

BRINGING JUSTICE HOME

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE MESSAGE

THERE IS BROAD PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE CONCEPT OF LEGAL AID

- There is broad public support for the concept of legal aid. Close to nine in 10 Americans (89%) agree that legal help for civil matters should be provided for low-income people. Over half (55%) of the public *strongly* agrees with this sentiment. Eight in 10 (82%; 42% strongly) even support the idea when it is described as a government-funded program.

WE CAN EMPLOY A BROAD MESSAGE TO REACH ALL AMERICANS

- Such potential widespread support means that we can employ a broad message to reach all Americans, rather than narrow-casting different messages to different groups. The public opinion data indicate that liberals, divorced adults, residents of the south, as well as minorities, low-income adults, women, and young people are the most supportive, while conservatives and upper-income people are the least. However, the central point is that a clear majority of every group supports civil legal aid. Therefore, everyone is a target for a general public education effort.

THERE IS A PERCEPTION THAT THERE IS A LACK OF NEED FOR CIVIL LEGAL AID FOR LOW-INCOME PEOPLE

- Perceived lack of need is a major barrier to support. Only 13% of Americans say they know that a program of government-funded civil legal aid exists and also can offer a name that comes reasonably close to describing civil legal aid. Only a third (33%) of Americans believe that low-income people have a very difficult time getting legal help with civil matters.

ADDITIONAL BARRIERS: GOVERNMENT ASPECT OF LEGAL AID AND WORRY OVER TOO MANY LAWSUITS

- This lack of perceived need is a bigger problem than two other barriers which surfaced in the research. One is the government-program aspect of legal aid, which is highly decisive to a small segment of the population. Only 15% oppose spending tax dollars on government help to the poor, and this 15% is not likely to support funds for civil legal aid. The other barrier is the worry over too many lawsuits and lawyers—a feeling that is widespread but one which Americans can hold and still support civil legal aid.

The small percentage that opposes government help to the poor probably cannot be won over, but the many Americans who worry about lawsuit abuse can put those worries aside and support legal aid.

THE PUBLIC WOULD SUPPORT CIVIL LEGAL AID IF IT KNEW THE PROGRAM EXISTED

- The implication of these findings is simple: the most important challenge to address in communications is the sheer invisibility of civil legal aid. The public would support civil legal aid if it knew the program existed. Therefore, our central communications goal must be to inform the public about the program.

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE MESSAGE

What is the best way to introduce civil legal aid? The public opinion data provide much guidance on what is most relevant.

LEGAL ADVICE TO HELP CHILDREN, VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, VETERANS AND THE ELDERLY ARE HIGHLY SUPPORTED

KEY VALUES THAT UNDERLIE PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR CIVIL LEGAL AID

- Americans broadly support all types of civil legal aid. Broad majorities support helping poor people with legal problems, from helping an elderly woman solve a landlord-tenant dispute to assisting local residents in their legal fight to keep an incinerator from locating in their neighborhood. However, support is highest when it is described as providing legal advice to help children, victims of domestic violence, veterans, or the elderly who are in desperate need. Support is slightly less when legal aid's work is described as going to court or negotiating with government agencies.
- Fairness, equality, and responsibility to help others in need are the key values that underlie public support for civil legal aid. The most persuasive reasons to support civil legal aid focus on how civil legal aid makes a difference in the lives of individuals, helps people gain access to justice, and helps everyone obtain their rights.

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ELEMENTS OF A MESSAGE AND ADVICE ON COMMUNICATING ABOUT CIVIL LEGAL AID

WE MUST INTRODUCE THE PROGRAM TO AMERICA IN A WAY THAT IS CONSISTENT WITH AMERICANS' VALUES

The research has informed us that the central challenge is to overcome the anonymity of civil legal aid. We must introduce the program to America in a way that is consistent with Americans' values. In doing so, we have developed universal message elements. They should guide communications on the importance of civil legal aid on both the national and local levels and across all regions.

We believe that the message advice outlined below can be just as effective in Boston as in Birmingham or Bakersfield. We encourage those communicating on civil legal aid across the country to use this message advice as the basis for telling the story of legal aid through specific local examples. At the same time, we recognize that every location has its own characteristics, customs, symbols, images, and ways of speaking. Therefore, those working on the local level should, where appropriate, take the general message we have developed and make it their own.

The universal message elements are outlined below:

- For all audiences, a positive message on civil legal aid should place two values front and center: **responsibility to care for others who are in desperate need and the value of fairness.**
- We can best communicate these values through stories of hope. Focus on people who were struggling against injustice and *who had no place else to turn*, but who overcame their problems with the help of civil legal aid.
- Simple stories of a vulnerable individual are best when they make it clear that: a) the person truly needed *legal advice*, as opposed to some other social service, b) the person tried other sources and could not get help except from the Legal Aid office, and c) a serious injustice was avoided because Legal Aid stepped in and helped an individual.
- Similarly, focusing on *individuals* in need is more easily understood and acceptable than claims that civil legal aid will solve *community* problems.

ELEMENTS OF A MESSAGE AND ADVICE ON COMMUNICATING ABOUT CIVIL LEGAL AID

- Focus on the results of legal aid’s efforts for clients rather than the process of how these results are achieved. The public wants to know the outcome: who was helped, what injustice was corrected, what need was filled? Describing the work involved in achieving these outcomes distracts from their power and can weaken support for civil legal aid.
- Since the program is unknown to most of the public, communications should always include a brief description of the work of civil legal aid, either through an individual story or a simple statement. For example, it can be as simple as: “civil legal aid offices provide advice and help with legal matters for people with no place else to turn.”
- Nationally, the term civil legal aid is more descriptive and understandable to people than “legal services,” which sounds generic. However, the best name to use is the name of the local legal aid office. Emphasizing the local program is most effective in building support.
- “Access to justice” is a more effective phrase than “access to lawyers,” and to a lesser extent, “access to the courts,” when describing civil legal aid. Access to justice describes the desired result, the other phrases describe the process.

Overall Message

- **Civil legal aid offices in your community offer advice and help with legal matters for people with no place else to turn.** From helping a single mom collect the child support she deserves, or helping an elderly person overturn an unlawful eviction notice, civil legal aid is working in your community, to help people when their rights are denied.
- **Civil legal aid fights for fairness.**