

Employment, Unemployment and Civil Legal Aid

Massachusetts
Legal
Assistance
Corporation



More than 10% of Massachusetts residents, the majority of whom belong to working families, live in poverty. Wage theft, employment discrimination, and unfair denial of unemployment compensation, combined with a slow economic recovery, have left hundreds of thousands of individuals and families struggling to make ends meet. Civil legal aid attorneys work to address these problems through legal representation, policy advocacy, and partnerships with unions, workers' groups, and social service providers.

Types of Employment Cases

In FY17, legal aid programs funded by the Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation closed nearly 1,000 employment-related cases.

Unemployment Compensation: 576

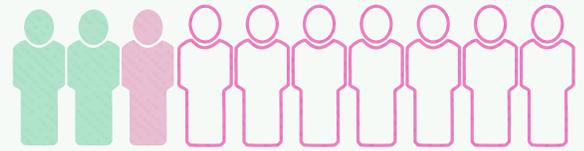
Taxes (including Earned Income Tax Credit): 129

Employment Discrimination: 166

Wage Claims and Fair Labor Standards Act Issues: 62

Employee Rights: 10

Other Employment: 43



71%
TURNUED AWAY

Due to lack of funding, legal aid programs in Massachusetts turn away 71% of eligible clients who seek assistance with employment matters.

Policy Advocacy

Beyond representing individual clients, legal aid programs use data-driven analysis and advocacy to help shape laws and policies that impact the working poor. From advocating for minimum wage and unemployment insurance reform to pushing legislation to remove barriers to employment for the long-term unemployed, legal aid is a driving force for systemic change.

Partnerships

Over 60 community organizations have endorsed MLAC's FY19 budget request, recognizing the pivotal role civil legal aid plays in helping residents across the Commonwealth maintain safe, stable and healthy lives.

Extensive Legal Needs

Low-income families face daunting barriers to attaining the basic necessities of life. Health issues, discrimination and exploitation, lack of training, lack of childcare services, and administrative errors can prevent individuals from securing and maintaining employment that can support their families. With access to so many basic needs—from housing to health care—dependent on fair employment, legal aid plays a crucial role in combatting poverty in the Commonwealth.

- Low-wage workers are especially vulnerable to exploitation. When workers are denied wages, underpaid, subjected to unsafe working conditions, or otherwise mistreated, legal aid can help enforce fair labor standards to ensure that their rights are upheld.

- Employment discrimination can come in many forms. When employees face sexual harassment, wrongful termination due to illness or disability, or other forms of discrimination, legal aid can secure favorable outcomes.
- Individuals who must leave work through no fault of their own are sometimes denied unemployment insurance, which can trigger a downward spiral into poverty. Legal aid works on behalf of these clients to secure this vital benefit.
- When low-income households need help resolving complicated tax issues, legal aid can help them recover the hard-earned income they need to get by.

Preventing Wage Theft for Low-income Workers

When **Helen** first got a job at a laundromat, she was promised \$10 per hour and five hours of work per day, five days a week. Once she started the job, she realized none of what she had been told was true; her employer would not let her leave when her five hours of work were up. Instead of the 25 hours per week she'd been promised, Helen was working 40. To make things worse, after three weeks of work, Helen was not paid her wages.

Knowing she was not working for a trustworthy employer, Helen left the job after five weeks without ever getting a paycheck. And because she had taken public transportation just to get to work, she had actually lost money. Shortly after Helen left the job, the laundromat closed, making it nearly impossible for her to recover the wages on her own. Helen attended a wage theft clinic hosted by the Attorney General's Office, where she met an attorney from MetroWest Legal Services, who heard her story and took the case. The attorney filed a complaint in small claims court so Helen could recover the money she was owed for her work. As a result, the employer paid Helen her outstanding wages plus several hundred dollars in damages. Helen has since found a better job and no longer needs to worry about being paid for the work she does. After receiving her back pay, Helen asked her legal aid attorney, "How much do I owe you?" When he replied that his efforts on her behalf were free of charge, she couldn't believe it.