

Report highlights civil legal problems facing Granite Staters

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A new study of civil legal needs (attached) in New Hampshire assesses the kinds of civil legal problems faced by Granite Staters and their experiences seeking low and no cost legal help. The civil legal needs assessment was sponsored by the New Hampshire Supreme Court's Access to Justice Commission.

"The Judicial Branch was pleased to partner with other funders, the Commission, and the civil legal aid programs to make this needs assessment possible," said Associate Justice James Bassett of the New Hampshire Supreme Court. "It will help improve our understanding of the kinds of civil legal needs experienced by low-income Granite Staters and the obstacles they confront when seeking affordable legal help."

The needs assessment research team received input from nearly 1,000 people, including 540 people eligible for services from New Hampshire's four civil legal aid programs: the Disability Rights Center-New Hampshire, the Legal Advice & Referral Center, the Pro Bono Referral Program, and New Hampshire Legal Assistance. Research methods included a telephone survey conducted by the Suffolk University Political Research Center, focus groups conducted by the University of New Hampshire Survey Center, and online surveying.

Key findings include the following:

- Economic insecurity is inextricably linked with civil legal problems such as eviction, debt collection, and denial of public benefits.
- Civil legal problems related to rental housing and homeownership remain an acute challenge for low-income people in New Hampshire, particularly in light of the state's affordable housing shortage.
- People with disabilities face unique civil legal problems, such as being taken advantage of or abused, and also experience some civil legal problems more frequently than people without disabilities.
- Each year, thousands of Granite Staters go to court seeking protection from domestic violence, and most do so without an attorney.
- New Hampshire has a shortage of low or no cost legal help, and services should be expanded so that more people can get the help they need.
- New Hampshire's civil legal aid programs should increase and better coordinate outreach to potential clients, with an emphasis on reaching people in their own communities.
- In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic overshadowed all else, and demonstrated both the potential and limitations of technology-based approaches to delivering civil legal aid.

"The civil legal aid network will have to continue prioritizing who it helps and with what kinds of problems," said Mark Rouvalis, Co-Chair of the Access to Justice Commission. "The needs assessment report provides essential data for that purpose."

New Hampshire's civil legal aid network helps low-income people, older adults, and people with disabilities by providing free legal information, advice, and representation.
