

BRINGING JUSTICE HOME

HOW TO FRAME AND PITCH STORIES ON CIVIL LEGAL AID

Civil legal aid helps millions of people in many different ways. However, through the extensive research that has been conducted—and possibly through your own experience with communications—there are certain aspects of civil legal aid that are better understood and supported by the public than others.

The goal of our communications is to increase public commitment and financial support for civil legal aid.

The research has told us that in order to achieve that goal, our primary objective is to introduce the largely invisible program to the public and to funders, and to communicate widespread unmet need.

Therefore, we need to use client stories to tell the bigger picture: that we need legal aid for many people who are in trouble but have nowhere else to go for help.

Readers and/or viewers will be best reached by highlighting the personal stories of individuals and positive outcomes for clients and communities to illustrate the importance of civil legal aid. Broad majorities of people support helping poor people with legal problems. However, support is highest when it is described as providing legal advice to:

- Children • Victims of domestic violence
- Veterans • The elderly

Remember that **fairness, equality, and responsibility** to help others in need are the key values that underlie public support for civil legal aid. In fact, research shows that people are most supportive when they understand that those who are being helped had “no place else to turn.”

The most effective placements will come from stories that *show* or *illustrate* the campaign’s key messages:

- Legal aid makes a difference in the lives of real people.
- Every person in America deserves equal access to justice.
- Every person in America should be treated fairly, and should be able to obtain his or her rights, regardless of income.

Some other suggestions on how to encourage reporters to think about telling stories of clients include:

- Encourage media contacts to interview a client who has been helped and clearly had no place else to turn. Focus on the good *results* of legal aid’s efforts for clients rather than the process of how these results are achieved.
- Try to offer stories that raise the universal values of *fairness* and *justice*, rather than talking about access to the courts or to an attorney.

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- Localize as much as possible. Local outlets are always looking for stories to tell from the neighborhoods they are supposed to be covering. Many outlets look for positive news stories because they get complaints from consumers when the news is all negative.
- Get to know the local media in your area. Find out who writes features and human-interest stories. Sometimes local television stations have an ombudsman-type reporter who regularly tells stories about local people being helped out of a jam.
- Before you pitch a story, consider which media would be best to report it. Brief, easily understood stories with universal appeal are great for radio. Longer stories that require more background should be targeted for print. For television, a story needs a compelling visual to convince the producer. Tell them when you pitch what it is you can *show* them.
- Whenever possible, pitch stories about civil legal aid services that occur *outside* of the courtroom. This helps keep the focus on the individuals and their needs, and away from the legal process and lawyers themselves.
- Statistics can be used to make a story more compelling. The best way is to use them to demonstrate unmet need in the community. For example, you can build into a pitch something like, “We are gratified that we were able to help Jane Doe. There are 2,000 women just like her in Our City who need legal protection for domestic violence flooding a system struggling to meet their needs.”
- Make sure to vary the story ideas you offer. For example, if you went to the local newspaper last month with a story about an eviction, don’t go back to them again with a similar story. If you have a similar story that’s great to pitch, try another outlet and save the local newspaper for another topic the next time around.
- Gather the relevant facts, figures and contact information and put them prominently in a pitch letter or memo. Also, have the details in front of you when you make the call so the information is immediately available to the media contact. If a producer or reporter says, “Well, send me something...” ask them whether they prefer email or a fax. Then promptly send the information to him/her. Place a polite follow-up phone call the next day to discuss the story idea with them. You should save the contact info, especially the email address so your office can update and expand a master media list as needed.
- The most success in pitching comes when you act like a producer or reporter yourself. Try to figure out in advance what questions the media are likely to have for you and have answers at the ready. Quickly provide facts and offer spokespeople for quotes. Without letting on that you have done so, try to do as much of their work for them as you possible can.