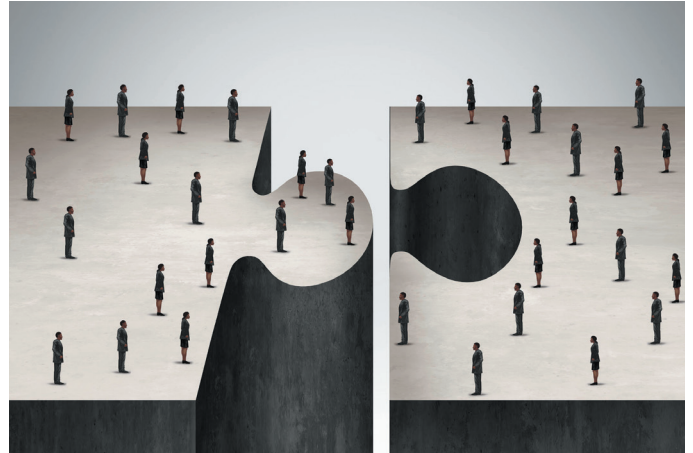


CBA Responds to COVID-19's Impact on the Access to Justice Gap

By AMY LIN MEYERSON



With the continued spread of the coronavirus across the globe, we feel the impact on our lives and our communities and the heightened concern for our well-being and safety. Effective as of 8:00 p.m. on Monday, March 23, 2020, as part of Connecticut Governor Lamont's Stay Safe-Stay Home Initiative, all workers at non-essential businesses in the state were ordered to work from home. "The Governor is encouraging all businesses to employ, to the maximum extent possible, any telecommuting or work-from-home procedures that they can safely implement. The Governor's order excludes any essential business or entity providing essential services or functions, such as healthcare, food service, law enforcement, and similar critical services."¹ The economic impact of COVID-19 will significantly increase the number of low-income Connecticut residents who need civil legal assistance.

As we actively monitor the pandemic situation and track guidance provided by our state medical associations,² the CDC and the World Health Organization, I took some time to visit with Cecil J. Thomas to learn about the work he and his colleagues are doing and what each of us can do to address the legal needs of the most vulnerable among us.

Cecil J. Thomas is an attorney at Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc. (GHLA), where he represents low-income clients, predominantly in housing matters. He has led appellate and class action litigation resulting in significant victories on behalf of low-income Connecticut residents, including a multi-million dollar class action

settlement to benefit Hartford tenants displaced from their condemned homes.³ In addition to serving as incoming CBA president-elect and incoming chair of the CBA Pro Bono Committee, Cecil is the president of the University of Connecticut Law School Alumni Association. He is co-chairing the Legal Aid Subcommittee of the CBA COVID-19 Task Force, along with Alexis Smith of New Haven Legal Assistance Association and Dahlia Grace of Connecticut Legal Services.

How are Connecticut's legal aid programs serving their clients during this time of social distancing?

In addition to individual representation, attorneys from all of Connecticut's legal services programs have been actively engaged in the systemic advocacy necessary to protect Connecticut's low-income residents at this difficult time. The depth and breadth of this advocacy is truly amazing. You can review some of those advocacy efforts at cflawhelp.org/en/covid-19-advocacy.

In addition, Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Connecticut Legal Services, and New Haven Legal Assistance Association have collaborated to prepare several topical webinar briefings. Hundreds of participants have joined each presentation to learn timely and relevant information about the legal rights of low-income individuals, changes in the law, and important resources and tools.

On March 25, 2020, GHLA developed a new strategy to meet our clients' still-urgent and changing needs for legal ser-

vices by instituting a temporary direct legal information and advice phone line. It provides more access to our attorneys and serves as another portal to legal information, advice, and help. We distribute information about our remote services through electronic communications, social media, and fliers in English and Spanish. For the Greater Hartford Area, clients may call (860)541-5070. Clients seeking assistance outside of the Greater Hartford Area can call Statewide Legal Services at 1(800)453-3320.

How is the CBA responding to the most pressing legal issues for low-income clients arising as a result of the pandemic?

The Legal Aid Committee of the CBA COVID-19 Task Force is coordinating with the legal aid organizations and attorneys serving Connecticut's most vulnerable populations to address issues such as evictions, benefits, and family law matters. Currently, the subcommittee is focused on two initiatives: 1) developing CBA Pro Bono Connect, a call for pro bono volunteers in the areas of civil legal needs (e.g., housing, family, consumer, special education) that are likely to be the most impacted by the COVID-19 crisis; and 2) monitoring, with the assistance of the Connecticut Bar Foundation, the impact of COVID-19 on legal aid funding.

