

# BRINGING JUSTICE HOME

## COMPONENTS OF A COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY TO BUILD COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR LEGAL AID

*Campaign for Equal Access: Bringing Justice Home*  
An initiative of the Project for the Future of Equal Justice  
A Joint Project of the National Legal Aid & Defender Association  
and the Center for Law and Social Policy

### **Why Develop a Communications Strategy?**

In recent years, civil legal aid organizations in the United States have seen traditional sources of financial support—largely from the federal government—grow smaller. At the same time, the number and complexity of restrictions placed on the types of cases they can pursue has increased. In response to the Federal Legal Services Corporation’s (LSC) reduction and restrictions on funding for civil legal aid, organizations providing these services have sought to increase and diversify other funding sources, including state legislative funding, city and county funds, private bar campaigns and foundation grants.

In the past 10 years, while LSC funding has remained static, other funding sources for civil legal aid have doubled. Advocates and supporters also are building political support for legal aid at the state and local levels.

**Legal aid professionals credit this expanded financial and political support as the result of building relationships with a broad group of supporters.** Building these relationships has required “getting the message out” about the value to society of providing legal services to low-income people.

**Despite the successes in fundraising and “friend-raising,” legal aid still suffers from low visibility in the public eye, and the resources to support these services are still woefully inadequate to meet client need.** For national, state and local advocates and supporters to achieve “equal access under the law for all,” **civil legal aid must become much more visible to funders, the media, policy makers and the general public.**

According to a recent research study done by Belden, Russonello & Stewart (BRS), nearly half of Americans (49%) are unaware that community-based programs exist to provide civil legal help to low-income people. Only 13% of Americans say they know that a program of government-funded civil legal aid exists and also can offer a name that comes reasonably close to describing civil legal aid.

The central communications challenge for legal aid organizations is:

*To overcome the anonymity of civil legal aid among the American public in order to develop a base of support that will, over time, provide adequate funding for civil legal aid and offer increased independence to legal aid groups that wish to pursue a broader range of legal and policy advocacy.*

### **Goals of a Communications Strategy**

1. To raise the visibility of organizations that provide civil legal aid to poor people.
2. To generate positive feelings and support for civil legal aid among Americans.
3. To translate this visibility and support into increased public and private funding, as well as political support.

## **COMPONENTS OF A COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY TO BUILD COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR LEGAL AID**

### **Target Audiences**

#### *Primary Target Groups*

1. Opinion-leaders
  - To influence both policy-makers and private individuals to support civil legal aid
2. Donors and potential donors
  - To make financial contributions
3. Policy-makers
  - To support increased funding from state and local governments

Note that attorneys are likely to be heavily represented in all of the above target groups.

### **Key Messages**

The research shows that, for all audiences, the most persuasive reasons to support civil legal aid focus on how civil legal aid makes a difference in the lives of individuals, helps people gain access to justice, and helps everyone obtain their rights, regardless of income. Fairness and the responsibility to help others are the bedrock values upon which the messages of this campaign are based. The primary messages are:

1. Legal aid makes a difference in the lives of real people:
  - the single mother, who needs to receive child support in order to feed her children
  - the veteran, who will lose his home if he doesn't receive his disability check
  - the abused child, who deserves a safe and loving home.
2. Every person in America deserves equal access to justice.
3. Every person in America should be treated fairly, and should be able to obtain his or her rights, regardless of income.

### **Message Elements**

The BRS public opinion data provide a great deal of guidance on the elements that underlie the messages outlined above and the most effective language to use in introducing and promoting civil legal aid to the American public.

### **Assets to Promote**

- The most persuasive way to highlight the need for funding for legal aid is to illustrate your messages with stories about low-income individuals who clearly have no place else to turn. Focus on the results of legal aid's efforts for clients rather than the process of how these results are achieved.
- Explain that legal aid makes a difference in the lives of individuals; that it helps people gain access to justice, and helps everyone obtain his or her rights.

