

Civil Legal Aid in Family Law



Line Item 0321-1600

Civil legal aid organizations help people with low incomes protect and stabilize their families by solving critical issues related to custody, divorce, domestic violence, guardianship, and more. Requests for assistance with family law matters increased by 25% from FY20-23, compared to the period of FY17-19.

Family law attorneys at Massachusetts civil legal aid organizations help families at critical times in their lives by:

- Providing advice and representation for survivors of domestic violence, and enforcing legal protections for them
- Preventing foreclosure, stabilizing housing and securing favorable property settlements
- Enforcing divorce and child support orders
- Addressing denial of benefits, which can destabilize families with low incomes

People and families with incomes at or below 125% of the federal poverty level (\$39,000 per year for a family of four; \$18,825 for an individual) qualify for civil legal aid.

2,965

family law cases were resolved in FY23, including cases involving:

1,017 Divorce, Separation, and Annulment

812 Custody and Visitation

484 Domestic Abuse

237 Other Family Issues

260 Child and Spousal Support

111 Adult Guardianship and Conservatorship

44 Paternity, Name Change, Parental Rights Termination, and Adoption



Sarah (names changed for privacy) was married to Nassim for seven years. Over time, he took control over every aspect of her life, including her social life and financial resources, and even became physically abusive. After their daughter was born, his behavior got worse, and he strangled Sarah. She told him she wanted a divorce, but Nassim threatened to take their daughter away since he was the only working parent.

“I was afraid for myself and my daughter, and felt trapped and desperate,” says Sarah. She searched online for help and found a domestic violence organization that helped her file for divorce and referred her to her local legal aid.

“My attorney provided me not only with the legal aid that I urgently needed but also with emotional support,” Sarah says. The attorney worked with Sarah to secure a restraining order against Nassim and then helped her through a complicated divorce and custody case.

“Having legal aid allowed me the stability and time to be a mother, find a job, and pursue my Master’s in Public Health,” says Sarah. “Eventually and most importantly I gained sole custody of my child. Today, my beautiful daughter and I are healthy, happy, and thriving. I’m forever grateful for the legal services that transformed my life.”

FAMILY PRESERVATION PROJECT

In FY22, MLAC received special one-time funding from the Massachusetts legislature to support a statewide initiative called the Family Preservation Project (FPP). Children often end up in the foster care system because of underlying, poverty-related issues that have legal solutions, such as inadequate housing, food insecurity, and family violence. Modeling other successful programs across the country, FPP attorneys at six grantee organizations provide civil legal aid and related supportive services so families can avoid having their children removed by the Department of Children and Families (DCF). The project is initially focused on areas with historically high rates of DCF removals and large minority populations interacting with DCF.

In FY23, the FPP handled 142 cases, helping 121 clients and their families.



11%

of legal aid cases closed in FY23 were Family Law cases.

Legal Aid: A Sound Investment

Nearly **\$100 million** in estimated economic benefits were provided to the Commonwealth and its residents last year, including **\$1.3 million** in health care savings for survivors of domestic violence and **\$3.7 million** in total lifetime child support.

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