

Coronavirus Pandemic Response

Intake

The demand for our free legal services has increased exponentially since the start of the public health and economic crisis.

Since March, we have received over 350 requests for legal assistance (intakes). The estimated demographic breakdown is as follows: 55% Black; 25% Latinx; 10% Asian American; and 10% other.

Common legal issues:

- Low-income families who have lost jobs seeking legal help accessing unemployment benefits and advice regarding potential eviction;
- Parents who are concerned about the impact of school closures on their children, especially on students of color, English-language learners, and students with disabilities;
- Immigrant families with low-wage hourly workers who are afraid of requesting life-saving public assistance such as food stamps because of the federal government's "public charge" rule; and
- Community-based groups whose members are experiencing structural barriers to support services, including COVID-19 testing and medical care due to race, national origin, and language.

Community Legal Education and Outreach

The need for timely and accurate legal education across a range of topics has never been more critical. We have responded in the following ways:

- Launching an online multi-lingual guide in English, Spanish, and Mandarin with robust legal and community resources related to the pandemic (<http://lawyersforcivilrights.org/coronavirus/>);
- Creating and sharing "know-your-rights" videos on social media – every weekday at 10 AM – to empower client communities with technical and legal information;

- Disseminating legally accurate information and communicating directly with affected individuals through a bilingual legal hotline;
- Conducting virtual trainings, workshops, and legal clinics on the public charge rule to ensure that immigrant families access life-saving benefits without fear;
- Conducting bilingual community education to stop the spread of hate in the community and through social media targeting manifestations of discrimination such as #ChineseVirus in English and #VirusChino in Spanish; and
- Leading bilingual trainings for community groups and families surrounding the 2020 Census during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Legal Advocacy

At the same time, LCR continues to advocate for systemic change, particularly as the pandemic exposes and highlights deep structural inequities that mean our client communities are being hit the hardest during this public health and economic crisis.

In many cases, LCR’s advocacy has brought about immediate change:

- Successfully urged the Commonwealth to revamp its unemployment application process to allow applications for unemployment benefits in Spanish across all platforms (telephone, online, etc.);
- Successfully secured a moratorium on evictions to help families shelter and quarantine;

- Successfully called on the Department of Public Health to release data showing the disparate impact of COVID-19 on people and communities of color such as Chelsea and Brockton;
- Successfully called on the U.S. Census Bureau to extend critical Census 2020 deadlines in light of public health restrictions on community outreach and engagement and requested additional appropriations to support grassroots community groups seeking to get out the count;
- Successfully called on the Social Security Administration (SSA) to address the strain of short deadlines for disability benefit applications and to create virtual opportunities for advocacy;
- Successfully called on the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to move the April 15 deadline for filing individual tax returns so families can prioritize health issues. Both federal and state governments have now delayed filing deadlines;
- Helped ensure that low-income children have access to free breakfast and lunch during school closures, including advocating for both site-based "grab and go" options and meal delivery to eligible children via bus to their homes;
- Filed public records requests with federal officials to shed light on the slow response to the crisis, including efforts to cast COVID-19 as a "Chinese virus";
- Filed public records request with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) regarding the "digital divide" that has been increasingly exposed as a result of the move towards remote learning;
- Called for a moratorium on immigration raids, detentions, and deportations;
- Called on the Commonwealth to launch a dedicated fund to support families that don't qualify for unemployment or food stamps;
- Called on public transit authorities to make bus/train services available for free during the pandemic;
- Called on the State to establish a dedicated rental assistance fund;
- Drew attention to the environmental racism driving higher rates of infection and death in communities of color in an op-ed published in the *Bay State Banner*; and
- Drew attention to the deportation of COVID-19 in an op-ed published in English by *Latino USA*, an NPR affiliate, and in Spanish in *El Faro*, a prominent news outlet in Central America.