# BRINGING JUSTICE HOME

## COMPONENTS OF A COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY TO BUILD COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR LEGAL AID

- Support for legal aid is highest when it is described as providing legal advice to help children, victims of domestic violence, veterans, or the elderly. Support is slightly less when legal aid's work is described as “going to court” or negotiating with government agencies.
- Speak about fairness and justice, rather than talking about access to the courts or to an attorney. Fairness and justice are values that direct audiences' attention to the outcomes of civil legal aid.
- Speaking of access to the courts or access to an attorney directs audiences' attention to mechanisms and processes, which are much less effective in generating support for civil legal aid.
- Use the term “civil legal aid” rather than “legal services.” The former is more descriptive and understandable. Whenever possible, use the specific name of the local legal aid office. Emphasizing the local program is most effective in building support.
- Since the program is unknown to most of the public, communications should always include a brief description of the work of civil legal aid, either through an individual story or a simple statement. For example, you might say, “Civil legal aid offices provide advice and help with legal matters for people with no place else to turn.”

### Challenges to Deflect

- Challenges to legal aid are driven primarily by negative attitudes toward government assistance programs, rather than by views of lawyers, the courts, or access to courtrooms for low-income people.
- Therefore, it is more important to deflect the label of “wasteful government program” than it is to spend time countering attacks about “frivolous” lawsuits or explaining why poor people need representation in court for civil matters.
- The best way to deflect challenges is to keep your focus on the proactive messages discussed above, highlighting the personal stories of individuals and positive outcomes for clients and communities to illustrate the importance of civil legal aid.

### Tactics

Following are some proven tactics for conveying key messages to target audiences. Many of these are specific to the media, but the media is not your only venue for communicating to your target audiences. In some localities, certain tactics will be more effective than others, depending upon community norms and customs. You are the expert on what is likely to work best in your area, so let common sense and experience be your guide.

*Keep in mind that the messenger is an important part of the message.* In other words, who is carrying your message (e.g. who makes a presentation to a particular group or signs an op-ed or letter to the editor) has an impact on the audience and how the message is perceived. Therefore, you will want to carefully choose your messengers for maximum credibility and influence. In some cases, the messenger may need to differ depending on the segment of your target audiences that you are trying to reach.

## **COMPONENTS OF A COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY TO BUILD COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR LEGAL AID**

If you have questions, comments, or would like help implementing some of these ideas, contact Elizabeth Arledge, Director of Communications, 202-452-0620 ext. 223, e.arledge@nlada.org.

### **Media Audit and Analysis**

Before you begin a media initiative, you need to have accurate, current information on the media outlets that exist in your area. You also need to know something about each outlet, such as its audience, its reach, and the interests of its reporters and/or producers. The best way to acquire this information is to conduct a media audit of the outlets in your area and then analyze how those outlets have covered current news events that are of special interest to your organization.

**A media audit** is an annotated list of all the media outlets in your area, along with pertinent information such as the names of key columnists and the topics they write about, the names of the producers of nightly news broadcasts, and the names of producers of relevant talk shows. Remember to include non-traditional media, such as the house organs of large corporations in your area and the television station on the local university campus.

**A media analysis** is an assessment of how particular news stories have been covered by the media in your area. Knowing how your daily newspaper has framed its coverage of a recent rent strike, for example, will tell you a lot about how to approach the paper with a story idea related to the Campaign for Equal Access.

### **Targeted Media Outlets and Speaking Venues**

Once you've identified all of the media outlets in your area and know something about each one, you'll need to decide which outlets will be the most useful in getting out your messages to the target audiences. The media on this narrower, targeted list should be those that are read, watched, and listened to by the primary and secondary target groups discussed above. In other words, getting coverage in a newspaper or on a radio station that does not reach a segment of your target audience is not an effective way to communicate your message to that audience.

The same holds true for speaking venues in your area, such as civic groups, bar associations, political clubs, and fraternal organizations. Make a list of all the organizations that offer speaking opportunities and prioritize them according to how likely each is to reach your target audiences.

The media and organizations that end up on the final "A" list are the ones on which you should focus your communication efforts.

