Southeast Louisiana Legal Services

2019 Annual Report

Fighting for fairness for vulnerable people
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Now more than ever, civil legal aid is critical to protecting the future health and stability of struggling people and to the ability of our communities to recover from COVID-19’s devastating economic impact. Southeast Louisiana Legal Services (SLLS)’ team of dedicated attorneys, support staff, board members, donors, and volunteers are making a big difference in the daily lives of people who turn to us in need of legal help during a major life crisis.

As we have been for over 50 years, SLLS continues to be a lifeline for vulnerable families at the time they most need help. We pivoted almost overnight to become a virtual law firm working remotely to sustain services to struggling workers whose lives have been upended by COVID-19, to seniors and people living with chronic health conditions at increased risk of serious complications, to domestic violence victims trapped in their homes due to abusers, and to so many more people adversely affected by the pandemic. As we continue to fight the long-term effects of COVID-19 on marginalized people, to battle systemic inequities disproportionately impacting people of color, and to ensure equal access to justice in a changing world, I am so proud and honored to serve as SLLS’ Board President and to present our 2019 Annual Report to you.

Mark Surprenant
SLLS Board of Directors President
Of Counsel with Adams and Reese, LLP
For over 50 years, Southeast Louisiana Legal Services (SLLS) has provided a legal safety net. We serve 22 parishes covering half of Louisiana’s low-income population from our offices in Baton Rouge, Covington, Harvey, Hammond, Houma, and New Orleans. SLLS attorneys and support staff are complemented by pro bono attorneys, law students, and other volunteers. We work in partnership with other community stakeholders.

SLLS provides legal help for indigent and other vulnerable people who cannot afford a lawyer. We protect livelihoods, health, housing, and families. Programs like ours are essential to assuring fairness for all in the civil justice system.
OUR PRIORITIES

Protecting Families And Children

Preserving Housing

Legal Help For Special Populations

Economic Stability

Domestic Violence
Family Law
Child in Need of Care
Elder Law

Foreclosure Prevention
Landlord-Tenant
Successions for Homes
Fair Housing Rights

Employment Law
Public Benefits
Education & Health
Consumer & Tax

Homeless Advocacy
Rights of the Disabled
Disaster Survivors
Veterans Project

AREAS SERVED

Louisiana Legal Services Network

Acadiana Legal Service
Southeast Louisiana Legal Services
Office Locations
Having an SLLS attorney prevents loss of family, food, shelter, income, medical care, or personal safety.

In 2019, SLLS handled 11,838 cases, closing over 8,000 of those. SLLS helped 25,076 vulnerable Louisianans, reached another 30,579 people through community education and resources, and provided legal information to 185,000 more through LouisianaLawhelp.org. As we headed into 2020, 3,663 cases remained open. The charts below are a breakdown of our 2019 closed and open cases.

**Closed Cases**
- Miscellaneous - .5%
- Income - 8%
- Wills and Estates - 8.4%
- CINC - 8.5%
- Consumer - 10%
- Education, Employment, or Health - 10.4%
- Housing - 15.5%
- Family - 38.9%

**Open Cases**
- Individual Rights - 2%
- Education, Employment, or Health - 4%
- Income - 7%
- Miscellaneous - 7%
- Consumer - 8%
- Housing - 9%
- CINC - 26%
- Family - 38%
The direct economic impact of SLLS’ 2019 work for our clients exceeded $19 million. This represents income secured, assets or benefits protected, such as the value of homes saved from foreclosure, consumer debt relief, health coverage obtained, housing subsidies preserved, financial support for hard-working families, and much more. No price tag can be placed on the value of lives saved through our Domestic Violence and Child in Need of Care work. A new Economic Impact Study on the value of civil legal aid released in early 2019 by the Louisiana bar Foundation found that for every $1 supporting programs like SLLS, there is $9.13 in social return on investment in immediate and long-term cost savings.

CIVIL LEGAL AID SUPPORTS LOUISIANA
Standing up for our state’s most vulnerable residents

ECONOMIC BENEFIT

Louisiana saw over $19 million in economic benefits by providing Civil Legal Aid through Southeast Louisiana Legal Services.

