

BRINGING JUSTICE HOME

COMPONENTS OF A COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY TO BUILD COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR LEGAL AID

Campaign for Equal Access: Bringing Justice Home
An initiative of the Project for the Future of Equal Justice
A Joint Project of the National Legal Aid & Defender Association
and the Center for Law and Social Policy

Why Develop a Communications Strategy?

In recent years, civil legal aid organizations in the United States have seen traditional sources of financial support—largely from the federal government—grow smaller. At the same time, the number and complexity of restrictions placed on the types of cases they can pursue has increased. In response to the Federal Legal Services Corporation’s (LSC) reduction and restrictions on funding for civil legal aid, organizations providing these services have sought to increase and diversify other funding sources, including state legislative funding, city and county funds, private bar campaigns and foundation grants.

In the past 10 years, while LSC funding has remained static, other funding sources for civil legal aid have doubled. Advocates and supporters also are building political support for legal aid at the state and local levels.

Legal aid professionals credit this expanded financial and political support as the result of building relationships with a broad group of supporters. Building these relationships has required “getting the message out” about the value to society of providing legal services to low-income people.

Despite the successes in fundraising and “friend-raising,” legal aid still suffers from low visibility in the public eye, and the resources to support these services are still woefully inadequate to meet client need. For national, state and local advocates and supporters to achieve “equal access under the law for all,” **civil legal aid must become much more visible to funders, the media, policy makers and the general public.**

According to a recent research study done by Belden, Russonello & Stewart (BRS), nearly half of Americans (49%) are unaware that community-based programs exist to provide civil legal help to low-income people. Only 13% of Americans say they know that a program of government-funded civil legal aid exists and also can offer a name that comes reasonably close to describing civil legal aid.

The central communications challenge for legal aid organizations is:

To overcome the anonymity of civil legal aid among the American public in order to develop a base of support that will, over time, provide adequate funding for civil legal aid and offer increased independence to legal aid groups that wish to pursue a broader range of legal and policy advocacy.

Goals of a Communications Strategy

1. To raise the visibility of organizations that provide civil legal aid to poor people.
2. To generate positive feelings and support for civil legal aid among Americans.
3. To translate this visibility and support into increased public and private funding, as well as political support.

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Target Audiences

Primary Target Groups

1. Opinion-leaders
 - To influence both policy-makers and private individuals to support civil legal aid
2. Donors and potential donors
 - To make financial contributions
3. Policy-makers
 - To support increased funding from state and local governments

Note that attorneys are likely to be heavily represented in all of the above target groups.

Key Messages

The research shows that, for all audiences, the most persuasive reasons to support civil legal aid focus on how civil legal aid makes a difference in the lives of individuals, helps people gain access to justice, and helps everyone obtain their rights, regardless of income. Fairness and the responsibility to help others are the bedrock values upon which the messages of this campaign are based. The primary messages are:

1. Legal aid makes a difference in the lives of real people:
 - the single mother, who needs to receive child support in order to feed her children
 - the veteran, who will lose his home if he doesn't receive his disability check
 - the abused child, who deserves a safe and loving home.
2. Every person in America deserves equal access to justice.
3. Every person in America should be treated fairly, and should be able to obtain his or her rights, regardless of income.

Message Elements

The BRS public opinion data provide a great deal of guidance on the elements that underlie the messages outlined above and the most effective language to use in introducing and promoting civil legal aid to the American public.

Assets to Promote

- The most persuasive way to highlight the need for funding for legal aid is to illustrate your messages with stories about low-income individuals who clearly have no place else to turn. Focus on the results of legal aid's efforts for clients rather than the process of how these results are achieved.
- Explain that legal aid makes a difference in the lives of individuals; that it helps people gain access to justice, and helps everyone obtain his or her rights.

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- Support for legal aid is highest when it is described as providing legal advice to help children, victims of domestic violence, veterans, or the elderly. Support is slightly less when legal aid's work is described as “going to court” or negotiating with government agencies.
- Speak about fairness and justice, rather than talking about access to the courts or to an attorney. Fairness and justice are values that direct audiences' attention to the outcomes of civil legal aid.
- Speaking of access to the courts or access to an attorney directs audiences' attention to mechanisms and processes, which are much less effective in generating support for civil legal aid.
- Use the term “civil legal aid” rather than “legal services.” The former is more descriptive and understandable. Whenever possible, use the specific name of the local legal aid office. Emphasizing the local program is most effective in building support.
- Since the program is unknown to most of the public, communications should always include a brief description of the work of civil legal aid, either through an individual story or a simple statement. For example, you might say, “Civil legal aid offices provide advice and help with legal matters for people with no place else to turn.”

