

Report: White House LAIR: Expanding Access to Justice, Strengthening Federal Programs First Annual Report (DOJ 2016)

White House LAIR released its first annual report entitled [Expanding Access to Justice, Strengthening Federal Programs \(opens as PDF\)](https://www.justice.gov/atj/page/file/913981/download), which is also available at <https://www.justice.gov/atj/page/file/913981/download>. From the executive summary:

"Civil legal aid—free legal assistance to low-income and underserved individuals—increases access to justice and alleviates poverty and inequality. With legal aid, a woman may obtain a protection order and escape domestic violence, a homeless veteran may secure stable housing, and a young adult may get their old criminal record expunged and get a job. Though not always appreciated or utilized, legal aid is a critical element of the Federal government's efforts to reduce poverty, protect the most vulnerable among us, and strengthen our communities.

Recognizing the power of legal aid, the White House Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable (WH-LAIR) agencies have been working together since 2012 to integrate legal aid into myriad Federal programs, policies, and initiatives. Co-chaired by the Attorney General and the Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council and staffed by DOJ's Office for Access to Justice, WH-LAIR has engaged Federal grantees, legal aid providers, and Federal agency staff to raise awareness about how legal aid advances Federal priorities. The impressive results include clarifying the scope of dozens of Federal grant programs to include the provision of legal aid that further program goals in the areas of health care, domestic violence, citizenship,

homelessness, reentry, and more; developing new training and technical assistance to grantees and legal aid providers; and generating new research about the impact of civil legal aid. WH-LAIR also launched the [WH-LAIR website](#) and published the [LAIR Toolkit](#), online resources that provide information about civil legal aid as well as Federal funding opportunities and other resources.

In September 2015, President Obama signed a Presidential Memorandum that formally established the interagency collaboration as a White House initiative. The Memorandum expanded WH-LAIR's mandates to include advancing evidence-based research and data collection of civil legal aid and indigent defense, promulgating best practices, and assisting the United States with implementing Goal 16 of the United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—which calls on countries to ensure “equal access to justice for all.”

This Report is WH-LAIR's first annual report to the President. Part I provides an overview of civil legal aid and WH-LAIR; Part II details WH-LAIR agencies' efforts to improve their programs by incorporating legal aid; and Part III outlines WH-LAIR's plans for the future.

The Report demonstrates that the 22 members of WH-LAIR have taken significant steps to integrate civil legal aid into their programs designed to serve low-income and vulnerable individuals, where doing so can improve their effectiveness and increase access to justice. The strategies that agencies deploy to advance WH-LAIR's mission largely fall into four categories: 1) leveraging resources to strengthen Federal programs by incorporating legal aid; 2) developing policy recommendations that improve access to justice; 3) facilitating strategic partnerships to achieve Federal enforcement and outreach objectives; and 4) advancing evidence-based research, data collection, and analysis. WH-LAIR agencies' efforts in these areas include:

Leveraging resources to strengthen Federal programs by incorporating legal aid

➤ HHS clarified that legal aid is included in the range of “enabling services” that HHS-funded health centers can provide to meet communities' primary care needs.

- HUD funds fair housing enforcement organizations, including legal aid programs, to assist people who believe they have been victims of housing discrimination.
- Treasury's Internal Revenue Service (IRS) supports legal clinics that provide representation for little to no cost for low-income individuals seeking to resolve disputes with IRS to ensure fairness and integrity in the tax system.
- SSA, ED, and HHS provide legal aid to people with disabilities through the Protection and Advocacy System (P&A) programs and also fund technical assistance to P&A programs providing legal aid.
- CNCS and DOJ fund legal aid lawyers and staff through Elder Justice AmeriCorps to help elder abuse victims and justice AmeriCorps to assist unrepresented immigrant children who have crossed the U.S. border without a parent or legal guardian.
- DOI helps support tribal courts and provides free trainings to tribal judges, prosecutors, and defenders—which include legal aid providers—to strengthen tribal justice systems.

Developing policy recommendations that improve access to justice

- ACUS and DOJ co-chair WH-LAIR's Working Group on Self-Represented Parties in Administrative Hearings, which explores best practices for administrative hearing procedures involving self-represented individuals to increase fairness, accuracy, and efficiency.
- DOL issued the 2016 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act final rules, which list legal aid among the services American Job Centers can provide to help youth, adults, and dislocated workers secure employment.
- HHS's Office of Child Support Enforcement outlines opportunities to support self-help strategies for certain legal needs in its proposed rule to modernize the nation's child support program.
- VA issued a directive to advise VA medical facilities on how to refer homeless veterans to legal aid providers for assistance with legal matters, such as child support, outstanding warrants and fines, and to provide office space to legal service

providers when possible.

- State, USAID, and DOJ are promoting the creation of the first global network of criminal legal aid providers.

Facilitating strategic partnerships to achieve enforcement and outreach objectives

- FTC developed the Legal Services Collaboration, a nationwide partnership with legal aid, to inform FTC's law enforcement priorities and allow the agency to alert local communities about scams and respond to local concerns.
- CFPB collaborates with legal aid to broaden the reach of the Your Money, Your Goals Toolkit, which helps individuals and families work through short- and long-term financial issues.
- DOJ, DOL, and FTC credit their collaborations with legal aid for enforcement actions ending discriminatory school discipline practices, ensuring language access for injured low-income workers and court users, and helping to shut down illegal practices by car dealers and bogus "work-at-home" scammers.
- EEOC and DOL are working to strengthen their respective collaborative partnerships with civil legal aid providers who can inform the agencies of relevant issues to enhance their enforcement and outreach activities.

Advancing evidence-based research, data collection, and analysis

- DOJ chairs WH-LAIR's Working Group on Access to Justice Indicators and Data Collection, which works to identify national indicators to track the United States' progress in achieving access to justice consistent with Goal 16 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- NSF sponsored a workshop to advance practitioner-scholar partnerships on access to justice-related research projects, and DOJ, in collaboration with NSF, hosted a Civil Legal Aid Research Workshop to help create a research agenda on Federal priorities at the intersection of civil legal aid, public safety, and criminal justice.

- VA surveys veterans, VA staff, and community participants each year to identify the needs of homeless veterans including their legal needs.
- LSC is undertaking a new national legal needs survey to update the Justice Gap studies of 2005 and 2009.

These are just some of the many WH-LAIR agency actions that expand access to civil legal aid, improve program effectiveness, and enhance the quality of life for families and communities. Although much has been accomplished, there is more work to be done to maximize the performance of Federal programs and ensure meaningful access to justice for all in America."

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