PEOPLE

In 2019, Southeast Louisiana Legal Services handled 11,838 cases in Louisiana, thereby helping over 25,076 people.

LEGAL ISSUES

In 2019, the top 3 legal issues facing Southeast Louisiana Legal Services clients in Louisiana were Family (39%), Child in Need of Care (CINC) (14%), & Housing (13%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SLLS</th>
<th>Louisiana</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>4,585</td>
<td>11,299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CINC</td>
<td>1,639</td>
<td>2,343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>1,583</td>
<td>2,199</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SLLS fulfills its mission through work with clients like Deanna. Deanna’s marriage to her husband was full of ups and downs. Her husband was often abusive to her. But she loved him and was committed to making things work. After three years of marriage, they had a beautiful baby boy. Deanna was thrilled. She thought the love she and her husband each felt for their son would bring them closer together. Unfortunately, she was wrong. Things got worse. Her husband continued to abuse her physically and emotionally. When her son was four years old, Deanna’s husband pushed her against a wall in a fit of rage, screamed in her face, and threatened to kill her. She was terrified. She had finally had enough.

She wanted legal help, but because she was working a low-wage job and needed to support her son, she knew she could not afford to pay a lawyer. Deanna went to the St. Charles Parish Courthouse to find out what she could do to protect herself on her own. She was directed to the SLLS Access to Justice Center Self-Help Desk funded by the United Way of St. Charles Parish. There, an SLLS attorney helped her fill out the forms she needed to obtain a protective order to keep her and her son safe. Still, she was scared – of her husband, of what the monumental step she was taking would mean for her and her son, and of the complicated legal process she was about to start. It all felt overwhelming and confusing.

Fortunately, SLLS didn’t stop at pointing her to forms she needed to file. She was offered legal representation free of charge to help her obtain more permanent safety for herself and her child than the protective order alone could provide. With the help of an attorney by her side to fight for her rights, Deanna obtained a divorce and joint custody of her son. She was named as the primary custodial parent. Her now ex-husband was ordered to complete a batterer’s intervention program. Now Deanna has the fresh start she needs to stabilize her life and protect her family.
Continued Housing for Mother with Disabilities

The SLLS Capital Area Homeless One Stop Legal Clinic funded by the Capital Area United Way recently changed the life of a single mother of five children. Suzanne struggled with mental health problems, agoraphobia, and osteoarthritis. To make matters worse, her temporary housing was about to expire. Suzanne was referred to our onsite attorney at the Homeless One Stop. We helped her navigate the byzantine process of applying and being approved for disability benefits. Once that happened, we were able to help her obtain permanent housing and a stable future for her family.

In talking about how we impacted her life, she said, “It’s definitely been a long time coming for my benefits and words cannot express how happy and blessed that I can finally take care of my girls I actually took my girls out for the first time in such a long time & it felt so good to do that, that I got emotional just doing it. Again “Thank You” for all your help & also giving me the opportunity to finally be a mother & provide for my girls. Southeast Louisiana Legal Services is definitely a blessing.”

Helping a Homeless Mother and Her Children

With no options of a place to live after leaving her child’s abusive father, Jessica and her baby were living at a local motel with a bad reputation as being a place known for drug activity. To help pay for her room, she took a job cleaning rooms at the motel. Even though her child’s father had physically attacked her in the past, in desperation, she called him for help to buy diapers and food. When he came to the motel, another altercation broke out. The father called the police, lying that she had pulled a gun on him and stolen his wallet. Police realized she did not have a weapon and the father ended up being arrested. Once he got out of jail, he retaliated against our client by calling child welfare to report the mother as living at the motel. He threatened to fight her for custody of the baby. That is when she turned to SLLS for legal help.

