LEGAL AID CHICAGO

EQUAL JUSTICE STARTS HERE

OCTOBER 2026 NEWSLETTER

JUSTICE UP CLOSE

CHILDREN & FAMILIES EDITION

8 Questions With Legal Aid Chicago's Children & Families Practice Group Senior Staff Attorney, Colleen A. Connolly

"There is not enough legal aid to go around. People often understand that legal aid sounds like a good thing, but they do not realize how many people need a lawyer simply to keep their heads above water."

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month, a time to recognize survivors and the many barriers that can stand between individuals and their safety, stability, and ability to remain connected to their families.

Domestic violence does not exist in isolation. It can intersect with family law, child welfare, housing, financial stability, and other systems that shape a person's life. Legal Aid Chicago's Children & Families Practice Group helps survivors and families navigate these complicated legal issues while working to protect their rights and support their ability to make informed choices about their futures.

In this edition of ***Justice Up Close***, we spoke with **Colleen A. Connolly, Senior Staff Attorney in the Children & Families Practice Group.** Colleen has worked at Legal Aid Chicago since 2000. Through her work with survivors, older adults, parents, and relatives involved with DCFS, she has developed a deep understanding of how legal systems can either support or undermine family safety and stability.

What inspired you to work in legal aid?

I did not go to law school intending to work in legal aid. I did not even know it existed. At Northwestern, I became fascinated by the idea that law could be used to implement social policy. Through a mentorship and grant, I spent time at Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services and realized I had found a legal workplace where I belonged. After working at Prairie State Legal Services and the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, I realized I still thought of myself as a legal aid attorney. I applied to Legal Aid Chicago and have been here ever since.

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

There really isn't a typical day. I work on a range of family law issues, including helping parents navigate DCFS involvement, working with relatives caring for children, and assisting older adults who are vulnerable to abuse or exploitation. A lot of my time is spent talking with clients, explaining how the legal system works, and helping them understand their options.

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

I represented a mother whose children had been removed because DCFS believed she had failed to protect them from an abusive partner. While we were working toward reunification, a caseworker discovered something that raised concerns. When I spoke with my client, I realized she had not told me the full story.

I told her we could work with it. We could acknowledge what happened, figure out how to address it, and move forward. Eventually, the family was reunited, the monitoring was completed, and the case was closed.
That experience reinforced the importance of meeting clients where they are. You cannot penalize clients for not trusting you. There is always something you can do to repair the relationship and move forward. I cannot promise that everything will work out, but I can promise that I will be by their side. Sometimes what a client needs to hear is, "You and I are still a team."

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

Money is the biggest barrier. If people had more financial resources, they could make choices based on safety and stability rather than affordability.

My clients often face bureaucracies and institutions with systemic prejudices built into the way they operate, along with the damaging assumption that poor people's problems result from poor choices. Having a lawyer can provide some protection by helping clients navigate systems that can otherwise grind people down.

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

In the best-case scenarios, clients are safer because of the work that I do. Once someone feels safer, they are no longer spending all of their emotional energy in a defensive crouch. They can begin thinking about what they want their lives to look like and moving toward it.

For families affected by DCFS, that means protecting children from abuse while also protecting the parent from being held responsible for violence committed by someone else. I want the children to be safe, and I want my client to be safe. Those goals should not be in conflict.

What keeps you going in this work?

I believe the work is valuable. Helping people use the legal system to achieve their goals is part of having a functioning civic society, and I value helping clients access that system.
On a more day-to-day level, it is my coworkers who keep me at Legal Aid Chicago. Having colleagues who value the work and are enjoyable to be around makes a tremendous difference. The Children and Families Practice Group is the best practice group ever.

What do you wish more people understood about legal aid?

There is not enough legal aid to go around. People often do not realize how many people need a lawyer simply to keep their heads above water.
I also wish we would move away from the idea that legal aid is only for "deserving" people. The question should be whether someone has a legal problem or claim we can help address, not whether we think they are a good person.

What might surprise people about your job?

People often think family law means orders of protection and divorces. It is much broader than that. I work with DCFS-impacted families, relatives caring for children, guardianships involving adults and minors, and many other issues. Family law often involves answering the question of who gets to define a family and who gets to decide whether that family can exist together in peace.

There are so many statutes, courtrooms, and administrative agencies involved in those decisions. As a result, I end up in many places where people do not expect to see a family law attorney.

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.

FIREARMS WARRANT PROJECT

Turning Protection into Action

When **Karina's Law** took effect in Illinois in May 2025, it created an important new tool for protecting survivors of domestic violence: a civil search warrant that can be used to remove firearms from someone who is prohibited from possessing them.

