

Limited Scope Representation Broadens Range of Legal Help Available to Low-income Connecticut Individuals and Families



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By Ashleigh Backman

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For many years, legal aid attorneys have grappled with the question, “How do legal aid programs increase services to the poor while legal aid costs rise, economic pressures on attorneys increase, and state and federal funding remain at-risk to be cut?”

As practitioners, we ask ourselves, “How can the legal services market offer a broader range of services to meet the financial needs of potential clients with modest means?”

A partial answer to both questions is limited scope representation. Limited scope representation, also called unbundled legal services, refers to the practice of breaking legal representation into separate and distinct tasks. Examples of unbundled legal services include: (1) answering legal questions to empower the client with pro se legal advice; (2) drafting legal documents for the self-represented individual; or (3) filing a limited appearance for a specific court event.

Statewide Legal Services of Connecticut, Inc. (SLS) successfully uses limited scope representation to broaden the range of pro bono services provided to our low-income clients, while at the same time meeting the needs of busy volunteer attorneys. For example, we offer our:

- **Call4law program**—a telephonic legal advice hotline for pre-screened low-income individuals facing consumer debt actions.
- **Security Deposit Clinic**—which provides in-person document drafting to pro se litigants seeking to get back security deposits.
- **Family Law Clinic**—which allows individuals to speak to a pro bono attorney about the divorce process and get help drafting the legal documents and fee waivers they need.
- **Limited Scope Representation Program**—which provides brief or in-depth legal assistance in all areas of poverty law to eligible low-income clients.

The Connecticut Bar Association also launched a pro bono, unbundled legal service program called Connecticut Free Legal Answers for low-income individuals and families whose household incomes are slightly over SLS’ financial eligibility guidelines. This program

allows individuals to ask questions online and receive answers back from volunteer attorneys. Without this support, these individuals would not be able to solve their problems because they are financially unable to afford a private attorney to address their legal issues.

Limited scope representation has proven to be effective in certain types of legal matters. For example, 70 percent of low-income clients that attend our pro bono Family Law Clinic have been successful in filing their lawsuit as a pro se litigant based on advice given at the clinic; 58 percent of low-income clients that attend our Security Deposit Clinic have successfully recovered their security deposits by filing suit against their landlord—all from the advice given at the clinic; and 53 percent of low-income clients that receive pro bono telephonic legal advice have reported following through with the advice provided to them, including writing letters to collection agencies to stop unlawful creditor harassment, protecting their limited means from unlawful bank executions, or seeking return of an unlawful wage execution.

Besides providing legal benefits to low-income clients, limited scope representation allows busy practitioners to participate in pro bono programs. Pro bono attorneys are able to dedicate a discrete time commitment to a pro bono client. For example, pro bono attorneys arrive at a Security Deposit Clinic at 9:00 a.m., go back to the office by noon, and still have made a difference in the life of a low-income individual or family.

SLS and the CBA continue to challenge CBA members to engage in “bite-sized pro bono” through limited scope representation pro bono programs. To learn more about SLS’ unbundled pro bono legal service programs, please contact SLS’ pro bono attorney manager, Ashleigh Backman, at abackman@slsct.org.

To learn more about the CBA’s Connecticut Free Legal Answers Program contact Tanya Gaul at tgaul@ctbar.org.

A small amount of time provides a lasting affect on a low-income individual or family. ■