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Cutting the Poverty Rate with Civil Legal Aid

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(AP Photo/Eric Risberg)

According to the [new data](#) from the US Census Bureau, 46.7 million Americans live in poverty. That's 46.7 million people who are making impossible choices every day between paying the rent, feeding their children, obtaining healthcare, and meeting other basic needs. And that's not even counting the many more who are a [layoff or single crisis away](#) from a similar fate.

There are no quick or easy fixes to eliminate poverty. But there is a vital resource in our communities that helps prevent many people from falling into poverty while lifting others out of it: civil legal aid. By

providing legal assistance to people who face potentially life-changing and destabilizing challenges—like wrongful evictions and foreclosures, domestic abuse, and debilitating medical crises—civil legal aid allows people to protect their homes, families, and livelihoods. And it does it in a cost-effective way: A [New York Task Force study](#) found that every dollar invested in civil legal aid delivers six dollars back to the state’s economy. Unfortunately, because of a lack of investment in this resource, many families don’t get the legal help they need and therefore face the prospect of economic ruin.

It’s all too easy to become poor. In challenging economic times and with growing income inequality, it’s often a matter of bad luck. For example, Mary is a hard-working single mother in Maine who lost her job as a hairdresser when the salon that employed her unexpectedly closed down. It was already difficult to support her three children on her salary; after losing her job and then struggling to rebuild her client base at a new salon, she was unable to continue paying the rent. She found herself and her children at risk of losing the roof over their heads.

But as is the case for many people throughout the nation, things took a turn for the better when Mary got help from a civil legal aid organization. [Pine Tree Legal Assistance](#) worked with her to challenge the eviction and negotiate an agreement with her landlord that allowed her family to stay in their home and avoid poverty and a costly stay in a local shelter.

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Civil legal aid also helps people who are already in poverty. Monica is a former Navy officer who was discharged for misconduct following an in-service sexual assault—behavior that was a symptom of her undiagnosed and untreated Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that resulted from the assault. Despite her service to our country, she found herself unable to access veterans’ benefits due to the discharge, and was battling homelessness, jail, and addiction. She turned to [Bay Area Legal Aid](#) in California for assistance. Civil legal aid lawyers helped Monica navigate a complex system to prove that she was assaulted in the military and consequently suffered from PTSD. She now receives veteran’s benefits—including disability compensation—which is helping her get her life back on track.

Others need civil legal aid in order to escape dangerous situations, like domestic violence. In Illinois, Kayla was struggling to support herself and her son after ending a bad relationship with her child’s father—who not only withheld child support, but physically abused her during parental visits. With the help of [Prairie State Legal Services](#), Kayla secured a protective order against her abuser as well as several thousand dollars in unpaid child support. The award and the protective order allowed her to move to another state, lift herself out of poverty, and build a new life for her family. She now makes more than \$50,000 a year working as a welder.

I wish that every story of a family experiencing poverty had a happy ending. But that’s not the case, and a lack of legal counsel should never be the reason that a family can’t work its way out of poverty. In more than [70 percent of civil cases today](#), Americans are headed to court without legal representation. We simply don’t provide enough resources to civil legal aid organizations, and therefore too many people go without the legal help needed to avert poverty and better their lives.