We were able to help her obtain an 18-month protective order against the father, temporary sole custody, and the father being limited to supervised visitation. Her SLLS attorney heard about a job and referred her to it. She got the job and now has stable employment as a food truck manager with a five year contract, a vehicle, driver’s license and insurance. Child welfare has now closed its case and the family is no longer living in a motel.
Mr. C is a 77-year old Army veteran. In August 2016, he had an urgent medical problem and was hospitalized for treatment. Adding to his medical issue, Mr. C had fallen ill on a Saturday and the New Orleans VA Hospital had not been open on weekends since Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. This meant Mr. C had no choice but to go to a non-VA hospital. Unbelievably, three years later, he received a collection notice from the VA alleging he owed them $11,000. Why? Because he had not promptly notified the VA about his hospitalization. He called the VA and tried to explain what happened but he was told that the VA would not pay his $11,000 hospital bill. Mr. C lives on a fixed income, could not afford to pay the bill, and this debt was putting his VA pension and Social Security disability benefits at risk of garnishment.

Mr. C came to see the SLLS attorney onsite at our Medical-Legal Partnership at the New Orleans VA Medical Center Hospital funded by the New Orleans Bar Association and its Foundation. SLLS submitted a memorandum disputing the debt with supporting medical records. We are happy to report that in December 2019, we received notice that the VA had agreed to pay Mr. C’s $11,000 medical bill. As a result, Mr. C was able to protect his monthly benefits from garnishment so that he can continue to pay his mortgage payments on his family home.

**Protecting Vulnerable Veterans**

Veterans are an area of special focus at SLLS. Thanks to funding from the New Orleans Bar Association and its Foundation, we have dedicated staff assigned to work with veterans like Mr. W. He was a 57-year old veteran who worked full-time. In May 2019, he was hospitalized due to depression. Unable to work due to his extended hospitalization, Mr. W could not pay his June 2019 rent and was served with an eviction notice.

VA hospital social workers set up an appointment for Mr. W with SLLS while he was hospitalized. We visited him there to help stop his eviction. Working with his social workers and employer after he was released from the hospital, Mr. W was able to work extra hours to catch up on his June 2019 rent and late fees. SLLS represented him in with negotiations with his landlord, who agreed to drop the eviction. Mr. W continues to work and pay his rent and no longer has to worry about becoming homeless due to this hospitalization.
Many of our clients have a wide range of needs. To help clients get the holistic services they need, SLLS works with organizations across our service area to coordinate services and referrals.

Mr. P was referred to us after talking with his supportive housing case manager to get help with obtaining disability benefits. He was late in filing for an appeal of a disability claim he tried to do on his own.

After talking to Mr. P and reviewing his medical records, we learned that he had schizophrenia, HIV, and an IQ of only 65. Yet, he wasn’t receiving any medical or mental health treatment at the time. Because many of Mr. P’s needs were beyond the scope of the legal help that SLLS provides, we referred him to a specialized Assertive Community Team worker to help stabilize people with severe mental illness. He was approved for services and began seeing their psychiatrist, he was connected with HIV treatment, and they helped him with an outstanding bench warrant. Mr. P finally had the scope of services needed to improve his qualify of life. We are happy to report that after connecting him to intensive services, we helped build a strong administrative record to support a “good cause” argument for his late appeal and we helped him successfully win his disability claim.

Ms. W, a client whose Section 8 rent was $5 a month, was being evicted. Her landlord was illegally charging her additional fees for pest control and “valet” trash collection. The Housing Authority had not approved these charges which when added on, pushed up her tenant portion of rent far above the maximum amount that she could be charged based on her income.

After she sought SLLS’ assistance, we represented her in an eviction. We defeated it on the grounds that these illegal amounts were never approved by the Housing Authority and she was being overcharged. Ms. W was not only not evicted, she received a refund of $260. But SLLS did not stop there. These same charges were being assessed against all the other tenants in the complex. We negotiated with the Housing Authority and the apartment complex’s corporate headquarters. Through our efforts, the Housing Authority ended the fees for over 500 tenants resulting in the avoidance of $32,450 per month in illegal charges.
A single mother of two who worked for a local non-profit providing services to at-risk youth found herself in need of civil legal aid. She had been sued by an online lending company for unsecured debts of more than $25,000. By the time she made her way to us, a motion for summary judgment had already been filed against her in court.

She was very afraid that her meager check would be garnished and that she would be in trouble at her job because of a garnishment. An SLLS consumer attorney met with her, reviewed her loan documents and lawsuit, and found multiple deficiencies. We filed pleadings to challenge the motion for summary judgement to help stop possible collection action. At that point, the lending company negotiated with SLLS and the company wound up dismissing the entire suit. Our client was then able to breathe a sigh of relief.

