

SUPPORT OF LEGAL AID IS INTEGRAL TO FIRM'S DIVERSITY EFFORTS



Kevin Margolis

What does it mean for a law firm to be committed to diversity? For Benesch, it means more than hiring a diverse group of attorneys. To live out our promise with integrity, we have to acknowledge that if all opportunities were equally accessible, there would be a more inclusive and diverse legal community. In addition to cultivating a more diverse and inclusive workplace, we are called to address the societal inequities that result in a disproportionately privileged law-school-to-law-firm pipeline.

That's why in 2018, Benesch teamed up with The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland and University Hospitals to support a Medical Legal Partnership that makes a positive difference in the community.

The challenges facing low-income communities in Cleveland are significant. Lead poisoning in older homes, unjust evictions, barriers to healthcare, and discriminatory practices in schools and workplaces are all more common in communities of color, which are also disproportionately low-income. According to a December 2018 study, 50% of all black children in Cleveland lived in poverty.¹ And poverty can impact a person's health even more than genetics or lifestyle choices. It is now widely understood that social determinants (factors such as stable shelter, financial stability, and supportive relationships) account for as much as 80% of a person's overall health.²

The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland has been helping low-income people who are in crisis for more than 115 years. With

significant funding from Benesch, Legal Aid is now able to support a full-time staff attorney who works specifically on cases referred by University Hospitals staff. These cases help families with issues that are now part of medical screenings, including securing a divorce from an abusive spouse; fighting an unjust eviction notice; or obtaining medical benefits.

For example, Joy Fisher (*names have been changed to protect client identity*) was worried about her son David. David was a middle-schooler who had been diagnosed with ADHD, but was having unexplained difficulty with behaving and following rules at school. The family was also struggling to find stable and affordable housing, and Joy found out too late that David's school had held an expulsion hearing for him. The decision was made that David would be transferred to another school.

Joy was able to choose the new school that David would attend, but unfortunately, it was not a better situation. After multiple disciplinary actions, this new school was prepared to hold another expulsion hearing. At a regular appointment with David's doctor at University Hospitals, Joy recounted his struggles at school, and the family was referred to the Legal Aid attorney located in University Hospitals MacDonaldis Women's Hospital for help.

Joy's Legal Aid attorney reviewed David's situation and helped him obtain an Individualized Education Program, or I.E.P. The attorney also attended meetings with school administrators and facilitated communication between the staff and Joy. Eventually, the school committee agreed to transfer David to another school where he would receive more individualized attention.

Four months after enrolling at the new school, David is thriving and acting out much less. He is also receiving commensurate education to make up for school days he missed due to disciplinary action (his teacher is working with him during lunch hours). David is happy, progressing in his education, and enjoying school for the first time in his life.

Benesch is proud to partner with Legal Aid and University Hospitals to break down barriers and work for a more diverse and inclusive community.

Beyond the partnership with Legal Aid and University Hospitals, Benesch is committed to advancing diversity and inclusion through the recruitment, retention and advancement of diverse lawyers throughout all of our offices. We are tackling this initiative in a variety of ways, such as our 1L Diversity Fellowship program, our partnership with the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity, stronger ties to minority bar associations such as the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association, and launching a diverse mentoring program internally.

¹ <https://www.communitysolutions.com/research/racial-disparities/>

² <https://healthpayerintelligence.com/news/addressing-the-real-implications-of-social-determinants-of-health>

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