



## Do Justice and Love Mercy

BY ELIZABETH DAVIDSON AND CAROLYN GRAVIT

An Afghan woman named “Maryam” came to the Justice and Mercy Legal Aid Center (JAMLAC) seeking a divorce from her husband, with whom she has two children. Maryam’s husband had been physically abusing her, and she was afraid for her safety and the safety of her children. However, Maryam was also concerned about her ability to provide for herself and her children following a divorce. Maryam knew

that her limited English and work history would make it difficult for her to earn enough to support her family.

Fortunately, JAMLAC was able to step in and assist Maryam with her divorce and custody agreement. Maryam’s husband did not make this process easy. Throughout the divorce proceedings, he made unreasonable demands, accused Maryam of being mentally unstable, and refused to recognize or follow

the legal process. But JAMLAC staff, through the assistance of Farsi interpreters, helped Maryam navigate the complex legal process and unique cultural considerations until she received final orders from the court.

Ultimately, the court awarded Maryam sole decision-making and the majority of parenting time, with the father having only limited time so he could work on rebuilding his relationship with the children. Maryam also received maintenance and a portion of the equity from her former husband’s business. With JAMLAC’s assistance, Maryam was able to gain freedom from her abusive husband and start a new life with her children.

### What is JAMLAC?

JAMLAC is a 501(c)(3) organization that provides civil legal aid services to low-income families and individuals in the Denver metro area. Most of its clients are victims and survivors of domestic violence and other crimes. JAMLAC’s mission is to seek justice for those struggling with poverty and oppression, and to create healthy communities where all people have access to justice, live free from abuse, are empowered, and thrive in their community.

JAMLAC provides a range of civil legal services, including full representation for family law and immigration matters, consultations, non-legal resource navigation, legal clinics, community workshops, and programs for pro bono service. This past year, JAMLAC provided the following legal services:

- provided full legal representation to 607 individuals, including 104 neglected and abused children;
- assisted 741 individuals through legal consultations or advocacy services;
- provided 660 individuals with one-on-one legal advice or information at legal clinics and workshops;
- assisted 65 Afghan refugees in applying for visas; and
- provided emergency legal services and information to 687 migrants arriving in Denver.

These services were made possible through JAMLAC’s 17 full-time staff members and volunteers who donated 1,200 pro bono service

hours in assisting JAMLAC clients in a variety of ways.

### **Commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

JAMLAC is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). This commitment to DEI is necessary to seek justice, break down barriers, and serve those struggling with poverty and oppression. While JAMLAC approaches its work from a faith-based perspective, JAMLAC believes that all individuals struggling with poverty and oppression should have access to the legal services they need. JAMLAC serves clients regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, immigration status, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religious identity, physical and mental disabilities, age, and language.

JAMLAC's team of attorneys, paralegals, support staff, and volunteers also represents the community it serves. The majority of JAMLAC clients are native Spanish-speakers, and many speak only Spanish. To serve these clients, most of JAMLAC's staff speak both English and Spanish. JAMLAC also provides interpreters for other languages, including American Sign Language. Many of JAMLAC's staff are also immigrants themselves, or children of immigrants, and some staff members have been victims of domestic violence and other crimes—making them uniquely situated to relate to the experience of JAMLAC's clients.

### **Current Challenges**

Like many legal aid providers, JAMLAC continues to face challenges in providing clients the representation, information, and resources they need to navigate the often-overwhelming justice system. Unfortunately, these challenges only continue to widen the justice gap—defined by the Legal Services Corporation as the difference between the civil legal needs of low-income Americans and the resources available to meet those needs. The pandemic has had unprecedented consequences on economic situations, housing security, mental health, physical safety, food security, access to education, and many other aspects of life.<sup>1</sup> One-third of all low-income Americans personally experienced at least one

civil legal problem related to the COVID-19 pandemic in the past year.<sup>2</sup>

Despite so many challenges, JAMLAC finds hope in the number of clients it has been able to help. However, the need is still great. For every person JAMLAC has helped, many others were turned away—often because JAMLAC did not have the capacity to take on additional clients. Challenges with funding, overwhelming demand for services, high-cost legal actions, and overbooked court dockets are more significant than ever.


### **How You Can Help**

JAMLAC relies on the support of volunteers to help provide legal representation and assistance to the community. Here are a few ways you can get involved:

- **Pro Bono Program:** Volunteer attorneys are needed for one-time consultations and representation for civil matters not generally handled by its staff attorneys. The JAMLAC pro bono program seeks volunteer attorneys for bankruptcy, employment, protection orders, end-of-life planning, guardianship, and other civil matters. Volunteer attorneys who can't take on a full representation pro bono case can volunteer for limited-scope pro bono representation. JAMLAC clients often need help with services that only require limited-scope representation, such as understanding a child support agreement, drafting a court pleading, or preparing for an upcoming mediation. Limited-scope representation falls into two broad categories: discrete tasks and limited entry of appearance. CRCP 11(b) governs discrete tasks, such as helping to draft a pleading or paper (often referred to as "ghostwriting"), while CRCP 121 outlines the procedures on limited entry of appearance.
- **Legal Aid Clinics:** Volunteers are needed at JAMLAC's 12 legal aid clinics. The clinics are held in partnership with the Christian Legal Society of Metro Denver and across the Denver metro area.
- **Workshop Volunteer:** At JAMLAC workshops, attorneys provide one-time

consultations. JAMLAC's immigration workshop seeks volunteers to help community members apply for citizenship or for other needed immigration issues.

- **Law Firm Partnership:** Attorneys who work for a law firm or other organization can partner with JAMLAC to provide legal services. JAMLAC will handle attorney training, vet client information and financial requirements, provide language translation, and assist with other needs.
- **Individual Partnership:** JAMLAC provides numerous volunteer opportunities, educational and fundraising events, and partnership opportunities to connect each individual attorney's passion and expertise to the community.
- **Donate:** No time? Donations to JAMLAC change lives. The need for representation in the Denver area far exceeds JAMLAC's capacity. Donations help JAMLAC continue its work and expand services.

For more information about volunteering with JAMLAC, visit [www.jamlac.org](http://www.jamlac.org) or email Carolyn Gravit at [cgravit@jamlac.org](mailto:cgravit@jamlac.org). 



**Elizabeth Davidson** is a family law attorney at JAMLAC. Her practice focuses on working with survivors of domestic violence and other crimes. In addition to her full representation cases at JAMLAC, Davidson manages JAMLAC's partnership with PorchLight Family Justice Center in Jefferson County. She graduated from the University of Denver Sturm College of Law in 2016 and has worked with JAMLAC since 2017. **Carolyn Gravit** is the pro bono director at JAMLAC, where she leverages the talents and dedication of attorney volunteers—[cgravit@jamlac.org](mailto:cgravit@jamlac.org). She will serve as the judicial educator for the Colorado Judicial Department starting in October. For 20 years, she has led law-related educational programs and pro bono efforts in the Colorado community.

### **NOTES**

1. Benton et al., "The Impact of the First Year of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Recession on Families with Low Incomes," Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (Sept. 2021), <https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/2021-09/low-income-covid-19-impacts.pdf>.
2. *Id.*