But a law is only as effective as its implementation.

Legal Aid Chicago launched the **Firearm Warrant Project** in May 2026 after it became clear that Karina's Law was not yet reaching survivors as intended. We took on this work in response to that need, without dedicated funding for the project. Every day, a Legal Aid Chicago attorney is available at the Domestic Violence Courthouse to help survivors navigate the firearm warrant process, from providing legal advice and assistance with paperwork to representing survivors in court and offering longer-term representation when appropriate. As the project has grown, so has our ability to identify opportunities to strengthen implementation and pursue appeals when stronger legal precedent can advance survivor safety.

Since May 2026
Legal Aid Chicago has met with 250 litigants filling against someone with a firearm

The need has been clear. Since the project launched, the team has met with more than 250 litigants filing against someone with a gun. Eighty qualified for assistance, 47 chose to pursue a firearm warrant, and attorneys helped 58 people complete the required paperwork. In 39 cases, the court granted an emergency order of protection. This is what it means to turn a new legal protection into meaningful access to safety.

During **Domestic Violence Awareness Month**, we invite you to stand with survivors. Your support of Legal Aid Chicago makes initiatives like the Firearm Warrant Project possible, helping ensure attorneys are available in the courthouse, advancing the implementation of Karina's Law, and strengthening safety and justice for survivors across Illinois.

Justice doesn't happen on its own. Together, we can help keep safety and justice within reach.

CELEBRATING PRO BONO MONTH

October is Pro Bono Month, a time to recognize the attorneys who lend their time and expertise to help expand access to justice.

At Legal Aid Chicago, our attorneys and staff provide free legal services to people living in poverty. But the need for legal help is far greater than any one organization can meet alone. That's where pro bono partnerships come in.

Through our **Pro Bono & Community Partnerships Group**, Legal Aid Chicago works with volunteer attorneys from law firms and legal organizations to extend the reach of our services. Our team recruits and trains volunteers, connects them with clients and cases, and provides the guidance and support they need to advocate effectively. It's a collaborative model: Legal Aid Chicago brings the legal expertise, client support and infrastructure, while pro bono attorneys bring additional resources, time, talent and capacity. Together, we can help more people navigate complex legal challenges.

This Pro Bono Month, we're highlighting one example of that partnership in action: Legal Aid Chicago's SNAP Restoration Project.

Pro Bono in Action: Restoring Access to SNAP

When new **SNAP** work requirements led to benefit terminations across Illinois this spring, Legal Aid Chicago saw an urgent need for legal assistance. In response, our **Public Benefits Practice Group** partnered with the **Pro Bono & Community Partnerships** team to launch the **SNAP Restoration Project**, bringing private attorneys into the effort to help people challenge wrongful terminations and restore their benefits.

Legal Aid Chicago staff provide the expertise and infrastructure behind the project, preparing cases, identifying legal issues, coordinating assignments and supporting volunteers throughout the advocacy process. **To date, 139 attorneys from 25 firms have joined the effort, with 68 cases assigned and 25 cases closed, resulting in $117,100 in financial outcomes in closed cases.**

The partnership is also helping Legal Aid Chicago identify broader problems in how the new requirements are being implemented, including issues with exemption policies, termination notices and appeals. These insights can inform ongoing advocacy with the Illinois Department of Human Services and help shape our response to future changes affecting public benefits.

The **SNAP Restoration Project** demonstrates what is possible when Legal Aid Chicago's legal expertise and the resources of the private bar come together: more attorneys working together to help more people keep the benefits they rely on.

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THANK YOU FOR JOINING US AT *JUSTICE IS SERVED!*

Last Friday, Legal Aid Chicago welcomed supporters, advocates, and friends to our biggest ***Justice is Served*** yet, and what an unforgettable evening it was. With over 400 guests gathered at our new venue, the **Chicago History Museum**, it was truly a party for the history books. Together we celebrated our shared commitment to equal justice, enjoyed an incredible night of food, entertainment, and community, and raised critical funds to support Legal Aid Chicago's work across our city.

To everyone who joined us, bid in the auction, purchased raffle tickets, made a contribution, or simply shared in the evening's energy and purpose: thank you. Your generosity and partnership help ensure that thousands of people can access the legal assistance they need to build safer, more stable futures.

SAVE THE DATE

Mark your calendar for **October 8, 2027**, and join us for the next ***Justice is Served***.

Want to be more involved in advancing equal justice? Learn more about joining Legal Aid Chicago's Ambassadors Board and connect with a network of professionals committed to making justice more accessible in Cook County.

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!