



The Collaborative Effect

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Hilary Creary; Geraldine M. DeBianchi; Jeffrey Hittleman; Victoria Sexton; Mia Stevenson; Yasuaki Sawamura (left to right; top to bottom).

Author and educator Helen Keller famously said, “Alone we can do so little. Together we can do so much.” Collaboration is a necessary and powerful tool for legal services providers. It is essential that legal aid programs collaborate within their organizations and with community partners to fully utilize everyone’s experience, knowledge, and skills to achieve shared



Mobile Justice Squad van and Attorney Geraldine DeBianchi.



Nonprofit Awards for Mobile Justice Squad.

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goals. At Coast to Coast Legal Aid of South Florida (CCLA), we work as a team every day to provide a holistic approach to resolving the legal, social, and economic issues faced by our community. CCLA provides free civil legal services in the areas of Senior Law, Family Law & Victims of Crime, and Economic Advocacy & Community Health. Our mission is to provide equal access to justice to underserved communities through quality and innovative free civil legal aid. Through our teamwork and collaboration, we have been able to expand the depth and breadth of the services we provide to our clients. We multiplied our vision and effort, and the result has been the crafting of many creative and innovative programs. This article discusses just four of those programs: the Mobile Justice Squad/Senior Center Outreach, the Senior Housing Stability Project, Human Trafficking Expungement Collaboration, and the Family Court Self-Advocacy Program.

The Mobile Justice Squad/Senior Center Outreach

CCLA's Mobile Justice Squad, (MJS) is an innovative concept wherein legal services are conducted in a van outfitted as a fully equipped law office on wheels. The MJS offers free civil legal assistance to seniors 60 and older in Broward County who are struggling with legal issues and are either homebound or face challenges with transportation. Seeking help with legal issues can be overwhelming for seniors in these particular circumstances. Realizing that everyone deserves access to legal representation regardless of their physical limitations, the MJS was conceptualized, and has proven to be an essential tool to the most vulnerable seniors in our community. The program provides legal services in all areas covered by the Senior Law Unit which include housing, consumer, naturalization, public benefits, and elder abuse and exploitation. The MJS ensures that justice is accessible to seniors in their homes, community centers, nursing homes, and assisted living facilities.

The MJS is one of the pioneers of mobile legal services in the country. Geraldine M. DeBianchi, CCLA's MJS attorney, states that the purpose of the project is to "bridge the justice gap for those who are entitled to legal services and justice, yet are unable to access it simply because they cannot physically get to the legal aid service provider." The MJS advances

CCLA's mission to improve the lives of low-income persons in our community by delivering essential legal services directly to seniors in need.

The MJS's services include representation in housing matters, such as preventing evictions and resolving landlord-tenant disputes, all vital in maintaining stable living conditions for the elderly. Additionally, MJS assists seniors to manage public benefits programs, including ensuring clients receive all of the benefits to which they are entitled and resolving disputes related to Social Security, food assistance, Medicare, and Medicaid. Consumer protection is another vital area where the MJS assists seniors with foreclosure and medical and credit card debt. Moreover, the MJS intervenes when seniors are victimized with fraud, scams, and exploitation. The MJS attorney drafts legal documents and supports its clients in understanding the content and weight of them. This wide-ranging legal support protects seniors' rights, meets their legal needs effectively, and helps them maintain their dignity and security.

The MJS's impact is best illustrated through its success stories. One case involves an elderly woman over 100 years old who lacked access to her home because she did not have a car, and therefore, she did not have the barcode necessary for access. The MJS intervened including contacting a local television station which aids Broward County residents called "Help Me Howard." Through collaboration with this



CCLA lead attorney Jeffrey Hittleman, from the left, CCLA Executive Director Lisa Goldberg, CCLA Director of Senior Unit Sarah Barker, CCLA Director of Operations Katianna Mazard, CCLA Board Chair Alejandro Larrazabal, GJFS Case Managers Frieda Caldes & Anna Maria Borreca, GJFS Chief Operating Officer Sandra Ala, and GJFS President & CEO Randy Colman.

program, the MJS successfully aided the senior in regaining access to her home, thereby maintaining her independence and upholding her legal rights. Ms. DeBianchi shared, “The reaction I receive from clients when I tell them I can come to them is overwhelming. They cry or gasp, and you can feel their relief, knowing someone can take their case and help resolve their legal issue.” Clients consistently express their gratitude, highlighting the program’s crucial role.

Senior Housing Stability Project

The Senior Housing Stability Project (SHSP) provides wraparound services to low-income seniors, helping them age in place and reduce their risk of homelessness. Through SHSP, CCLA collaborates with Goodman Jewish Family Services of Broward County (GJFS), a leading local social services agency. SHSP pairs each senior with a CCLA attorney and a GJFS social worker. The attorneys assist with legal issues that could jeopardize a senior’s housing, such as evictions and foreclosures. The social workers help with a wide range of needs, including applying for food stamps, accessing resources such as transportation services or food pantries, and combating social isolation by connecting seniors to community groups.