Mr. O grew up in New Orleans. When he was young, he was shot. Since then, he had chronic pain and weakness in the leg and was eventually diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Over time, he became unable to work any longer as his condition deteriorated. After Hurricane Katrina in 2005 Mr. O, who had been evacuated, returned to New Orleans. He could not stabilize, became even more severely depressed and experienced homelessness several times.

After trying several different programs and social service agencies, Mr. O was referred by his social worker to SLLS’ Veterans and Innovative Project (VIP) Unit. SLLS helped him with an application for Social Security disability benefits and diligently built the medical record to support his claim. Although he was initially denied, SLLS appealed and argued his case in front of an Administrative Law Judge. The judge issued a fully favorable decision, monthly SSI benefits, and $16,000 in back-owed benefits. This income helped Mr. O obtain both economic and housing stability for the first time in more than fifteen years. Now he truly feels like he is back home.
In his early 20’s, Mr. Francis was convicted of a serious crime that he did not commit. Rather than face the possibility of the electric chair, he pled guilty to a lengthy prison sentence ultimately serving four decades at Louisiana’s infamous Angola prison. While there, he was a model prisoner becoming an ordained minister, a trained CPR instructor sent to dozens of jails and prisons to teach these lifesaving skills, a trusty, and a mentor for other prisoners enrolled in Angola’s Re-Entry Court Program. His activities were cut short when he had a major stroke at age 66 which left him paralyzed on his left side.

But after over forty years in prison, he didn’t have much of a support system. He couch surfed with some distant relatives - but that was not working out well. He feared becoming homeless since he was now disabled and couldn’t work. Someone suggested he apply for affordable senior housing. He got his hopes up that he might finally have a home of his own when he learned several housing complexes were taking applications. Mr. Francis applied but was denied admission due to his criminal record. He was offered an administrative hearing to appeal.

Though discouraged and doubting an appeal would do any good, he turned to SLLS for legal help. We prepared an appeal to two properties arguing that their blanket denial violated federal law. SLLS represented him in an in-person hearing. The housing providers overturned their decision and further agreed to work with SLLS to update their outdated admission policies. Mr. Francis was able to move in his new home just before Christmas. When describing how his legal aid attorney made a difference in his life, he said “She is my everything”. He also noted that he is only one of many that SLLS helps every day and that he is so grateful we are there to help give a voice to people in their time of need.
The New Orleans City Business Newspaper Named SLLS Executive Director Laura Tuggle a Women of the Year honoree.

The Louisiana State Bar Association Announced the Justice & Accountability Center (JAC)’s Re-Entry Legal Clinic as the winner of the Legal Services Innovation Award. SLLS is a proud partner in JAC’s Re-Entry Clinic.

The Gillis Long Poverty Law Center recognized SLLS with its inaugural Social Justice Champion Award.

Jessica Wood Williams received a Trees for Life award from Children’s Hospital. The awards were given to recognize professionals from various specialties for their work in advocating against domestic violence and child abuse.
SLLS continued to expand justice to all by operating the statewide free legal information website LouisianaLawHelp.org with resources available in both Spanish and English. We also posted legal alerts through our website and Facebook page.

**SELF HELP DESKS**

**HELP ADDRESS UNREPRESENTED LITIGANT CRISIS**

Near 2010, with shrinking funding for civil legal aid, the number of self-represented litigants rose to as high as 65% in many courts across the country including Louisiana. The civil justice system found it needed new ways to provide some level of help for people without an attorney especially in family law cases. Local court partnerships with civil legal aid, bar associations, and other organizations started self-help desks or courthouse kiosks with self-help resources.

In Louisiana, civil legal aid and pro bono programs began operating self-help desks several years ago. These desks now serve thousands of people annually. SLLS usually places the self-help desks it operates in rural areas where it does not have an office or where it runs a pro bono project. Through the support of the Louisiana Bar Foundation, the United Way of Southeast Louisiana, and the United Way of St. Charles Parish, SLLS started pilot self-help desks.

