

Justice and Mercy Legal Aid Center

Transforming Lives through
Faith-Based Legal Aid

BY SHELLY DILL



Justice and Mercy Legal Aid Center (JAMLAC)¹ began in 2006 as a program of the nonprofit organization Mile High Ministries.² JAMLAC is a faith-based legal service provider that offers free civil legal services to low-income clients in the greater Denver metro area serving primarily Adams, Arapahoe, Broomfield, Denver, Douglas, and Jefferson counties.³ JAMLAC volunteer attorneys provide comprehensive legal services to clients, thereby strengthening their capacity to positively direct their own lives. Each year more than 1,000 clients receive direct legal services. Approximately 90% of these clients have experienced some type of trauma. JAMLAC has a team of six attorneys, seven support staff, and many volunteer attorneys that advocate for clients' rights in a way that provides them increased empowerment and dignity.

What are Faith-Based Legal Services?

JAMLAC is part of a historically larger movement around the country that promotes faith-based legal aid—a community-based, holistic ap-

proach to meeting legal needs that integrates the attorney's faith, motivations, and beliefs into his or her work.⁴ The American Bar Association has recognized faith-based legal aid as an important component of the provision of legal aid services.⁵

Faith-based legal service providers are not monolithic in style or substance.⁶ Some are small and independent, while others are part of larger national organizations. Some have paid staff, whereas others are run entirely by volunteers. And some limit services to legal advice, whereas others offer full representation for cases.

In addition, many faith-based services provide support beyond the transactional interaction. For example, at JAMLAC, attorneys may address spiritual matters influencing the situation or offer to pray with clients about their legal matter. While some lawyers may have less expertise with the spiritual component, JAMLAC ensures that resources in this area are readily available to lawyers and provided directly to clients, thereby facilitating a holistic and transformative encounter.

JAMLAC's Mission

JAMLAC strives to meet both the legal and physical needs of its clients, as well as their spiritual and emotional needs. JAMLAC is a "faith informed model" where lawyers operate in a traditional role but within a faith-driven values system.⁷

JAMLAC's mission is to seek justice for those struggling with poverty and oppression in a way that affirms their dignity and strengthens their capacity to positively direct their own lives.⁸ It pursues justice by increasing and improving legal aid services and providing legal representation to the most marginalized people in the community. Faith directs and motivates JAMLAC to advocate for vulnerable people to "speak up and judge fairly, defend the rights of the poor and needy."⁹

JAMLAC's vision is to foster healthy communities where transformed and empowered individuals and families contribute to the community's well-being. In fact, 92% of clients who have received JAMLAC services report having greater knowledge of their legal rights, and feeling safer and less alone.

What Services does JAMLAC Provide?

JAMLAC mobilizes and equips the legal community to provide pro bono representation and engages other non-legal volunteers. Last year, 116 volunteers donated over 3,500 hours to JAMLAC. JAMLAC's areas of direct services include family law,¹⁰ immigration,¹¹ civil protection orders, and chapter 7 bankruptcy. JAMLAC also presents legal workshops for low-income and underserved communities, including Know Your Rights, Naturalization, Family Protection Plan, and Legal Options for Victims. In addition, JAMLAC has 11 legal clinics throughout metro Denver, in partnership with the Christian Legal Society, that operate at the Denver Rescue Mission, Salvation Army, Samaritan House, and area churches and faith-based nonprofit organizations.¹² JAMLAC services are offered in both English and Spanish.

JAMLAC has robust partnerships with organizations serving the Latino/Hispanic and immigrant communities, including a formal partnership with the Mexican Consulate to work with Mexican nationals in the community. In addition, JAMLAC partners with the Rose Amond Center in Denver as well as One Place, Arapahoe County's family justice center, to provide on-site legal services to individuals experiencing domestic violence. Similarly, there are plans for a future partnership with Porch Light, the new family justice center in Jefferson County. Beyond direct legal services, JAMLAC's staff helps with enrollment in the Address Confidentiality Program, Victim Compensation, and other advocacy work for each client.

Finally, JAMLAC has a deeply holistic approach and strategically partners with other organizations to help clients obtain wrap-around services, including housing, counseling, education, employment opportunities, health services, and emergency services.

The Importance of Pro Bono Efforts

The Colorado Supreme Court's Access to Justice Commission has described the situation for indigent people with legal needs in Colorado as a "crisis."¹³ More than 75% of all low-income households experience at least one important civil legal problem each year.¹⁴ According to Bureau of Justice statistics, low-income house-

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holds are twice as vulnerable to victimization when compared to high-income households, increasing the risk of re-victimization for unrepresented low-income victims.¹⁵ In 2017, 14% of people in Denver County lived below the poverty line.¹⁶

Additionally, language is a huge barrier for non-English speaking clients, so there is a great need for Spanish-speaking attorneys who provide pro bono legal services. According to the 2017 census, 29.9% of the population in Denver is of Hispanic/Latino origin, and 27.1% of Denver County residents speak a language other than English at home.¹⁷ Overcoming cultural differences, language barriers, and a complex governmental system often leaves non-English speakers devoid of access to quality civil legal representation.

