civil legal aid and a strategic, coordinated communications effort, communications plan.

Leaders of the PLAN network have identified developing a coordinated statewide approach to media advocacy as a top priority. This approach would include building capacity to implement it.

## **Broad Goal and Specific Objectives**

The overarching goal of the Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network, its affiliated programs and other partners is greater support for civil legal aid in Pennsylvania. To achieve this goal, we have developed a communications plan to bring attention to what civil legal aid is, why it matters and why it deserves support. For 2018-2019, we have set the following objectives:

### ***Garnering Strong, Sustained Media Coverage***

1. Generate 25 pieces of media coverage illustrating the value of civil legal aid in state and local outlets, including a diverse mix of reported and opinion pieces from all regions of the state, both urban and rural.

### ***Building Communications and Media Capacity***

2. Launch “Pennsylvania Voices” as an initiative of PLAN and its affiliated programs and partners, with its key functions to include recruiting the participation of all PLAN programs and other likely partners, providing training and support (in coordination with Voices for Civil Justice) to advocates and spokespeople, tracking media coverage, and guiding the media placement effort.

## **OBJECTIVE 1 – MEDIA COVERAGE**

**In 2018-2019, Pennsylvania Voices will produce or have a hand in 25 pieces of media coverage illustrating the value of civil legal aid, including a diverse mix of reported and opinion pieces in state and local outlets in all regions of the state, both urban and rural.**

### **Decision Makers**

- **Reporters, editors and producers** - These are the media gatekeepers who decide whether to cover civil legal aid in their outlets. They are looking for good stories that will appeal to their audiences, and are closely following the news cycle.
- **Advocates for civil legal aid** - Whether they are employees of PLAN-affiliated programs, pro bono attorneys, bar association officials, or others who care about civil legal aid, these advocates decide whether, when, and how to provide their stories and make themselves and their clients accessible as resources to the media. They are the conduit to clients and former clients who are crucial to the success of most pitches, providing the human scale and narrative elements that reporters need for their coverage.

### **Decision Maker Readiness**

When PLAN conducted a media audit, we learned that varying messages were being used and communicated. Several PLAN programs have full or part time media or communications staff and several programs do not have dedicated staff. Apart from the strong media track record of Community Legal Services in Philadelphia, most of the news coverage generated by PLAN programs appeared in bar association publications and focused on funding and/or staff news. Reporters, editors and producers are likely open and receptive to stronger and more extensive coverage about civil legal aid, but the advocates need to get a lot better at giving them the necessary raw material.

### **Internal Scan**

## **Assets**

- PLAN has identified media advocacy as a high priority and has committed the staff time and media expertise of Christine Kirby to this effort.
- Community Legal Services is a state leader in dedicating staff resources to media advocacy and is willing to lend its credibility and experience with the media to this cooperative effort.
- Several PLAN programs have recently dedicated staff to media and communications.
- The most recent PLAN Conference included communications training for many staff.
- At the 2018 PLAN Leadership Summit, a diverse group of state leaders enthusiastically endorsed a coordinated, statewide initiative to improve media advocacy for civil legal aid.

## **Challenges**

- Advocates for civil legal aid are busy and have priorities beyond media coverage. Sometimes availability and accessibility are challenges.
- Clients have legitimate privacy concerns, may not immediately understand the value of media engagement or what may be expected of them, and have life circumstances that may make logistics challenging. Civil legal aid advocates are the conduits to clients and their stories.
- Among Pennsylvania advocates for civil legal aid, there are different, sometimes competing messaging priorities, so the coordinated effort will need to encourage message discipline and prioritize common civil legal aid messaging as much as possible in conversations with the media.
- In some instances, media coverage might conflict with litigation or advocacy strategy.
- LSC restrictions and concerns about violating them may limit the involvement of some advocates.

## **External Scan**

### **Assets**

- Many Pennsylvania advocates for civil legal aid work with clients every day on issue areas that are in the news, and reporters are often interested in covering this work when the right raw materials are in place.
- Nationally and at the state level, there is considerable momentum around issues of justice reform, especially the inequality of the current system. There is great opportunity to tap into these narratives to interject civil legal aid's role. A good example is the current media interest in Philadelphia about a right to counsel in eviction cases.

### **Challenges**

- Although exposure is growing, civil legal aid is still not well known or understood by reporters, editors and the general public.

- Reporters need clear examples of civil legal aid’s impact, client stories and spokespeople, and expert opinions about policies that affect their media audiences, but advocates may be too overstretched to devote the time to putting all the pieces in place for media.

### **Audiences**

We start with the assumption that most Pennsylvania reporters and editors are still at the need-to-be-educated stage – that is, they may have only a limited understanding of what civil legal aid is or that legal aid is a proven solution to many of the problems their outlets are covering. Our goal is to pitch them strong stories and keep highlighting the importance of civil legal aid in any given issue area. Our advocates need education, too, about what it will take to engage effectively with the media.

As our communications efforts evolve and media relationships cultivated, PLAN recognizes that additional target audiences will be identified and corresponding messaging strategy developed.