Challenges to Deflect

- Challenges to legal aid are driven primarily by negative attitudes toward government assistance programs, rather than by views of lawyers, the courts, or access to courtrooms for low-income people.
- Therefore, it is more important to deflect the label of “wasteful government program” than it is to spend time countering attacks about “frivolous” lawsuits or explaining why poor people need representation in court for civil matters.
- The best way to deflect challenges is to keep your focus on the proactive messages discussed above, highlighting the personal stories of individuals and positive outcomes for clients and communities to illustrate the importance of civil legal aid.

Tactics

Following are some proven tactics for conveying key messages to target audiences. Many of these are specific to the media, but the media is not your only venue for communicating to your target audiences. In some localities, certain tactics will be more effective than others, depending upon community norms and customs. You are the expert on what is likely to work best in your area, so let common sense and experience be your guide.

Keep in mind that the messenger is an important part of the message. In other words, who is carrying your message (e.g. who makes a presentation to a particular group or signs an op-ed or letter to the editor) has an impact on the audience and how the message is perceived. Therefore, you will want to carefully choose your messengers for maximum credibility and influence. In some cases, the messenger may need to differ depending on the segment of your target audiences that you are trying to reach.

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THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE MESSAGE

THERE IS BROAD PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE CONCEPT OF LEGAL AID

- There is broad public support for the concept of legal aid. Close to nine in 10 Americans (89%) agree that legal help for civil matters should be provided for low-income people. Over half (55%) of the public *strongly* agrees with this sentiment. Eight in 10 (82%; 42% strongly) even support the idea when it is described as a government-funded program.

WE CAN EMPLOY A BROAD MESSAGE TO REACH ALL AMERICANS

- Such potential widespread support means that we can employ a broad message to reach all Americans, rather than narrow-casting different messages to different groups. The public opinion data indicate that liberals, divorced adults, residents of the south, as well as minorities, low-income adults, women, and young people are the most supportive, while conservatives and upper-income people are the least. However, the central point is that a clear majority of every group supports civil legal aid. Therefore, everyone is a target for a general public education effort.

THERE IS A PERCEPTION THAT THERE IS A LACK OF NEED FOR CIVIL LEGAL AID FOR LOW-INCOME PEOPLE

- Perceived lack of need is a major barrier to support. Only 13% of Americans say they know that a program of government-funded civil legal aid exists and also can offer a name that comes reasonably close to describing civil legal aid. Only a third (33%) of Americans believe that low-income people have a very difficult time getting legal help with civil matters.

ADDITIONAL BARRIERS: GOVERNMENT ASPECT OF LEGAL AID AND WORRY OVER TOO MANY LAWSUITS

- This lack of perceived need is a bigger problem than two other barriers which surfaced in the research. One is the government-program aspect of legal aid, which is highly decisive to a small segment of the population. Only 15% oppose spending tax dollars on government help to the poor, and this 15% is not likely to support funds for civil legal aid. The other barrier is the worry over too many lawsuits and lawyers—a feeling that is widespread but one which Americans can hold and still support civil legal aid.

The small percentage that opposes government help to the poor probably cannot be won over, but the many Americans who worry about lawsuit abuse can put those worries aside and support legal aid.

THE PUBLIC WOULD SUPPORT CIVIL LEGAL AID IF IT KNEW THE PROGRAM EXISTED

- The implication of these findings is simple: the most important challenge to address in communications is the sheer invisibility of civil legal aid. The public would support civil legal aid if it knew the program existed. Therefore, our central communications goal must be to inform the public about the program.

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE MESSAGE

What is the best way to introduce civil legal aid? The public opinion data provide much guidance on what is most relevant.

LEGAL ADVICE TO HELP CHILDREN, VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, VETERANS AND THE ELDERLY ARE HIGHLY SUPPORTED

KEY VALUES THAT UNDERLIE PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR CIVIL LEGAL AID

- Americans broadly support all types of civil legal aid. Broad majorities support helping poor people with legal problems, from helping an elderly woman solve a landlord-tenant dispute to assisting local residents in their legal fight to keep an incinerator from locating in their neighborhood. However, support is highest when it is described as providing legal advice to help children, victims of domestic violence, veterans, or the elderly who are in desperate need. Support is slightly less when legal aid's work is described as going to court or negotiating with government agencies.
- Fairness, equality, and responsibility to help others in need are the key values that underlie public support for civil legal aid. The most persuasive reasons to support civil legal aid focus on how civil legal aid makes a difference in the lives of individuals, helps people gain access to justice, and helps everyone obtain their rights.

