



# LEGAL AID CHICAGO

EQUAL JUSTICE STARTS HERE

JUNE 2026 NEWSLETTER

## JUSTICE UP CLOSE

PRO BONO &  
COMMUNITY  
PARTNERSHIPS  
EDITION

8 Questions With Legal  
Aid Chicago's  
Pro Bono & Community  
Partnerships Staff  
Attorney, Elaine Cleary



*"Public interest attorneys are helping people navigate life-changing legal issues and ensuring that access to justice is not limited to those who can afford it. Legal aid attorneys are often among the first people clients turn to when every other system has failed them."*

Legal Aid Chicago's **Pro Bono & Community Partnerships Practice Group (PCG)** builds and facilitates collaborations with dedicated volunteers, pro bono attorneys, and community partners to expand access to justice across Cook County. Through these partnerships, PCG manages a wide range of volunteer-based projects, including community legal clinics, virtual clinics, legal help desks, advance directive services, and criminal records relief work such as sealing, expungement, and related advocacy.

PCG offers expungement and sealing services, as well as pursuing alternative forms of criminal records relief for clients. In this edition of **Justice Up Close**, we spoke with **Elaine Cleary**, a Staff Attorney in PCG's Criminal Records Relief project. Elaine works with clients seeking to overcome the long-term barriers created by arrests and convictions, helping them pursue employment, professional licensing, housing, and other opportunities that can remain out of reach long after a case is resolved.

### 1. What inspired you to work in legal aid?

I was drawn to legal aid because I wanted to do work that has a direct and tangible impact on people's lives. Before joining Legal Aid Chicago, I worked in immigration legal services and later in corporate law, but I found myself wanting to return to public interest work where the outcomes felt more immediate and meaningful.

What I value most about civil legal aid is that strong legal representation can fundamentally change someone's future. Whether it is helping someone access employment, maintain custody of their children, or move forward after a criminal record, our work helps people regain opportunities, stability, and dignity. I think there is something deeply rewarding about being able to see that impact so clearly in the lives of the people we serve.

### 2. What does a typical day look like for you at Legal Aid Chicago?

No two days look exactly the same. Much of my work involves preparing for court, communicating with clients, researching legal issues, and litigating criminal records cases. I also work on clemency petitions and motions to vacate unconstitutional convictions, which often require extensive legal research and case review.

Client communication is also a major part of my day. Many clients come to us after feeling ignored or overwhelmed by the legal system, so I make it a priority to keep them informed throughout their case. Even small updates can help reduce anxiety and build trust during a stressful process. I think taking the time to communicate consistently helps clients feel supported and reminds them that someone is actively advocating for them.

### **3. What is one moment with a client that has stayed with you?**

One case that has stayed with me involves a client in his 60s who has a single nonviolent marijuana conviction dating back to the 1980s. Since then, Illinois has significantly changed its marijuana laws, but because of the specifics of his conviction, he was excluded from relief that became available to others. Despite living for decades without additional criminal convictions, that record continues to shape what opportunities and rights are available to him today.

We are currently working with him on a clemency petition, which has been a powerful reminder of why this work matters. Clemency offers an opportunity to recognize growth, context, and the reality that people are more than a single moment in their lives. Cases like his highlight how legal advocacy can help address long-term consequences that persist long after someone has moved forward and create a pathway toward greater stability, dignity, and opportunity.

### **4. What is the biggest challenge your clients face beyond the legal issue itself?**

Many of our clients are navigating complicated systems long before they ever reach our office. Whether they are trying to secure housing, access benefits, or find stable employment, bureaucracy can become a barrier in itself.

For people already facing poverty or instability, even understanding the process can feel overwhelming. Legal aid helps bridge that gap by providing guidance, advocacy, and support in systems that are often difficult to navigate alone. Often, clients are not just dealing with one legal issue, but with multiple overlapping challenges that make it harder to move forward without assistance.

### **5. How does your work impact clients' lives outside the courtroom?**

A large part of my work helps clients access employment opportunities that would otherwise remain out of reach because of a criminal record. Once records are sealed or expunged, clients are often finally able to pursue careers they have worked toward for years, including jobs in healthcare, real estate, and other licensed professions.

We also see the broader impact on families and stability. Clients are able to secure housing, support their children, and move forward with goals that once felt impossible. One of the most rewarding parts of this work is getting to see clients experience the results of their persistence and hard work after spending years facing barriers that kept doors closed to them.

### **6. What keeps you going in this work?**

What keeps me going is seeing the real difference this work makes for clients. In our practice group, we are fortunate to secure meaningful victories that can immediately improve someone's quality of life, whether that means gaining employment, clearing a record, or restoring an important right

I am also constantly inspired by my colleagues. Legal Aid Chicago attorneys bring an incredible level of skill, dedication, and institutional knowledge to this work, and our clients deserve that level of advocacy and representation. Being part of a team that is so deeply committed to both excellent legal work and client-centered advocacy makes this work especially meaningful.

## **7. What do you wish more people understood about legal aid?**

I wish more people understood both how important and how sophisticated legal aid work truly is. Legal aid attorneys handle complex, high-impact cases every day while serving clients who otherwise would not have access to quality legal representation.