On the first initiative, CBA Pro Bono Connect, we have developed a call for pro bono volunteers, together with a web portal where lawyers will be able to sign up to participate, express their preferences, and be matched with an organization that provides that type of pro bono referral. At-

torneys who sign up, and pledge to take at least one pro bono referral from one of Connecticut's legal services providers, will be able to access training materials and webinars free of charge. Committee members have developed those trainings, which are being posted to the CBA Education Portal. Of course, we hope participants will elect to pay for those CLE trainings, as the proceeds from these pro bono trainings have been designated to benefit Connecticut's legal services program.

On the second, the Connecticut Bar Foundation is gathering information on the impact of COVID-19 on IOLTA and court filing fees, two important funding sources for legal services in Connecticut that have been impacted by the economic impact of the current pandemic. It is an unfortunate reality that financial resources for legal aid are decreasing, at a time when the need for those services is increasing.

What should pro bono attorneys do to help during the coronavirus pandemic?

Sign up to join our new pro bono initiative, CBA Pro Bono Connect! Connecticut's low-income residents need your time and expertise now more than ever. Visit ctbar.org/CBAProBonoConnect to join us in this new push to increase pro bono representation.

Share best practices and resources. The CBA has collected and continues to update resources on its website at ctbar.org/covid19-resources. If you have additional resources you have been using to assist your pro bono clients, please send those to the CBA at communications@ctbar.org.

Volunteer for the numerous pro bono opportunities available on CTLawHelp.org, a website that was created by several non-profit legal aid organizations whose shared mission is to improve the lives of Connecticut residents by providing free legal help to people with very low income.

Sign up to volunteer for Connecticut Free Legal Answers,⁴ an online civil legal ser-

vice for people who cannot afford to pay for an attorney. The service is a cooperative effort of the Connecticut Bar Association and the American Bar Association. Connecticut Free Legal Answers helps low-income people. Those seeking assistance are screened by income. Volunteer attorneys log on at their convenience to privately and anonymously answer questions on topics including family law matters such as divorce, child support, adoption and name change as well as domestic violence, bankruptcy, consumer issues, education, employment, housing, worker's compensation, wills, and estate planning.

You also can volunteer for the COVID-19 Small Business Virtual Legal Clinic,⁵ a collaborative project among the CBA, Lawyers for Good Government and area law firms. "Hundreds of thousands of small business owners, many of whom already operate on very narrow margins, are struggling with questions about how their businesses will survive the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only do these businesses provide necessary services in communities all over the country; they provide employment, job training, and other benefits. Their survival is essential to strong neighborhoods."⁶

Be prepared to volunteer when temporary relief measures are lifted and courts resume their regular case loads. Many of our clients will find themselves in more dire situations than before the stay in place order was issued. We also are preparing for a great increase in the number people seeking assistance.

Are you worried that there won't be enough pro bono providers to meet new legal needs associated with COVID-19?

The need for civil legal services always exceeds available resources. We have an important ethical obligation to help address that access to justice gap, for the good of society, the profession, and the rule of law. I firmly believe that by working together, we can make important strides in addressing the civil legal needs of Connecticut's low-income residents. I understand

the pressures that face all of us, particularly now as we balance many changes, new roles and new obligations, as a result of this pandemic. Yet ours is a heroic profession, one that has always been on the front lines of protecting the rule of law. I am proud of the CBA's commitment to access to justice, and I know our members will answer the call to provide pro bono representation at this difficult time.

What are other ways people may help?

You can make a donation to Project Feed Connecticut⁷ that is a joint effort by the Connecticut Bar Association, Hartford County Bar Association, CFA Society Hartford, Connecticut Chapter of the American College of Surgeons Professional Association, Connecticut Asian Pacific American Bar Association, Portuguese American Bar Association, George W. Crawford Black Bar Association, New Haven County Bar Association, Middlesex County Bar Association, Connecticut Society of Certified Public Accountants, the Connecticut Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, Pullman & Comley's ADR Group, the Connecticut Trial Lawyers Association, the South Asian Bar Association of Connecticut, the Connecticut Hispanic Bar Association, and the Connecticut Italian American Bar Association to provide financial support to Food Share⁸ and Connecticut Food Bank.⁹

Many other volunteer opportunities from making Personal Protection Equipment for yourself and health care workers to assisting elderly homebound neighbors with errands are listed on the CBA website on the For the Public resources page under the How to Help & Volunteer subcategory.¹⁰

Many thanks to Cecil and all of the members of our legal profession for providing

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Amy Lin Meyerson is the 2019–2020 president-elect of the Connecticut Bar Association and chair of the CBA's Pro Bono Committee. She is a sole

practitioner in Weston, practicing business and general corporate law.

