

LEGAL AID CHICAGO

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JUSTICE UP CLOSE

PUBLIC BENEFITS EDITION

8 Questions With Legal
Aid Chicago's Public
Benefits Director, Trey
Daly



"Civil legal aid is currently not a right. There are far more people who seek our services who we are not able to serve than those we are able to serve. And many more who do not know we exist."

Legal Aid Chicago's **Public Benefits Practice Group** assists clients with legal issues involving SNAP, Medicaid, and Social Security—programs that help people access food, healthcare, and income support when they need it most.

In this edition of ***Justice Up Close***, we sat down with **Trey Daly, Director of the Public Benefits Practice Group**, to learn what inspired his career in legal aid, the challenges clients face beyond their legal issues, and what keeps him motivated after years of advocacy.

1. What inspired you to work in legal aid?

I began working in legal aid in 1987 out of a desire to make the world a better place, which grew out of my faith and my family's emphasis on service to others. It also grew out of a sense that government can be a powerful source for good. My emphasis on public benefits is an effort to assure that public policy intended to alleviate poverty and suffering is effective.

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

As a Practice Group Director, I am in lots of meetings: with people I supervise; with the whole Practice Group; with other managers at Legal Aid Chicago; with our community partners and government agencies, which are sometimes collaborators or adverse parties. I still try to find chunks of time when I can drill down into a case. I love drafting hearing memos, where I try to weave a convincing legal argument with a compelling human story.

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

There have been so many over the decades. One recent one that sticks out is a client who is non-verbal and severely disabled because of cerebral palsy. We helped her qualify for Aid for the Aged, Blind, Disabled (AABD) Cash. She shared some of her art work with me, which I cherish.

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

Our clients seldom present with a single, well-defined legal issue. There are usually a multitude of legal issues and compounding social issues that disrupt their lives and prevent stability. It sometimes feels like our work is playing whack-a-mole. We help address one problem and another pops up. Work like we do on behalf of veterans can be so gratifying because when we help a veteran get total disability benefits, they not only receive substantial financial benefits, but also health care, housing, and educational benefits.

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

Using legal strategies to help clients get and keep public benefits can make a life or death difference. Assuring Medicaid can mean access to life saving medical treatment. Assuring SNAP food assistance can reduce hunger and malnutrition. Assuring disability benefits can provide the income necessary to pay rent and avoid homelessness. All of these hopefully help clients maintain dignity in a world that often assaults that dignity.

6. What keeps you going in this work?

I am so grateful for a career that has allowed me to bring my whole self to the mission. Over the years, that has meant things like integrating the words and music of my hero Bruce Springsteen into the work, or singing with my church choir at a Medicaid outreach event where my children were doing face painting, or collaborating with local celebrities, media outlets, and government officials to stage television benefit enroll-a-thons. Also, winning for our clients more often than not is extremely satisfying.

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

Civil legal aid is currently not a right. There are far more people who seek our services who we are not able to serve than those we are able to serve. And many more who do not know we exist.

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

I got to hold the diamond tiara of Miss America Heather French, who represented my boyhood home of Kentucky, when we both attended a Homeless Veterans Standdown together.

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