### **Media Outreach and Briefings: Distribute Press Releases and Media Materials**

Using the sample included in this kit as a guide, prepare a press release on a newsworthy topic, such as a lawsuit recently won by your organization. Distribute it, along with the enclosed fact sheet on civil legal aid, your local program and any other pertinent information, to the media on your "A" list. Offer your organization's spokesperson for interviews on the topic.

Another good technique for generating press coverage is to stage a briefing on a newsworthy topic and invite local media to attend. Serving breakfast or lunch will encourage attendance. Choose topics that will help forward the messages of the *Campaign for Equal Access*, such as employment

# BRINGING JUSTICE HOME

## COMPONENTS OF A COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY TO BUILD COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR LEGAL AID

discrimination, racial profiling, or access to healthcare. Remember to highlight the stories of individuals and, if possible, have an articulate client tell his or her story at the briefing.

### **Interviews**

Before you give an interview to a publication or broadcast outlet, jot down the three most important points that you want to make in the interview and review the key messages and language discussed above in the sections of this document called *Messages and Message Elements*. Take every opportunity to make your three points during the interview. For more tips on carrying out good media interviews, refer to the item in this toolkit called *Media Tips*.

### **Op-eds and Letters to the Editor**

Write an opinion piece on a provocative topic (perhaps the same topic as the one you featured at a media briefing) and try to get it placed on the op-ed (opposite the editorial) page of your daily newspaper. For more information, refer to the item called *How to Place an Op-ed*, included in this toolkit.

Be alert for occasions to get the message out. If the paper runs a story about a topic that is relevant to civil legal aid, send a letter to the editor commenting on the story. Be sure to include the key campaign messages in the letter.

### **Issuing Statements**

Be opportunistic and keep an eye out for news stories on which you can piggyback to draw attention to the value of legal aid. For example, if a story about spousal abuse airs on the local TV news, issue a brief statement that points out the need for civil legal aid to ensure that women and their children receive the help they need to stay safe. Offer your spokesperson for interviews on the topic.

### **Advertisements**

Place the advertisements included in this kit (in hard copy and on disk) in print media outlets, tailored with the name, address and contact information of your local organization. Some may run the ads free of charge as a public service. If you find you must pay for the ad space, ask the publication if it offers a discounted rate for nonprofit organizations. Check to see if there is a local corporation that will underwrite the cost of placing the ad. Investigate the possibility of getting public service ad space in the publications of corporations, universities, labor unions, and other nonprofit organizations.

### **Speeches and Presentations to Community Organizations**

Write a speech on a newsworthy topic that is pertinent to civil legal aid. This can become your spokesperson's standard stump speech. Arrange for the spokesperson to deliver the speech to community organizations that are on the "A" list you developed as a result of your audit of media and speaking venues. Invite the media to cover the event.

## COMPONENTS OF A COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY TO BUILD COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR LEGAL AID

### Suggested Implementation Schedule for a One-Year Campaign

Organizations are at different stages in developing their capacities to communicate effectively to the public. The following implementation schedule is a *suggestion*, taking into consideration that some organizations may already be engaged in some of these activities. Also, you may feel ready to engage in some of these activities before they appear on the timeline. If that is the case, go for it!

<u>What to Do</u>	<u>When to Do It</u>
Conduct media audit and media analysis	Months 1 - 3
Create targeted media lists	Months 1 - 3
Place prints ads (free and paid)	Months 3 - 4
Collect evaluation data and track progress	Month 3
Write press releases and media materials	Months 4 - 5
Conduct initial media briefing	Months 4 - 5
Secure interviews for spokesperson	Months 4 - 12
Release timely statements; place letters-to-editor	Months 4 - 12
Write and place op-ed	Months 5 - 6
Collect evaluation data and track progress	Month 6
Write and deliver speeches	Months 6 - 12
Conduct second media briefing	Months 8 - 10
Collect evaluation data and track progress (detailed in toolkit evaluation document)	Month 9
Conduct final evaluation	Month 13