

Surveying the Initial Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on California Legal Aid Organizations

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Introduction

In the week of March 16th 2020, OneJustice launched a series of surveys to understand the initial impact of COVID-19 on the legal services sector. This document summarizes learning from the responses of over 60 California legal aid organizations (49 Legal Services Providers and 12 Support Centers).

How has COVID-19 impacted legal aid organizations?

- *Many organizations have closed offices and implemented remote working.* The sector is struggling to move to a comprehensive remote working model. Some organizations face challenges in providing the technical infrastructure for remote working, implementing remote working procedures, and enabling remote working for certain job roles (e.g. administration, reception & intake) and for non-exempt staff. There is disruption to operations relying on in-person or paper-based activities, such as mail and finance.
- *Many organizations are experiencing a reduction in staffing.* This is primarily driven by staff members' responsibilities to look after their children or other family or community members. Some organizations have staff that are ill or family members that are ill.

How has COVID-19 impacted legal services?

- *The sector has serious concerns about the negative impact of COVID-19 on client communities.* Whilst it is still early in the pandemic, there are concerns about:
 - Direct health risks among the homeless, elderly, people with disabilities or pre-existing conditions, institutionalized/detained populations, and some workers.
 - The indirect impact of the economy, particularly loss of jobs/wages leading to an increase in evictions; moratoria on evictions is seen as a key advocacy goal.
 - Specific indirect impacts of shelter-in-place public health measures, such as increased risks to people experiencing domestic violence.
 - The impact of COVID-19 on the functioning of the courts/due process and disruption to social safety net services at a time of peak demand.
- *The sector is implementing a rapid shift towards remote client services.* Many organizations have been able to shift some elements of client service to a remote model, but they are encountering logistical challenges (e.g. managing and signing documents, confidentiality/safety in client interviews) and some are struggling to implement a virtual model for clinics. Whilst it is still early, some organizations are reporting a temporary drop

in requests for assistance. Some organizations are handling more inquiries about employment, evictions/homelessness and social service issues. Some organizations are considering whether or not to remain open for service.

- *The sector is leaning heavily on Zoom, Google Suite and Microsoft Teams for internal and external communication and is using a wide range of other tech tools. Their ability to effectively access and use technology at this time is paramount.*
- *Support Centers are tracking how COVID-19 is impacting policy and practice. Some have already started information and advocacy campaigns in response to COVID-19. Examples include: California Advocates for Nursing Home Reform¹, National Housing Law Project² and Youth Law Center.³*

What are the legal aid sector's needs and priorities right now?

- **Supporting client communities:** There is considerable concern to monitor how COVID-19 might harm clients, disrupt representation or otherwise limit access to justice. The sector wants information and coordination to help in this complex and continually evolving task.
- **Stabilizing a remote operations model:** Many organizations are trying to ensure that they have robust structures for remote operations such as finance and HR. Many organizations have numerous specific challenges to resolve before stability is achieved.
- **Developing effective remote services:** With the rapid implementation of a remote model, organizations are now seeking to resolve initial challenges to ensure that services can be delivered safely and effectively, including the implementation of virtual pro bono clinics.
- **Security of funding:** Some organizations are concerned about falling short of their grant deliverables and some have experienced disruption to fundraising activities. The sector seeks support from funders to help them move forward in responding to the crisis.

For any questions, please email: covid_response@one-justice.org

¹ <https://canhrcovidnews.com/>

² <https://www.nhlp.org/campaign/protecting-renter-and-homeowner-rights-during-our-national-health-crisis-2/>

³ https://ylc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Emergency-Plan-with-TAY-in-Foster-Care_YLC.pdf