These and other resources have allowed SLLS to continue operations beyond initial startup.
SLLS staff and volunteers participated in 120 community outreach and legal education efforts in 2019, including Ask-a-Lawyer Programs, Wills for Heroes events, Council on Aging presentations, monthly veterans outreach events, community-based legal clinics, and more. In 2019, 4,405 people were served through our 2019 community events and through dissemination of legal information.
Making a Difference
Through Pro Bono

1,396 Closed Cases
708 Hours Donated in 2019
$1,061,700 Market Value

SLLS Incubator Programs
Baton Rouge Bar Association Subgrant
SLLS Northshore Pro Bono Project
Pro Bono Project Subgrant
Low-Income Tax Payer Clinic Project

Law Students
Make Lasting Contributions

SLLS is fortunate to have law clerks assisting in the delivery of civil legal aid from Loyola, LSU, Southern, and Tulane Law Schools. We also host law students from schools across the country during alternate spring and winter breaks. This nationwide interest in volunteering at SLLS started as an outpouring of support after Hurricane Katrina and continues today. In 2019, law students provided over 10,006 hours of service valued at $150,090. Special thanks to all these dedicated future lawyers and their schools in supporting our work for vulnerable clients.
LEADERSHIP
IN THE LEGAL COMMUNITY

Civil Legal Aid Day 2019 at Louisiana State Capitol

Monte Mollere, LSBA ATJ Director; Laura Tuggle, SLLS Executive Director; State Senator Franklin Foil; Greg Landry, Acadiana Legal Services Director; and Adrienne Wheeler, Louisiana Appleseed Director

SLLS Staff and Colleagues at the LSBA Justice Community Conference

Executive Director Laura Tuggle Presenting at Re-Entry CLE in Partnership with the LSBA and the Louisiana Supreme Court Access to Justice Commission
With generous support from local and national organizations, SLLS hosts innovative Fellowship projects to respond to urgent community needs. The New Orleans Bar Association and the New Orleans Bar Foundation currently fund a Veterans Justice Fellowship and the Equal Justice Works Foundation support fellows to address the unmet legal needs of vulnerable veterans. Two Tulane Law School Lutz Fellows and a Loyola Law Schools Gills Long Social Justice Fellow are helping address critical needs of domestic violence victims and abused children. LBF Fellowships provide resources to help SLLS represent abused/neglected children and the needs of vulnerable people with chronic health problems.
SLLS’ Northshore Pro Bono Project (NSPBP) celebrated ten years of serving vulnerable people with a day long CLE featuring local judges, local leaders, SLLS staff, and our pro bono volunteers. We held a luncheon event with a line up of distinguished speakers including 22nd JDC Chief Judge Dawn Amacker, 22nd JDC Judge Mary Devereux, Louisiana State Senator Beth Mizell, Covington Mayor Mike Cooper, SLLS Board President Mark Surprenant, and Brandt Lorio, our 22nd JDC Bar Association Board appointee. We were pleased to honor the Louisiana Bar Foundation’s Northshore Community Partnership Panel represented by long-time SLLS volunteer, Patricia Bonneau, with our Founder’s Award for providing the seed funding to start the project.
After being in our old location for over 30 years, SLLS moved its Hammond office in the fall of 2019. We were delighted to show it off to local judges, elected leaders, attorneys, partners, board members, staff, and other community members. Our new space at 200 Guidry Drive, Hammond, Louisiana is only about a mile away from our old location, has better amenities, and room for us to grow. We were thrilled to host almost 100 guests at our Open House where we were delighted to present Louisiana State Senator Beth Mizell with the SLLS Champion of Justice Award for her dedication to increasing access to justice for low-income Louisiana families.
Champions of Justice

Defenders of Justice

Allies of Justice

2019 BAR EXAM

BATON ROUGE SPONSORS

KEAN MILLER LLP

The Celtic Group

ADAMS AND REESE LLP

McGlinchey Stafford

JONES WALKER

PHELPS DUNBAR

Linda Law Clark

SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY LAW CENTER

LSU LAW

TAYLOR PORTER

ATTORNEYS AT LAW
2019 BAR EXAM
NEW ORLEANS
2019 BAR EXAM
NEW ORLEANS SPONSORS

Premier Presenting Partner for Justice

Champion of Justice

Defenders of Justice

Allies of Justice

Mark & Monica Surprentant
For every $1 invested in civil legal aid in Louisiana, our communities receive a $9.13 social return on investment. This includes emergency services, law enforcement, healthcare, justice returns, and other public cost savings. That is why strong support from our funders and donors is so important. Because of you, we were able to improve the lives of thousands of vulnerable people across Southeast Louisiana in 2019.

