

Now more than ever, justice for all

Written by By Shannon Bacon Supreme Court Justice Commission on Access to Justice
Friday, 26 June 2020 07:42



Here in New Mexico, as across the nation, the economic effects of COVID-19 are making a significant impact on the people of our state, and the results could be particularly damaging for vulnerable New Mexicans. As the economic downturn continues to haunt us, people are suffering.

History tells us that when people feel the effects of a downturn, it leads to legal problems, such as evictions, foreclosures, debt collections, loss of benefits, and a rise in domestic violence. With the COVID-19 pandemic creating high unemployment and a slow comeback for businesses, it is clear to us at the Supreme Court and me personally as a Supreme Court Justice, that a wave of new civil legal cases is on the horizon — cases where the parties may not fully understand their legal rights or the justice system.

Now more than ever, we need the resources that civil legal services will bring to dealing with the thousands of new cases around the state. Now more than ever, when people are hurting and need us, our legal system will respond to create access to justice for all.

Many people are not aware that while people accused of a crime are guaranteed a lawyer for a criminal case, people do not have the same right to an attorney in civil cases. So if you have a civil case (evictions, issues surrounding domestic violence, benefits and debt collection are civil matters), you are not given a lawyer if you can't afford one. This leaves many people to navigate the legal system on their own.

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These can be very serious cases. Losing your home. Losing your benefits that keep you alive. Filing for a restraining order to protect yourself from a domestic violence situation. The Commission on Access to Justice works with stakeholders to connect those in need with resources like access to self-help centers within the court or a connection to appropriate civil legal service providers. These legal service providers help people in need with legal assistance or representation at little to no cost. Over 20,000 cases are handled each year by these nonprofit organizations.

Now, with COVID-19, a wave of civil cases will hit New Mexico's courts, and civil legal service providers are preparing to meet the demand. The good news is that if you have a civil legal issue, and can't afford representation, you can call 833-LGL-HELP and someone from the civil legal aid community will talk to you and try to assist you in your legal case or provide helpful information that you can use to represent yourself.

We must make sure the law is applied equally to all New Mexicans and that everyone has access to the court system. Additionally, it is important to eliminate barriers to the civil justice system that deny justice and keep people in poverty, such as racial inequities. The Supreme Court's Commission on Access to Justice serves our community to prevent injustices from occurring by connecting people with resources to access the justice system.

The Supreme Court of the State of New Mexico is committed to this cause. As a court, we know that we must look ahead and see the personal damage people could suffer. So we are moving forward. We are preparing to help our fellow New Mexicans get justice for the issues that might be burdening them by connecting them to different civil legal service providers or by providing vital resources necessary for their case.

We are also asking that the leaders of this state, our elected officials, the Governor, and legislators, recognize the need for civil legal aid now, and always, to prevent grave injustices from happening and ensuring that our state remains a compassionate place to live and work.

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