

Lessons in Resilience From 100 Years of Providing Legal Aid to Coloradans

BY MATT BACA



Earlier this year, Colorado Legal Services celebrated 100 years of serving Colorado communities, defending low-income people and seniors for a full century. Through the decades, the Coloradans we serve remain ever resilient and daringly hopeful, a mindset that buoys them even in life's toughest moments. And, as vulnerable Coloradans' legal needs continue to grow, we adopt that ethos of resilience and hope.

Surviving on a low income is challenging, let alone when facing the added burden of a complex and demanding court system when the stakes are impossibly high and representation hard to come by. But our clients, attorneys, paralegals, staff, and volunteers push forward with determination and the belief that by working together we move the needle just a bit farther toward equal justice for all.

Colorado Legal Services is Colorado's statewide legal aid nonprofit. We were founded on February 25, 1925, as the Legal Aid Society of Denver, later merging with Colorado Rural Legal Services and Pikes Peak-Arkansas River Legal Aid to form the team of dedicated professionals reaching every corner of the state that we are today.

We provide free legal advice and representation to keep people housed, help people escape domestic violence, stop unfair debt collection,

undo bureaucratic public benefits mistakes, protect the rights of trafficking victims, solve tax disputes, fix complicated identification document issues, and protect the rights of farm workers.


Through each of our 100 years, we have faced challenges great and small, both on behalf of our clients and on our own as an organization. We have seen repeated attempts to reduce, pause, or eliminate our funding, and we are in the midst of another now as the White House's budget calls for the total elimination of our biggest federal funder, the Legal Services Corporation. And even without those efforts to defund life-changing legal support for low-income folks and seniors, we rely on a duct-taped budget of about 75 grants to keep up the important work. A good way to illustrate our funding shortfall is the state Public Defender's Office, which received \$178 million in revenue last year while Colorado Legal Services had a budget of about \$23 million to support the same 1.4 million Coloradans who qualify for our services. Another way: a report found last year that Wyoming spent about 3.5 times as much on legal aid per capita as Colorado.¹

But we are nothing if not persistent, a lesson we take first and foremost from our clients and embody on their behalf. Doing this work, we meet people who are on the verge of losing everything—a home, a job, even their children. And yet we cannot count the number of times a client in the face of despair has said: just keep going. The number of times a client has reminded us that there is a long arc to justice.

Because the people we represent don't have a choice. For our clients, and many other Coloradans throughout the state facing high rent and the loss of housing, unfair debt collection or a domestic abuser—there is no choice but to continue, powered by hope in a better future, girded by belief that everyone deserves a chance at justice. We are proud to stand with our clients not just to fight for justice but also for hope.

Another lesson is that whatever our name has been over the years, whatever threats we have faced, we are still the same at our core. A century after a small handful of attorneys started standing by Coloradans in civil court and founded our organization, we provide legal aid to the most vulnerable in Colorado. We are still driven, like our predecessors in 1925 and every year since, by a heart for justice and dignity, powered by brilliant legal minds and the resilience to keep showing up to do this hard work.

One hundred years of determination is no small thing. It lives in the kindness of our attorneys who spend their weekends helping a client move their possessions to a safer place. Or staff spending hours on the road to reach a rural farm worker community. In the commitment to the power of the law to make things right that has fueled countless long nights and weekends as we prepare to tell a client's story in court, a story of their rights that the courts must honor and protect.

The attacks will come. The need will never abate. But our determination has risen to match it for 100 years. So here's to 100 years. Onward—ever resilient and daringly hopeful—to the next. 



Matt Baca is the executive director of Colorado Legal Services, Colorado's statewide nonprofit legal aid program, which has provided civil legal assistance to low-income people since 1925. Baca lives in Denver with his family.

NOTE

1. Colorado Access to Justice Commission, *Legal Aid Funding in the West: Colorado Lags Behind Most Western Neighbors in State Funding for Legal Aid* (2024).