**Total Budget: $8,205,482**
THANK YOU!

2019 FUNDERS

19th Judicial Family Court for the Parish of East Baton Rouge
21st Judicial District Court (Tangipahoa, Livingston, St. Helena)
22nd Judicial District Court (St. Tammany and Washington)
24th Judicial District Court for the Parish of Jefferson
34th Judicial District Court (St. Bernard)
AmazonSmile Foundation
American Bar Association
Baptist Community Ministries
Baton Rouge City Court
Capital Area Agency on Aging
Capital Area Alliance for the Homeless
Capital Area United Way
City of New Orleans
Civil District Court
East Baton Rouge Council on Aging
Edward Wisner Foundation
Equal Justice Works Foundation
Gillis W. Long Poverty Law Center
Greater New Orleans Foundation
Hope Center, Inc.
Huey and Angelina Wilson Foundation
Internal Revenue Service
Jefferson Parish Office of Community Development
Justice and Accountability Center
LaFourche Parish Council on Aging
Livingston Parish Clerk of Court
Louisiana Bar Foundation
Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement
Loyola University New Orleans College of Law
Lutz Family Foundation (Tulane University School of Law)
New Orleans Artists Against Hunger and Homelessness
New Orleans Bar Association/Foundation
Plaquemines Council on Aging
Single Stop USA
Southeast Advocates for Family Empowerment (SAFE)
St. Charles Council on Aging
St. Helena Clerk of Court
St. James Council on Aging
St. John Council on Aging
St. Tammany Council on Aging (COAST)
Start Corporation, Inc.
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
Terrebonne Council on Aging
Terrebonne Parish Consolidated Government
The Haven
U.S. Department of Justice Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)
U.S. Department of Veterans’ Affairs Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF)
United Way of Southeast Louisiana
United Way of St. Charles
Unity of Greater New Orleans
Wells Fargo Foundation
Thank you to our founding circle of justice donors!

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R. Patrick and the honorable Sarah S. Vance
James Weiss
Patrick Yancey
Thanks to all of our 2019 donors for your generous support. You helped us fulfill our mission of achieving justice for low-income people in twenty-two parishes in Southeast Louisiana.

Please accept our apologies for any omissions.
THANK YOU!

2019 DONORS

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SPECIAL

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

THANK YOU TO SLLS VOLUNTEERS ISABELLA TAPE AND GIANLUCA COCINTO-MONOC FOR THEIR EFFORTS IN MAKING THIS REPORT POSSIBLE!
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Thanks you for your support!

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You Can Increase Access to Justice in Southeast Louisiana

Make a Donation Today.

Your donation to SLLS helps ensure families can escape abuse, keep their homes, become self-sufficient, and access health and education services they need to succeed. The demand for our services continues to grow at a pace that outstrips resources. Your support makes it possible for SLLS to respond to urgent needs like helping crime victims, supporting disaster survivors, and helping struggling families impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

You can join our community of donors by making a gift today at:

https://slls.org/donations/

Or your tax-deductible donation can be mailed to:

Roxanne Newman, Deputy Director
Southeast Louisiana Legal Services
P.O. Drawer 2867
Hammond, Louisiana 70404

How Does your Contribution Support the Fight for Fairness?

- Provides legal advice to an at-risk community college student to remove barriers to completing education and improving employment opportunities
- Underwrites a community outreach event to 100 seniors to help them understand their legal rights
- Protects a domestic violence survivor and his or her children from future abuse through an uncontested divorce and permanent stay away order
- Saves a hard working family from eviction
- Protects a child from abuse and neglect by providing a year of legal representation to a child in need of care
- Gets a disabled homeless veteran off the streets and into safe, permanent housing by providing representation in Veterans and Social Security benefits matters

$50 $100 $150 $250 $500 $1000