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ELEMENTS OF A MESSAGE AND ADVICE ON COMMUNICATING ABOUT CIVIL LEGAL AID

WE MUST INTRODUCE THE PROGRAM TO AMERICA IN A WAY THAT IS CONSISTENT WITH AMERICANS' VALUES

The research has informed us that the central challenge is to overcome the anonymity of civil legal aid. We must introduce the program to America in a way that is consistent with Americans' values. In doing so, we have developed universal message elements. They should guide communications on the importance of civil legal aid on both the national and local levels and across all regions.

We believe that the message advice outlined below can be just as effective in Boston as in Birmingham or Bakersfield. We encourage those communicating on civil legal aid across the country to use this message advice as the basis for telling the story of legal aid through specific local examples. At the same time, we recognize that every location has its own characteristics, customs, symbols, images, and ways of speaking. Therefore, those working on the local level should, where appropriate, take the general message we have developed and make it their own.

The universal message elements are outlined below:

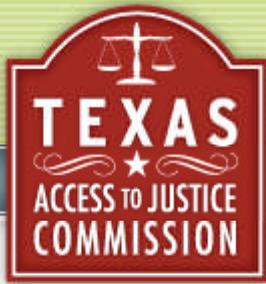
- For all audiences, a positive message on civil legal aid should place two values front and center: **responsibility to care for others who are in desperate need and the value of fairness.**
- We can best communicate these values through stories of hope. Focus on people who were struggling against injustice and *who had no place else to turn*, but who overcame their problems with the help of civil legal aid.
- Simple stories of a vulnerable individual are best when they make it clear that: a) the person truly needed *legal advice*, as opposed to some other social service, b) the person tried other sources and could not get help except from the Legal Aid office, and c) a serious injustice was avoided because Legal Aid stepped in and helped an individual.
- Similarly, focusing on *individuals* in need is more easily understood and acceptable than claims that civil legal aid will solve *community* problems.

ELEMENTS OF A MESSAGE AND ADVICE ON COMMUNICATING ABOUT CIVIL LEGAL AID

- Focus on the results of legal aid’s efforts for clients rather than the process of how these results are achieved. The public wants to know the outcome: who was helped, what injustice was corrected, what need was filled? Describing the work involved in achieving these outcomes distracts from their power and can weaken support for civil legal aid.
- Since the program is unknown to most of the public, communications should always include a brief description of the work of civil legal aid, either through an individual story or a simple statement. For example, it can be as simple as: “civil legal aid offices provide advice and help with legal matters for people with no place else to turn.”
- Nationally, the term civil legal aid is more descriptive and understandable to people than “legal services,” which sounds generic. However, the best name to use is the name of the local legal aid office. Emphasizing the local program is most effective in building support.
- “Access to justice” is a more effective phrase than “access to lawyers,” and to a lesser extent, “access to the courts,” when describing civil legal aid. Access to justice describes the desired result, the other phrases describe the process.

Overall Message

- **Civil legal aid offices in your community offer advice and help with legal matters for people with no place else to turn.** From helping a single mom collect the child support she deserves, or helping an elderly person overturn an unlawful eviction notice, civil legal aid is working in your community, to help people when their rights are denied.
- **Civil legal aid fights for fairness.**



Access to Justice Speakers Bureau

The Texas Access to Justice Commission and the Texas Access to Justice Foundation created the Access to Justice Speakers Bureau to provide local bar associations and other attorney and community groups with a FREE ethics CLE highlighting the many ways attorneys can get involved to increase access to legal services for poor and low-income Texans. Presentations are tailored to local areas and individual group needs and are a great time to recognize local pro bono champions—individual attorneys, attorney groups, corporations, law firms and banks. We encourage bar associations to collaborate with TYLA local affiliates, law firms, American Inns of Court and Rotary Clubs to convene for joint meetings for these presentations. To schedule an Access to Justice Speakers Bureau presentation, contact: atj@texasbar.com or call 512-427-1855.

*The Commission works in tandem with
the following Access to Justice Partners
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