Access to an attorney is one of the most important factors in determining if a survivor of domestic violence returns to an abuser.¹⁸ Survivors are significantly more likely to pursue a protection order, divorce from an abuser, or custody of their children when they have an attorney to support them.¹⁹ Clients are also significantly more likely to be successful in their immigration proceeding if they have an attorney to help them.²⁰

Given these findings, JAMLAC agrees with the Supreme Court that there is an access to justice crisis, and that the legal community has an obligation to respond. Colo. RPC 6.1 states that lawyers should engage in pro bono work and lists an aspirational goal of 50 hours of pro bono service per year by each attorney.²¹ Up to nine CLE credits per three-year period can be obtained by engaging in pro bono work pursuant to CRCP 260.8. Furthermore, retired attorneys can participate in pro bono services through the pro bono emeritus program, CRCP 223, which allows retired attorneys to represent clients who cannot otherwise afford an attorney. Lastly, individuals and law firms can be recognized by the Colorado Supreme Court in the Pro Bono Recognition Program.

JAMLAC's Pro Bono Project

In January 2019, JAMLAC launched its new Pro Bono Project to help attorneys have a meaningful pro bono experience while fulfilling the Colo. RPC 6.1 goal. JAMLAC provides free CLE programs to its volunteer attorneys and certifies CLE credits pursuant to CRCP 260.8. Volunteers also qualify for the Colorado Supreme Court's Pro Bono Recognition Program. Finally, JAMLAC sponsors retired attorneys in the pro bono emeritus program who actively take cases with the organization.

The Pro Bono Project helps low-income individuals who cannot otherwise afford an attorney by matching them with volunteer attorneys willing to take a full-service case. Attorneys are assured that clients have been financially screened and cannot afford to pay for services. In addition, JAMLAC provides professional liability insurance, periodic training opportunities, and mentoring for all of its volunteer attorneys.

JAMLAC seeks volunteer attorneys to join in supporting its mission to do justice for the poor and oppressed with mercy and humility, whether themselves an attorney of faith or an attorney who simply wants to help those in the community who cannot afford an attorney. Attorneys can volunteer at one of JAMLAC's 11 weekly triage clinics, or they can take a full-service case. JAMLAC partners with large law firms, small to medium size law firms, solo practitioners, and retired lawyers.

The Pro Bono Project is recruiting pro bono attorneys in areas that JAMLAC traditionally has served, including family law, immigration, protection orders, and bankruptcy, as well as areas it has not traditionally served, including sealing of criminal records, minor traffic matters, tax issues, identification issues, elder law, simple wills, end of life planning, guardianship, debt negotiation, appeals, mediation, and other general civil matters. Indigent clients have a broad variety of legal needs and JAMLAC often first helps a client in one area of law, and then determines that the client needs an attorney in another area of law. Those cases are frequently referred to volunteer pro bono attorneys as part of the Pro Bono Project.

Becoming a JAMLAC Volunteer

Through its Pro Bono Project, JAMLAC seeks to provide additional legal services to those who would not otherwise be able to afford an attorney, as well as to provide a meaningful opportunity for attorney volunteers to put their faith or their pro bono aspirations into action. One of JAMLAC's legal volunteers recently stated, "Volunteering at JAMLAC has been the single-most meaningful thing I've done with my law degree. I'm making a difference in the lives of families who are struggling." For more information about how to join the Pro Bono Project as a volunteer attorney, please contact Shelly Dill at sdill@jamlac.org.



Shelly Dill is the pro bono director and an attorney at the Justice and Mercy Legal Aid Center and is chair of the Denver Bar Association Access to Justice Committee.

NOTES

1. <https://jamlac.org>.
2. <https://www.milehighmin.org>.
3. Both Mile High Ministries and JAMLAC assist clients regardless of their religion, race, color, creed, national origin, ancestry, disability, gender, sexual orientation, or age.
4. Acevedo, "Client Choices, Community Values: Why Faith-Based Legal Services Providers are Good for Poverty Law," 70 *Fordham L. Rev.* 1491 (2002), <http://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/flr/vol70/iss4/6>.
5. ABA Faith-Based Pro Bono Resources, https://www.americanbar.org/groups/probono_public_service/resources/areas_of_focus/faith.
6. Acevedo, *supra* note 4 at 1494.
7. *Id.* at 1495.
8. JAMLAC's mission is based on Micah 6:8: "He has shown you, oh people, what is good and what does the Lord require of you: to seek justice, to love mercy, and walk humbly with God."
9. As stated in Proverbs 31:8 and 9.
10. Services include dissolution of marriage, allocation of parental responsibilities, and child support.
11. Services include Special Immigrant Juvenile Status Visas, DACA renewals, U Visas, VAWA petitions, and permanent residency.
12. Christian Legal Aid Society Clinic Directory, <https://www.christianlegalaid.org/about/clinic-directory>.
13. Access to Justice Commission Report 2014, www.coloradojustice.org/Hearings-Reports.
14. *Id.*
15. National Coalition Against Domestic Violence 2017.
16. U.S. Census Bureau 2017.
17. *Id.*
18. Legal Services Corp., How Legal Aid Helps Domestic Violence Survivors Fact Sheet, <https://www.lsc.gov/media-center/publications/how-legal-aid-helps-domestic-violence-survivors>.
19. *Id.*
20. Eagly and Shafer, "A National Study of Access to Counsel in Immigration Court," 164 *U. Pa. L. Rev.* 1 (Dec. 2015).

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