### **Themes and Messages**

The media placement effort will focus on high priority issues that illustrate the role of the civil justice system and the fundamental importance of civil legal aid. Important themes include:

- Civil legal problems are common and numerous, and their consequences are life-changing for thousands of everyday Pennsylvanians.
- When people do get the legal help they need, individuals thrive and communities prosper.
- Civil legal aid is a vital societal resource, but grossly inadequate funding leaves too many without the help they need.

In issue areas like domestic violence, housing, health, employment, consumer debt, and for people like veterans, seniors, children, and people with disabilities, there will be opportunities to interject these themes and messages.

### **Communications Activities**

- Create and maintain an editorial/pitch calendar, make it available to advocates on the PLAN website, and use it to develop a pipeline of diverse media pitching opportunities that produces an average of two placements per month (25 per year).
- Create and maintain a statewide online resource of templates, sample pitch scripts, thought leadership pieces, etc. for use by PLAN programs.
- Create and maintain a statewide spreadsheet or database of reporter contacts, make it available to advocates on the PLAN website, and use it to target pitches.
- Take advantage of legal aid-related news hooks – e.g., civil right to counsel in evictions, state funding initiatives, etc. – to pitch news stories, opinion pieces and spokespeople.
- Create and maintain a statewide spreadsheet or database of media coverage about civil legal aid (adapted from the CLS template), make it available to advocates on the PLAN website, and use it to monitor and improve the messaging and quality of placements.
- Create a Twitter feed/Group Twitter to easily and quickly share media coverage.
- Work with Voices for Civil Justice to ensure that Pennsylvania stories are included in national media placements, and encourage Pennsylvania advocates to join the JusticeVoices network.

## **OBJECTIVE 2 – PENNSYLVANIA VOICES**

**In 2018-2019, PLAN and its affiliated programs and partners will launch a new initiative, “Pennsylvania Voices,” with its key functions to include recruiting the participation of all PLAN programs, providing training and support (in coordination with Voices for Civil Justice) to advocates and spokespeople for civil legal aid, tracking media coverage, and guiding the media placement effort of Objective 1.**

### **Decision Makers**

- **Pennsylvania Voices task force** - With the guidance and support of PLAN and affiliated program leaders, the members of a Pennsylvania Voices task force will set communications strategy and guide implementation of the communications plan.
- **Pennsylvania Voices staff** - PLAN development director Christine Kirby will devote about 15 percent of her time to staffing the work of Pennsylvania Voices. In addition, PLAN program staff members with communications in their job descriptions – including, but not limited to, Caitlin Brown (CLS), Anabel Genevitz (RHLS), Brian Gorman (SPLS), Sean Morrow (NPLS), Marion Fraley (LASP), Susan Pearlstein (PLA) and Alexandra Morgan-Kurtz (PILP)-- will contribute to Pennsylvania Voices projects such as media tracking and pitching as appropriate.

### **Decision Maker Readiness**

At the May 2018 PLAN Leadership Summit, with its focus on messaging and communications, state leaders reached agreement about the general outlines of the initial communications plan and built momentum to launch Pennsylvania Voices as a concerted PLAN initiative. The decision makers are primed and ready to take action, but this is still a fledgling initiative that will need cultivation and support.

### **Internal Scan**

See Objective 1 above for assets and challenges that also apply here.

### **External Scan**

#### **Assets**

- Voices for Civil Justice can provide powerful opinion research, effective training modules, and website resources, such as national press clips, messaging and media toolkits, to support Pennsylvania Voices’ efforts.
- Versions of Voices are starting to emerge in other states, so that Pennsylvania Voices can also take advantage of resources from colleagues in those states.

#### **Challenges**

- Coordination with the broader public interest community statewide
- Lack of dedicated financial and staff resources
- Competing demands for staff time
- Recruiting a more diverse set of allies to join your effort? (courts, business, etc.)

## **Audiences**

Advocates for civil legal aid statewide – including leadership and key staff of PLAN organizations and partners – will be the first important audience that Pennsylvania Voices leaders must engage and win over. Their core concerns will include whether they have enough time, resources and organizational support to do communications and media work. They may have concerns about the impact of media advocacy on their clients or cases.

## **Themes and Messages**

Caitlin Brown’s “Communications in Less Than 60 Minutes Per Day” is an excellent example of the themes and messages that will need to be conveyed to Pennsylvania’s civil legal aid advocates to win their support and motivate them to get involved.

There is an opportunity to leverage national opinion research through the education of PLAN advocates on the survey findings in order to better equip them as messengers and media resources.

## **Communications Activities**

In addition to the activities listed under Objective 1 above:

- Develop, with the assistance of Voices for Civil Justice, a calendar of training events, online newsletter, communications listserv, and other strategies to improve the media willingness and capacity of Pennsylvania advocates.
- Designate a “Civil Legal Aid Day” to serve as a statewide pacing event around which to organize and mobilize all PLAN programs, other partners and advocates to focus their efforts on media placements, speaking opportunities, open houses, and social media campaigns (e.g., #JusticeMatters).