



## PRESIDENT'S PAGE

LARISA M. DINSMOOR

# Promoting Access to Justice in the COVID-19 Aftermath

I was recently asked to be a speaker at a virtual event for an organization called “International Bridges to Justice” (IBJ). IBJ’s goal is to provide access to justice to the most vulnerable populations around the world. This invitation made me think about access to justice here in Orange County. How has COVID affected our most vulnerable population’s access to justice and our legal aid organizations that serve them?

According to recent data: “Even before the pandemic, there was not enough funding for these groups (legal aid organizations) to meet the needs of the fifty-seven million Americans who qualified for their services. With demand now rising as court proceedings begin to resume, legal aid groups say they should be adding attorneys, but instead are scrambling to fill budget gaps and trying to dodge staff cuts.” But the pandemic has hit legal aid funding hard. Adiel Kaplan, *More people than ever need legal aid services*, NBCNews.com (Apr. 25, 2021), <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/personal-finance/more-people-ever-need-legal-aid-services-pandemic-has-hit-n1264989>.

I reached out to some of the OCBA’s legal aid partners to find out how they were doing. After all, the OCBA’s mission is: “To Enhance the System of Justice, To Support the Lawyers Who Serve It, and to Assist the Community Served by It.”

Kate Marr, Executive Director of Community Legal Aid SoCal, confirms that: “The demand for our services was overwhelming even before the pandemic, with over 15% of Orange County residents eligible for free legal services.” She explains that “as we face the long-term impacts of the health crisis on our county’s most underserved and under-resourced residents, the growing justice gap is far outpacing funding for legal services that keep people housed, free from violence, and able to thrive.”

Ken Babcock, Executive Director and General Counsel of the Public Law Center, describes how “legal aid funding from the State Bar’s IOLTA program has taken a devastating cut due to the Federal Reserve’s COVID-19 related interest rate cuts. In one year, this statewide grant program was cut by over \$31 million. PLC’s grant was reduced by over \$500,000 or 10% of our annual operating budget. At the same time, demand for our services is up, largely due to the pandemic.”

Antoinette Balta, Executive Director and Co-Founder of the Veteran’s Legal Institute, emphasizes, “Sadly, increasing isolation, illness, and unemployment caused considerable stress to veterans who already struggle with invisible and visible wounds of war. Veteran suicide and homelessness rates are rising at an alarming rate. Close to two-thirds of veterans are in need of assistance with complex veteran benefits appeals, discharge upgrades, and family law.”

Brooke Weitzman, Co-Founder and Directing Attorney of the Elder Law and Disability Rights Center, highlights how, “over the past year, non-profits had to rethink fundraising and operations while increasing remote access to clients who often didn’t have reliable phones,

computers, or even internet access. Of over 5,100 people who lost their lives in Orange County to COVID-19, well over 50% of those individuals are over 65. We have over 42,000 residents in licensed facilities covered by the County Ombudsman program. According to Justice in Aging, 45% of adults over 65 struggle to meet their basic needs, many living on less than \$1,000 per month.”

It is clear that the OCBA’s legal aid partners and our community needs our help. Each of us can take action by doing the following things:

Ken Babcock emphasizes that “any and all financial and/or volunteer support by OCBA members is greatly needed and would be most appreciated by our hard-working and dedicated staff.” Visit <https://www.publiclawcenter.org/> to contribute.

Kate Marr expresses that “with the continued support of the OCBA membership we can take the lessons that we learned providing remote services and develop innovative solutions to expand our reach throughout the county. Visit our website [www.communitylegalsocal.org](http://www.communitylegalsocal.org) or follow us on social media to learn more about our work and how you can get involved.”

Antoinette Balta encourages “all attorneys to consider adopting a case pro bono to help alleviate legal and stressful burdens from our veteran families in need. Advocating for veterans and their families in need by volunteering on a housing, veteran benefits, medical benefits, bankruptcy, discharge upgrade, or estate planning case pro bono alleviates stress and is an incredible way to pay it forward to those who signed the dotted line.” More information can be found at <https://www.vetslegal.com/>.

Brooke Weitzman stresses that “with your help, we can make sure these seniors have access to end-of-life planning and benefits. Your time and donations are critical to continued or increased access to justice. Without in-person events, our organizations and the foundations we rely on have struggled to meet our budget needs.” To help, visit <https://eldrcenter.org/>.

Please support these organizations by attending the OCBA’s Annual Charitable Fund Gala which will be held *in person* at the Newport Beach Country Club on October 28, 2021. Proceeds of this popular wine tasting and charity awards benefit will be used to fund donations to various law-related charities in Orange County, which has historically included the organizations listed here, as well as many others. I look forward to seeing you there.

Here’s to using connection, community, and unity to promote access to justice!



*Larisa M. Dinsmoor is 2021 OCBA President, an Orange County Public Defender, and a world traveler when there is no pandemic. She would love to hear from you at [larisa@ocbar.org](mailto:larisa@ocbar.org).*