

LEGAL AID CHICAGO

EQUAL JUSTICE STARTS HERE

JULY 2026 NEWSLETTER

JUSTICE UP CLOSE

MEDICAL-LEGAL
PARTNERSHIPS
EDITION

8 Questions With
Legal Aid Chicago's
Medical-Legal
Partnerships
Senior Paralegal,
David Mendieta



"I wish more people understood the level of dedication and expertise that exists within legal aid. Sometimes people assume we are stretched too thin to provide meaningful representation, but the opposite is true. Every day I see attorneys, paralegals, social workers, administrative staff, and advocates going above and beyond to serve our clients."

Legal Aid Chicago's **Medical-Legal Partnerships (MLP)** address the intersecting legal and medical challenges clients face during health care crises. By working alongside doctors, nurses, and social workers, our attorneys and advocates meet with patients in medical facilities and help them resolve legal challenges that impact their health, including unsafe housing, denial of public benefits, or lack of access to needed services. This holistic approach improves health outcomes by treating legal problems as part of a patient's overall care.

In this edition of **Justice Up Close**, we spoke with **David Mendieta**, a Senior Paralegal with Legal Aid Chicago's Medical-Legal Partnerships practice group. As part of the **Cook County Health Medical-Legal Partnership**, David works with clients experiencing homelessness, helping them access Social Security Disability benefits and other critical resources.

1. What inspired you to work in legal aid?

Much of my desire to work in legal aid stems from the lack of resources and legal representation available to my family when I was growing up. As part of a mixed-status household, I often felt frustrated and confused by a legal system that seemed out of reach. I questioned why some members of my family could not receive retirement benefits they had earned or access basic food assistance programs.

Those experiences inspired me to pursue a career in law and ultimately led me to Legal Aid Chicago. While I couldn't change my family's circumstances at the time, I can now be the advocate I wish they had. That opportunity to help others navigate the legal system with dignity and support is what motivates me every day.

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

No two days are exactly alike, but most involve a mix of client communication, case management, and research. I spend a lot of time scheduling appointments, helping clients complete Social Security paperwork, obtaining medical records, and following up with Social Security offices on pending Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) applications.

During client meetings, I walk people through questionnaires, explain the application process, and gather information about their medical treatment.

When I'm not meeting with clients, I'm often reviewing hundreds of pages of medical records to identify key diagnoses, treatments, and physician notes that support a disability claim. I also conduct intake interviews, research Social Security regulations, and collaborate with my team on legal issues that fall outside my area of expertise. Every day brings something different, which keeps the work both challenging and rewarding.

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

A few years back, we agreed to represent a client for her initial SSI/SSDI application, but we soon encountered some difficulty communicating with her. To start, she was experiencing homelessness and did not have a permanent address. Additionally, past traumatic experiences made her hesitant to communicate by phone call, which complicated our efforts to build a working relationship. Following some back and forth over text, I agreed to meet at her temporary housing placement.

From the moment I introduced myself, she immediately said, "I didn't know you were Latino! Are you Mexican by any chance, because I am!" I answered in Spanish and quickly developed a rapport. After she signed all the required paperwork, she confessed she was taken aback not only because I looked young but also due to my skin color: "There aren't many Latinos who do law, and I'm really happy that you'll be representing me on my case."

She appreciated the effort I made to meet her where she was, and that visit became the foundation of a strong working relationship. That experience reminded me that showing up for clients goes beyond legal advocacy. Sometimes simply meeting someone with empathy, cultural understanding, and respect can make all the difference.

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

One of the biggest challenges my clients face is rebuilding trust in the very systems that are supposed to support them. Many have experienced repeated denials from Social Security or difficult interactions with healthcare providers, leaving them feeling unheard, discouraged, and skeptical that anyone will truly advocate for them.

That distrust can make it difficult for clients to share deeply personal experiences or pursue medical treatment that is essential to documenting their disability. A significant part of my job is helping clients feel heard, rebuilding trust, and encouraging them to keep moving forward despite setbacks.

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

Receiving SSI or SSDI benefits can be life-changing. Beyond providing monthly financial support, these benefits often open the door to other federal and state assistance programs, housing opportunities, and healthcare resources that help clients build greater stability.

For many clients, a favorable Social Security decision also removes barriers to programs like SNAP and can make them eligible for additional assistance, including Aid to the Aged, Blind, and Disabled (AABD). I have seen clients secure stable housing and gain a greater sense of independence because they finally have access to the benefits they've earned. Those outcomes have a lasting impact well beyond the legal case itself.

6. What keeps you going in this work?

The people I work with, without question. While helping clients achieve positive outcomes is incredibly rewarding, difficult cases and denials can be emotionally challenging. Having a team that genuinely supports one another makes all the difference.

The Medical-Legal Partnership team is filled with people who care deeply about our clients and each other. Whether we're collaborating during case meetings or talking through a difficult legal issue, my colleagues constantly remind me why this work matters and inspire me to keep going.

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

I wish more people understood the level of dedication and expertise that exists within legal aid. Sometimes people assume we are stretched too thin to provide meaningful representation, but the opposite is true. Every day I see attorneys, paralegals, social workers, administrative staff, and advocates going above and beyond to serve our clients. I'm constantly inspired by my colleagues' stories and the extraordinary effort they put into helping people navigate some of the most difficult moments of their lives. It reminds me that legal aid is about far more than resolving legal issues—it's about changing lives.

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

People are often surprised by how broad my work can be. While I specialize in Social Security matters, conversations with clients frequently uncover other legal issues, from public benefits and utility shutoffs to advance directives and healthcare access.

Because the Medical-Legal Partnership model takes a holistic approach, I've learned how important it is to ask the right questions, recognize when another issue needs attention, and collaborate with colleagues across practice areas. Sometimes solving one legal problem starts by identifying several others.

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.



JUSTICE IS SERVED

OCTOBER 9
6:30 - 10:00 PM

Join us at the
Chicago History
Museum!



JOIN US AT JUSTICE IS SERVED

Don't miss one of Chicago's can't-miss fall fundraisers.

On **Friday, October 9, 2026**, Legal Aid Chicago invites you to ***Justice is Served***, an unforgettable evening at our exciting new venue, the **Chicago History Museum**.

Hosted in partnership with our **Ambassadors Board**, this lively event brings together supporters, young professionals, community leaders, and friends for a night of fabulous food and drinks, an exciting live auction, indoor and outdoor dancing, and exclusive after-hours access to the museum.

Whether you're reconnecting with familiar faces or meeting new ones, it's the perfect opportunity to mix, mingle, and celebrate alongside people who believe in equal justice.

Most importantly, every ticket helps support Legal Aid Chicago's work providing free civil legal services to people experiencing poverty across Cook County.

Bring your friends, enjoy a great night out, and be part of one of Chicago's can't-miss fall fundraisers.

We can't wait to celebrate with you!

[Click here for tickets!](#)

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Want to show your support for Legal Aid Chicago?

Our brand-new Legal Aid Chicago merch store is now open!

Wear your gear and show your support for equal justice. A portion of the proceeds go back to Legal Aid Chicago so we can continue making justice accessible to everyone!

[Get your gear here!](#)