SHSP was created in response to the realization that seniors at risk of homelessness often face intertwined economic, social, health, and legal challenges. CCLA recognized that addressing only a senior’s legal issue often left the underlying problems unresolved. Without addressing those root causes, legal problems often reoccurred a few months later. By combining legal assistance with social support, SHSP addresses the multifaceted problems faced by seniors, ensuring their long-term housing stability.

Teamwork is critical to the SHSP’s success, enabling the project to address a senior’s needs holistically and effectively. When a senior is assessed as eligible to participate with SHSP, the attorneys and social workers engage in a “warm transfer” process to ensure that all the senior’s needs are thoroughly identified. The attorneys and social workers regularly meet for case review and updates, fostering a collaborative environment. Additionally, the attorneys and social workers cross-train each other, which ensures that both groups are well-versed in each other’s fields, providing a unified, comprehensive approach to assisting each senior.

Since its inception in 2018, SHSP prevented over 580 seniors from becoming homeless, including many veterans and disabled and vulnerable seniors. One case that exemplifies this collaborative approach involves a

disabled senior struggling to keep her apartment clean due to physical disabilities. After receiving an eviction notice, she contacted CCLA for help. CCLA’s attorneys requested a reasonable accommodation for additional time to clean due to her disability. In tandem, social workers from GJFS then arranged for a cleaning company to perform a deep clean of her apartment. Ultimately, the issue was solved, and the eviction notice withdrawn. GJFS provided the senior supportive services, so this would not happen again. This successful collaborative effort between the attorneys and social workers allowed her to remain in her home.

With an emphasis on ensuring long-term stability, SHSP follows participants for six months after services are provided to ensure that they remain stably housed. If any issues arise during this time, the attorneys and social workers reconvene to address them. This proactive approach reflects the SHSP’s commitment to sustainable solutions rather than short-term fixes.

One of the biggest challenges faced by the SHSP is the speed of eviction cases in Florida, which can go from start to finish in just a few weeks. To address this, the team must act swiftly and cohesively to solve problems. Additionally, many seniors face technology barriers, as they may not be comfortable with the internet or smartphones. The team overcomes these hurdles



Human trafficking presenters.

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through direct visits to seniors' homes and outreach at senior centers, coordinating with the MJS van when necessary.

With two new initiatives, SHSP plans to expand its services. First, a housing navigator will be added to assist seniors in searching for affordable housing, particularly those who struggle with internet searches or have mobility issues. Second, a workforce navigator will assist younger seniors to find employment by helping them craft resumes and search for jobs. These new services aim to enhance the SHSP team's capabilities and strengthen the SHSP's ability to support seniors' independence and long-term stability.

Together, we have cultivated a highly effective model for preventing evictions and foreclosures, as well as ensuring that seniors can remain in their homes.

Human Trafficking Expungement Collaboration

At CCLA, we holistically assist victims of human trafficking by representing them for various legal cases, most notably, to expunge their criminal records. Florida Statute, §943.0583 allows survivors of human trafficking, who have committed crimes at the direction of, or by force of, their traffickers to petition the court to expunge their criminal records. Part of our efforts to expunge the criminal records of victims of human trafficking, involves close collaboration with the Broward County State Attorney's Office (BSAO). Our shared goal is to give survivors of human trafficking a chance to clear their records and begin a new chapter in their lives.

As a part of the judicial proceedings for the expungement process, the BSAO and the arresting agency are served a notice of the victim's intent to request an expungement. CCLA and the BSAO have formed a collaborative working relationship to streamline the process when survivors petition for an expungement. CCLA Attorney, Victoria Sexton, and BSAO Assistant State Attorney (ASA), Danielle Lennox, started handling human trafficking expungements at the same time, allowing them to create a partnership built on trauma-informed and victim-centered processes which ultimately benefits survivors.

On the BSAO's website, under the "Seal and the Expunge" section, survivors of human trafficking are informed of the partnership and encouraged to contact CCLA for assistance with their trafficking-related expungements. At CCLA, Attorney Sexton prepares

the paperwork and filing documents and submits them to the ASA. Typically, a Zoom conference is scheduled with the survivor, CCLA Attorney Sexton and the BSAO. The ASA will do a brief interview with the survivor to ascertain if the statutory requirements are met. Once the BSAO approves the expungement, the order is submitted to 17th Judicial Circuit Court Judge Stacy Ross for signature. Per an Administrative Order, Judge Ross is the only Judge in Broward County who handles human trafficking expungements. Once the Order is signed, the Clerk of Court forwards a copy of the Order to the arresting agency. The Clerk and the arresting agency are responsible for destroying the expunged records. The criminal convictions are deemed vacated due to substantive defect in the underlying criminal proceedings.

In addition to the collaborative case work on trafficking-related expungements, the CCLA Attorney and the ASA work with the Broward Human Trafficking Coalition (BHTC), a coordinated community response organization, to provide an annual Human Trafficking Expungement Training for court personnel and trafficking service providers. At the training, they explain the entire expungement process from petition to final order, and educate participants about the roles of all collaborators, including the Clerk of Court, the BHTC, CCLA, and the BSAO.