Public Charge Client Profile

LCR advised a patient at MGH-Chelsea with asylum who wants to apply for a green card who was terrified about applying for unemployment benefits and food stamps, which she desperately needs to survive during this pandemic. The patient had been told by a private immigration attorney that she was subject to the federal government “public charge” rule, and would be jeopardizing herself and her family if she applied for unemployment. Advising her in Spanish, we assuaged her fears. Crying, she thanked us.

BizGrow

Small businesses – and particularly minority- and women-owned businesses – have been hit hard during this public health and economic crisis. Working with Ropes & Gray and 30 other *pro bono* firms, LCR has ramped up our BizGrow services accordingly:

- As part of the COVID Relief Coalition, launched in partnership with Ropes & Gray, we are assisting small businesses with COVID-19 specific issues such as commercial leasing, employment law, taxes, and loan relief, including the payroll protection program (PPP);
- Since the crisis hit, we have provided *pro bono* legal services in partnership with law firms to over 200 small businesses on pandemic-related issues.
- We are continuously conducting bilingual technical assistance and community legal education on critical issues for small business, including SBA loans and unemployment benefits; and
- We have joined forces with Tufts Health Plan to provide one-time \$1000 grants to 20 small businesses to help them weather the crisis and re-open when it is safe to do so.

Due to the unprecedented demand for services during the pandemic, total BizGrow participation this year, including both individual services and workshop participation, has already topped 500 – which is close to our total for all of 2019.

BizGrow Client Email:

Just want to say a big Thank You to you. You go above and beyond and it is because you care for us all. Just want you to know that you are making such a huge difference in so many lives, critical, life-changing difference. So thank you.

Unemployment Assistance

As a result of the unprecedented need for unemployment assistance, we have spearheaded a *pro bono* unemployment project in partnership with *pro bono* firms, including Zalkind, Nixon Peabody, and Mintz to assist low-income clients in accessing these much-needed benefits. Through this work, we have helped over 80 individuals in English and Spanish. At the same time, we have advocated on a systemic level for increased access to unemployment assistance (see above).

Medical-Legal Partnership

Demand for services through our Medical-Legal partnership has skyrocketed during the current public health crisis, with over 138 appointments scheduled just since March (demographics: 50% Latinx, 17% Black, 2% Middle Eastern, 1% Asian-American, and 30% other). Chelsea has been recognized as one of the Commonwealth's "hot spots" for COVID-19 infections, and many clients are experiencing legal issues as a result. We continue to provide legal assistance virtually and remotely, on the full range of issues that our clients are facing, including accessing public benefits, avoiding eviction, and understanding the new public charge rule.

From a community ally:

My patient, her family, and I are so grateful for your help today. I am amazed that I was able to reach out today, and in just a couple of hours you had replied with exactly the information needed to help this family. It will make such a difference for them. As they leave the hospital with a newborn tomorrow, I am so glad to have been able to help improve access to basic resources.

Litigation

In partnership with WilmerHale and Yale Law School, in our federal class action against ICE and Bristol County Sheriff Hodgson regarding unconstitutional and life-threatening conditions for civil immigration detainees at Bristol County House of Correction (*Savino v. Souza*), we have obtained significant relief:

- 50 individuals have been released on bail to safely quarantine and shelter with their families in their own homes;
- The federal court certified the class and issued a groundbreaking preliminary injunction ordering ICE to offer universal testing for all detained individuals and staff, and barring ICE from admitting new individuals to the facility;
- Our case is the first of its kind in the country to take on a facility as a class action. It has resulted in the most releases of any such litigation – civil or criminal –

nationwide, and is now serving as a blueprint for other organizations who are urging other federal courts to adopt “Savino-like” remedies; and

- Judge Young’s powerful preliminary injunction opinion not only paves the way for similar remedies elsewhere, but also serves as a strong indictment of ICE’s civil immigration detention policies more generally.



Named plaintiff Julio Neves in Savino v Souza with his mother immediately after being release

In addition to this substantial body of work to address the ongoing public health and economic crisis, we continue to litigate all of our many pre-pandemic impact litigation cases as well.