President's Message

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to listen to your concerns and grievances, and to make you successful in your pursuits. I am not sure if the methods we have been utilizing are the most effective way to gather feedback from our members and allow for us to listen to the concerns of the legal community. I do know the CBA is eager to listen to your suggestions on how we can improve our efforts. We need to know what we are doing *right* but, more importantly, we need to know what we are doing *wrong*, and what you need from us. We want to listen to what you want and what you have to say, not just because our mission requires it, but also because we genuinely care about ensuring justice and preserving the rule of law as well as ensuring our members and affiliate bar associations are successful in their endeavors. To accomplish these goals, we need your support, your voice,

your thoughts, your ideas, and your grievances. Our armor is off, our guard is down, and the CBA is ready to listen. ■

Thank you for allowing me the chance to serve this year as your president. Throughout this bar year, I have had the pleasure of speaking with and getting to know so many of you and your families. Thank you for contacting me to discuss issues, inspiring me to write articles on topics and launch initiatives. I enjoyed working, learning, and growing with all of you. The support I received from you, the amazing staff at the CBA, my fellow officers, past presidents, the leaders of various sections and committees, other bar associations, and professional organizations cannot be understated. For this, I will be eternally grateful.

Pro Bono

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pro bono services, and supporting legal aid in these difficult and challenging times. It has truly been a pleasure to serve as chair of the Pro Bono Committee and working with and being inspired by our Committee members and attorney volunteers striving to narrow the access to justice gap. I look forward to continuing the important work of the Pro Bono Committee under Cecil's leadership. Stay well! ■

NOTES

1. Frequently Asked Questions on the State of Connecticut's actions related to COVID-19 at p. 4. (<https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/Coronavirus/COVID-19-FAQs.pdf?la=en>)
2. Medical Associations, CT Department of Consumer Protection (<https://portal.ct.gov/DCP/Common-Elements/Consumer-Facts-and-Contacts/Medical-Associations>)
3. Hartford Agrees To Pay Out \$2.75 Million To Residents Improperly Displaced From Condemned Buildings, Matthew Ormseth, March 22, 2018. (<https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-news-hartford-housing-settlement-20180321-story.html>)
4. <https://ct.freelegalanswers.org>
5. ctbar.org/SmallBusinessClinic
6. <https://www.lawyersforgoodgovernment.org/covid-smallbusiness>
7. ctbar.org/ProjectFeedCT
8. [Foodshare.org](https://www.foodshare.org)
9. [CTFoodBank.org](https://www.ctfoodbank.org)
10. <https://www.ctbar.org/home/coronavirus-response/resources/for-the-public>

PDD

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Attorney ordered by agreement to submit to three credit hours of continuing legal education in IOLTA account management and to cooperate with monthly audits by the Statewide Grievance Committee for a period of six months for violation of Rule 1.3, 1.15(e) and 8.4(4) of the Rules of Professional Conduct by failing to render a proper accounting regarding a tax lien when requested by the complainant and by failing to respond to the grievance complaint in violation of Practice Book § 2-32(a)(1). *Kaufman v. Walter A. Shalvoy, Jr.*, #18-0760 (10 pages).

Reprimand ordered by agreement for violation of Rule 8.1(2) of the Rules of Professional Conduct and Practice Book § 2-32(a)(1). *Hernandez v. Robert Louis Fiedler*, #19-0089 (8 pages).

Attorney ordered by agreement to submit to three credit hours of continuing legal education in law office management for violations of Rules 1.2(a), 1.2(c), 1.4(a)(2), 1.4(a)(3), 1.5(c), and 1.16(d) of the Rules of Professional Conduct. *Lowe v. Joseph E. Fournier*, #19-0143 (10 pages).

Attorney ordered by agreement to submit to three credit hours of continuing legal education in legal ethics and three credit hours in residential real property for violation of Rules 1.5(b), 1.7 and 1.16(d) of the Rules of Professional Conduct by representing the buyer and seller of the same real property in the same transaction without written consent of the complainant and by failing to provide the complainant or her counsel with a copy of her file within a reasonable time upon request. *Honeysette v. Dale H. King*, #19-0145 (9 pages).

Reprimand ordered by agreement for violation of Rule 8.4 of the Rules of Professional Conduct by failing to make payment under a promissory note, and attorney was ordered to make restitution of \$22,500 on or before thirty days after acceptance of agreement. *Brown v. Lawrence J. Greenberg*, #19-0230 (8 pages). ■

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