



LEGAL AID CHICAGO

EQUAL JUSTICE STARTS HERE

JUSTICE UP CLOSE

LONG-TERM CARE EDITION

8 Questions With Legal
Aid Chicago's Long-
Term Care Supervisory
Attorney, Lawrence
Wagner



"I think it is important for people to understand that legal aid takes a wholistic approach to our clients' legal issues. At Legal Aid Chicago, our clients are not billable hours. We seek to empathize with the entire person, humanize the situation and work to ensure our clients are heard and seen. Not just a legal problem to solve. But a human to respect."

Legal Aid Chicago's **Long-Term Care Practice Group** works to protect the rights, safety, and dignity of older adults living in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities. Through advocacy, education, investigation, and legal representation, our attorneys and ombudsmen help residents and their families navigate issues involving quality of care, abuse and neglect, discharge and transfer rights, public benefits, and access to services.

In this edition of **Justice Up Close**, we spoke with **Lawrence Wagner, Supervisory Attorney in the Long-Term Care Practice Group**. Lawrence reflects on two decades of legal aid service, what continues to inspire his work, and how legal advocacy helps older adults preserve their rights, independence, and dignity.

1. What inspired you to work in legal aid?

I learned relatively early in life that justice really isn't for all. It is for those who can access the justice system. Without legal aid, that means only those with substantial financial resources.

Initially, my goal was to become a public defender. I felt that this was the most important of the legal aid roles I could undertake, as criminal law tends to implicate constitutional rights. In law school I got a certificate in criminal law and interned at the Public Defender's office. But, after my second year of law school, I had the privilege of interning at Legal Aid Chicago, then known as LAF. During that internship, I was exposed to the civil side of the law. That exposure taught me how often individuals on the fringes of society are denied access to justice. That denial affects them in ways that not only impede their access to justice, but also to liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It also reminded me of my own lived experience.

When I was very young, my mom had a major stroke that left her unable to work. As a result my family relied on subsidized housing and public benefits. While my family never needed the services of legal aid, I was heartened to learn that there are dedicated lawyers committed to helping families like mine sustain the resources they need to survive and thrive. It motivated and humbled me that I could be counted among them.

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

A day at Legal Aid Chicago is shaped by constant conversation and adjustment. No two days look the same. My day often begins with emails or developments that came in after hours and continues with calls and conversations with opposing counsel, opposing parties, clients, and staff throughout the day. Priorities can shift quickly, and balancing those changing needs alongside an existing to-do list requires flexibility, problem-solving, and collaboration. I see that unpredictability as an opportunity to learn, support others, and creatively advocate for clients.

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

That moment involved a client's child. I visited a client's home to have her sign documents. We were seated at the kitchen table when the client's young daughter came cheerfully skipping into the room. The daughter seemed to be about 5 years old. The client introduced me as her lawyer. The smile immediately left the child's face. She stared at me with a perplexed look for what seemed like an eternity. She then said, "He can't be your lawyer," before turning to skip away as cheerfully as she entered. I could only imagine what went through that child's mind upon seeing me and deciding that I, a young, Black male, could not be her mom's lawyer.

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

I think my client's biggest challenge can be summed up as a challenge to their basic humanity. My clients are often denied the respect and treatment they need to live with dignity. Because they live in long-term care settings, my clients rely on care providers to ensure their basic human needs. Most long-term care facilities are not rightly staffed to meet those needs, including personal autonomy, bathing, basic hygiene, getting dressed each day, and getting adequate, quality meals, to name a few. Often, even getting outside to enjoy a warm, sunny, day can be a challenge for my clients.

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

Along with our Community Ombudsmen, this work protects clients' dignity, ensures they are treated with respect, and ensures their daily needs and preferences are met.

6. What keeps you going in this work?

Knowing how important and needed our work is. In general, that is fueled by my lived experience. Specifically, in my current role, my motivation is fueled by a strong belief that there should be no impediment, for the community I serve, to live a rich, meaningful, full life with dignity and respect.

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

That we are real lawyers. I'm only half joking there. I wish more people understood that we work to ensure that marginalized members of our society can live out the promises of this nation, that each of us has the unalienable right to life, liberty and justice. I know that might sound hyperbolic, but we do stand in the gap for individuals who would otherwise be unable to access justice.

It's important for people to understand that at Legal Aid Chicago, we take a holistic approach to our clients' issues. We seek to empathize with the entire person, humanize the situation and ensure our clients are heard and seen. Not a legal problem to solve, but a human to respect.

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

Simply that it exists. By that I mean, people are surprised to learn that if they qualify for our services, they can receive knowledgeable, experienced, quality, legal representation at no charge. What does not surprise people is that we don't have the resources to fully meet the need for our services. I wanted to work in legal aid not only to represent individuals who need an attorney to exercise their rights, but also to ensure they understand the process, feel comfortable asking questions, and are treated with basic respect.

Legal aid work is also unique as, unlike many litigation jobs (especially for younger attorneys), we are able to work directly with clients and get actual in-court experience. We get to have a direct impact on our community, even on a client-to-client basis.

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.

LEGAL AID CHICAGO UPDATES

**Legal Aid Chicago
Launches New Firearms
Warrant Project**



Legal Aid Chicago is proud to launch the **Firearms Warrant Project**. Attorneys from Legal Aid Chicago are on site daily at the Domestic Violence Courthouse to help survivors pursue firearm remedies under Karina's Law. Read more [here](#).