The work being done in legal aid is every bit as challenging and meaningful as work at large firms or prestigious institutions. Public interest attorneys are helping people navigate life-changing legal issues and ensuring that access to justice is not limited to those who can afford it. I also think legal aid attorneys are often among the first people clients turn to when every other system has failed them.

## **8. What's something about your job that might surprise people?**

People are often surprised by how closely criminal records work intersects with the broader criminal legal system. Although my role is not criminal defense, much of our work involves helping clients address the long-term consequences of arrests and convictions.

The work also requires a great deal of creativity and strategic thinking. We are constantly finding new ways to advocate for clients, challenge barriers, and help people move forward after contact with the criminal legal system. I think people are often surprised by just how much thoughtful legal strategy goes into helping someone rebuild opportunities that may have been limited for years.

*The work you just read about is happening every day. Your support helps make sure Legal Aid Chicago's attorneys and advocates can keep showing up for clients when they need it most.*



## STAFF UPDATES

Pro Bono & Community Partnerships Staff Attorney Jessie Meltzer Recognized by Windy City Times



Legal Aid Chicago's **Jessie Meltzer** (they/he) was recently recognized with the *Windy City Times*' **30 Under 30 Award** honoring young LGBTQ+ leaders making meaningful contributions to their communities. Jessie's work developing the Name Change Project continues to expand access to justice for clients across Chicago. Read more [here](#).

## OUR WORK IN ACTION

Pro Bono & Community Partnerships Group Launches SNAP Restoration Project



Legal Aid Chicago's **Pro Bono & Community Partnerships Group** has launched the SNAP Restoration Project, a new pro bono initiative focused on helping individuals navigate recent SNAP work requirement changes and restore critical food assistance benefits. Nearly 100 volunteers from more than 10 law firms already signed on to support the project. This expanded pro bono capacity will help more clients access and maintain the benefits they need to support themselves and their families.

## ANNUAL LUNCHEON



## THANK YOU FOR JOINING US

Thank you to everyone who joined us for Legal Aid Chicago's Annual Luncheon. We were honored to gather with supporters, volunteers, partners, and friends to celebrate the work happening across our organization and the communities we serve.

Thanks to your generosity, the event raised critical support to advance Legal Aid Chicago's mission. Your support helps ensure that individuals and families across Cook County can continue accessing free civil legal services when they need them most.

ANNUAL LUNCHEON



### THANK YOU TO OUR AWARDEES

A special thank you to this year's staff honorees, **Natalie Fulk, Steve Phillips, and Bill Sviatko**, and to our **2026 Champions of Justice, the University of Chicago Medicine Trauma Center team**, for their partnership with Legal Aid Chicago through **Recovery Legal Care**, our **Medical-Legal Partnership**.

Through this collaboration, Legal Aid Chicago attorneys work alongside trauma providers to address the legal and social needs that impact patient health, including housing stability, access to public benefits, and personal safety. We are grateful for their partnership and proud to celebrate the impact of this work together.

ANNUAL LUNCHEON



## OUR LUNCHEON VIDEO

At the Annual Luncheon, we shared a special short film about our Medical-Legal Partnership with the University of Chicago. You can view it on demand [here](#).

ANNUAL LUNCHEON



Photo credit: Kyle Flubacker Photography

## SAVE THE DATE

We hope you'll join us again next year for Legal Aid Chicago's Annual Luncheon on June 16, 2027. Save the date and stay tuned for more details as we continue celebrating the people and partnerships that make Equal Justice possible.

**JUSTICE**  
**IS SERVED**

**OCTOBER 9**  
**6:30 - 10:00 PM**

Join us at the  
Chicago History  
Museum!



## JOIN US AT JUSTICE IS SERVED!

Legal Aid Chicago is thrilled to announce a new venue for our second major event, *Justice is Served: the Chicago History Museum*.

On **Friday, October 9**, Legal Aid Chicago's signature fall fundraiser will bring together supporters, community leaders, and advocates for an unforgettable evening of impact and connection. [Tickets are on sale now!](#)

### **JUSTICE IS SERVED**

6:30 - 10:00 PM

The Chicago History Museum

1601 N Clark St

Chicago, IL 60614

Stay tuned for more details, and we look forward to seeing you there!

## 2025 ANNUAL REPORT

Legal Aid Chicago's 2025 Annual Report is here!

Last year, Legal Aid Chicago reached thousands of individuals and families, delivering critical legal support and strengthening communities across Chicagoland. Our Annual Report captures both the numbers and the stories behind this impact.

Please [click here to view the report](#) and explore how your partnership makes our work possible.

ANNUAL REPORT  
2025

EQUAL  
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**We are excited to announce our brand-new Legal Aid Chicago official gear online store!**

Show your support for Equal Justice with official Legal Aid Chicago branded products. Our online store is stocked with fresh gear - only available through us - that shows your support for our mission and helps to spread awareness of Legal Aid Chicago, wherever you go.

**[SHOP HERE!](#)**

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