



### Civil Legal Aid Response to COVID-19: Helping Montanans Access Basic Needs

- Montana Legal Services Association is a nonprofit law firm providing the only statewide general civil (non-criminal) legal aid to Montanans living in poverty.
- MLSA is open and helping clients – our disaster plan has been enacted and we are now a virtual law firm serving clients on the phone, email, video calls, and on-line.
- The COVID-19 health disaster is coupled with a near complete shutdown of our economy:
  - Simultaneously increasing the number of people living in poverty and needing help accessing basic needs, and
  - Complicating disaster civil legal issues, with new federal laws, court rules, and Governor Directives.
- Legal services providers are a critical component of comprehensive disaster relief, with Montanans now seeking assistance from MLSA with a range of basic needs:
  - **Housing:** Unlawful evictions during the moratorium and when it lifts.
  - **Safety:** Orders of protection and safety planning for families impacted by violent reactions to severe stress of the pandemic and stay-at-home order.
  - **Unemployment and Economic Stability:** Incorrectly denied unemployment benefits for laid off workers, improper application of sick leave, pandemic scams, collections abuse.
  - **Food:** Unfair denials of SNAP and TANF food benefits for hungry families.
  - **Healthcare:** Improperly restricted access to Medicare and Medicaid.
  - **End-of-Life Legal Care:** At-risk individuals need quickly executed wills and medical powers of attorney.
- MLSA's intake specialists have already started to see the impact of COVID-19. During the month of March:
  - 31% of MLSA's completed intakes were COVID-19 related.
  - 232 clients and their family members with COVID-19 legal issues went through intake.
  - Over 2,000 unique page views of COVID-19 specific legal resources on MLSA's self-help website, [MontanaLawHelp.org](http://MontanaLawHelp.org).
  - MLSA mobilized more volunteer attorneys to help meet the increased need, but with just one civil legal aid lawyer for every 9,800 Montanans in poverty, MLSA was already meeting only a part of the need to help people access equal justice under law.
- In this climate, civil legal aid is not only a restorative service, but also an emergency service helping people access housing, food, and safety.
  - **Short Term Impact:** This need is acute, with vulnerable Montanans needing help now with unemployment claims and unlawful evictions.
  - **Mid-Term and Long Term Impact:** This need will not end when the COVID-19 pandemic slows and the stay-at-home directive ends. Job loss, health impacts, domestic abuse, and immediate loss of housing when the eviction moratorium ends will increase the number of people needing civil legal aid for months and likely years into the future.