

New Mexicans count on Civil Legal Services now more than ever during pandemic

Written by By Shannon Bacon New Mexico Supreme Court Justice
Thursday, 24 December 2020 10:43



The Governor has announced a new series of actions to keep us safe from COVID-19. While some businesses are waiting out the storm, others have had to close permanently, or severely curtail operations, throwing thousands of people out of work, perhaps for a lengthy period. Often, the people hurting the most are the lower income workers, the restaurant, motel, retail workers who live paycheck to paycheck.

For these people, a storm is coming. And Civil Legal Services will be there to help. Even as the virus subsides, economic consequences of the pandemic will remain for many New Mexicans.

The storm is approaching. There can be no doubt about that. According to a study by the U.S. Census Bureau, 44 percent of businesses say they do not expect to return to normal for at least six months. For many, this could mean six more months without a paycheck. The consequences of such economic displacement will mean people lose their houses and their apartments to evictions or foreclosures.

In the past four months, approximately 33 percent of renters in the U.S. did not make at least one rent payment, leaving the renters susceptible for eviction. This number could be even higher in New Mexico. Once both moratoriums preventing evictions (the CDC or New Mexico Supreme Court moratorium) are lifted, the results in this state could be staggering. A Stout report estimates that the number of New Mexicans unable to pay their rent could be as high as 80,000 and suggests that number could lead to 50,000 evictions.

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This is why it's important to know your rights during the pandemic. The Supreme Court's Commission on Access to Justice has launched a campaign, "Know Your Rights During COVID-19." New Mexicans have rights during the pandemic, and we all should know them.

Currently, you cannot be evicted for non-payment of rent, but you must fill out the CDC form or demonstrate to the court that you do not have the ability to pay your rent.

You cannot be fired from your job for being placed in isolation or quarantine.

You have a right to unemployment benefits if you are laid off due to coronavirus.

Your employer must keep all your medical information confidential.

Civil Legal Services is a group of nonprofit providers in New Mexico working to provide legal help in civil cases. While you are guaranteed an attorney in criminal cases in this state, you are not in civil cases. That's where Civil Legal Services steps in and provides help to those in need when their rights are violated.

Civil Legal Services provides attorneys who work with housing counselors who can help you work with your lender to keep you in your home or make a plan to move. The housing counselors can assist you in working out an arrangement so that you can stay in your home while you get back on your feet. Civil Legal Services can also help you with gaining proper unemployment benefits or [with] a domestic violence situation made worse by the COVID-19 virus lockdown.

New Mexicans count on Civil Legal Services. Now more than ever, it's there for New Mexicans who need help advocating for rights. If the moratoriums end, Civil Legal Services will be there to help lower income people fight to stay in their homes, so that they can get back on their feet and provide for their families in due course.

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If you need help during the pandemic for evictions, foreclosures, unemployment benefits or domestic abuse, call (833) LGL-HELP and ask if civil legal service counselors or attorneys can help you in your case.

Civil Legal Services. New Mexicans count on it. And during this pandemic, New Mexico will be able to count on it more than ever.

By Shannon Bacon
New Mexico Supreme Court Justice