



Florida News & Notes

The Hidden Harm of Civil Legal Issues and a Path to Help

(NAPS)—Most Americans know that they have the right to a lawyer if they are accused of a crime. But more than half of Americans wrongly think that they also have a right to a lawyer in all civil legal cases. They do not.

This misperception means that many people end up in civil court at a big disadvantage because they don't have legal representation to help them navigate a complex, confusing legal system.

A recent survey by the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) found that most Americans who experienced a civil legal matter within the past three years did not seek legal help from an attorney who could have been pivotal in resolving their issues. They were unaware that free legal help is available for many low-income people who cannot afford to hire a lawyer. LSC, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary, supports 130 independent non-profit legal aid programs nationwide—including seven legal aid organizations that serve every corner of Florida.

Civil legal issues can be life changing. Your longtime family home, for example, could be damaged or destroyed in a hurricane. But when you apply for assistance to rebuild, you learn the deed was never officially put in your name, so you can't get the help you need. That's a civil legal issue.

Or, you are attempting to collect your veterans benefits or Social Security that you are entitled to, but you've been denied and you can't seem to fight your way through the red tape. That's a civil legal issue.

Or, you left a violent situation at home, but you fear for your safety and need a protective order against your abuser. That, too, is a civil legal issue.

Help is Available to Floridians

Legal aid attorneys help with the most common civil legal issues that people in the national survey said they have faced in recent years, even if they didn't recognize them as legal issues. The most common issues involve debt collection, job loss and coping with the aftermath of natural disasters.



Legal Services Corporation supports aid for Floridians in need.

In Florida, nearly 40% of 31,942 civil cases closed in 2023 by LSC-supported legal aid organizations involved housing. Florida legal aid groups also handled thousands of family law cases—helping domestic violence survivors and parents get and keep custody of their children. They also helped with consumer and medical debt, as well as access to veterans, Social Security and disability benefits, among other issues.

No Need to Do it Alone

Many Americans, the national survey showed, do not fully understand when an attorney can help. One in three who didn't seek legal help said they thought they could handle the problem on their own or they didn't think it was serious enough for legal help. Others didn't realize an attorney could help with their problem, and many worried about the cost.

Closing the Justice Gap

As LSC celebrates its 50th anniversary, it has launched an outreach campaign called Protecting the Promise, aimed at ensuring legal aid is available to low-income Florida residents who need it. To see if you're eligible for civil legal aid or to find an LSC-supported legal aid organization near you, visit www.lsc.gov.

To learn how you can help your low-income neighbors get fair treatment and help close the Justice Gap, read The Justice Gap Report: <https://justicegap.lsc.gov/the-report/>.