Family Court Self Advocacy Program

CCLA continuously seeks to improve access to legal services through community outreach initiatives, informational videos online, and through our unique and innovative programs such as the Family Court Self-Advocacy Program (FCSAP). CCLA maintains an office at the Central Broward Courthouse in downtown Fort Lauderdale. The office is provided by the 17th Judicial Circuit's Court Administration as part of their Self-Help Center to give the community greater access to community services. The FCSAP is operated by CCLA paralegal, Jaceinte McDougle. The office is open for intake, but applicants are provided information which allows them to apply online at www.CoastToCoastLegalAid.org or by phone at (954) 736-2400 if it is more convenient.

Our work at this office is a collaboration between CCLA, Court Administration, and community stakeholders who provide social services to the community. The goal of the office is to empower the community by providing greater access to legal and social services. Most of the referrals to CCLA's FCSAP come from the family and domestic violence divisions. Those who visit

the office are typically in need of urgent legal assistance, and many visit the FCSAP office immediately after a court hearing.

At the FCSAP, paralegals provide general information, guidance, and referrals to walk-in applicants who are self-represented. In addition, CCLA completes an intake for applicants to assess eligibility for CCLA's legal services, usually pro se litigants who need legal advice regarding a family law matter. Most eligible applicants become clients who receive legal advice and counsel with one of CCLA's family law attorneys. Other eligible applicants receive full representation with CCLA attorneys or pro bono attorneys. Through the FCSAP, CCLA handles petitions, answers, and counter petitions for paternity and dissolution of marriage cases, child support modifications, contempt and enforcement matters, post judgement matters, and other motion practice. The FCSAP and CCLA assist victims of violence for their injunctions for protection against domestic violence, dating violence, sexual violence, and stalking. The FCSAP is sometimes the first contact victims of intimate partner violence and human trafficking have with CCLA. When applicable, the FCSAP refers applicants to community partners such as the certified domestic violence center, certified rape crisis center, law enforcement-based victim advocates, and other community social services.

Conclusion

Coast to Coast Legal Aid of South Florida works to find new and innovative ways to collaborate with community partners to provide high-quality, free civil legal services to our community. The Mobile Justice Squad transformed a van into a roving law office providing civil legal services designed for vulnerable senior citizens in Broward County. The Senior Housing Stability Project works with case managers to keep seniors in their homes, helping them age in place and prevent homelessness. The Human Trafficking Expungement Project works with the Broward County State Attorney's Office to clear the criminal records for victims and survivors of human trafficking for a fresh start. Our Family Court Self-Advocacy Program improves access to legal services for self-represented litigants in the Broward County Courthouse.

Despite all the awards and recognitions received by CCLA and our staff, we are not resting on our laurels. As long as there are issues in our community, CCLA will continue to create solutions through creative, proactive thinking and collaboration with our community partners.

The spirit of collaboration, which is the foundation of these innovative programs, is fostered by CCLA's culture of teamwork in which every member is valued, every innovative idea is encouraged, and every staff member is given an opportunity to participate in community outreach. Industrialist and philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie said it best when he said "Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. The ability to direct individual accomplishments toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results." Here at CCLA, we achieve uncommon results because of our commitment to our common goal, to our community, and to each other.

Written in Collaboration by Coast to Coast Legal Aid of South Florida staff members Hilary Creary, Geraldine M. DeBianchi, Jeffrey Hittleman, and Victoria Sexton and CCLA's Summer 2024 interns Mia Stevenson and Yasuaki Sawamura.

- 1 Hilary A. Creary, Esq. is the Supervising Attorney for Coast to Coast Legal Aid of South Florida's Family Law & Victims of Crime Unit. Throughout her legal career, Hilary practiced in all areas of family law and was a Guardian ad Litem and Family Law Mediator. Her philosophy in life is "Tikkun Olam" — "the repair of the world." To that end she believes in giving back to the legal community and is active in it. Currently, she is a member of the Florida Bar Board of Governors representing the 17th Judicial Circuit and serves on the Broward County Bar Association's Board of Directors. Hilary held leadership positions in multiple voluntary Bar Associations including the T. J. Reddick Bar Association, the Broward County Women Lawyers Association, the Gwen S. Cherry Black Women Lawyers Association, and the Caribbean Bar Association. Moreover, Hilary believes in supporting and advancing her larger community. She received the 2018 Florida Bar President's Award for Pro Bono Service in the 17th Judicial Circuit for her tireless representation of clients who could not otherwise afford legal services. Hilary was honored with consecutive Florida Bar Presidents' Award for her efforts on the Special Committee on Greater Public Access to Legal Services and her work on the COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery Taskforce. Hilary is a founding member of Jamaican Women of Florida, which is dedicated to educating and empowering generations of Jamaican women. In her "spare" time, Hilary served as the legal advisor to the Greater Pompano Beach Margate and Lighthouse Point Chamber of Commerce. Hilary received her B.A. and J.D. from Nova Southeastern University. Hilary may be reached at hcreary@legallaid.org.

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- 2 Geraldine M. DeBianchi, Esq. is Coast to Coast Legal Aid of South Florida's (CCLA) Mobile Justice Squad Attorney who came to CCLA with nearly thirty years of experience in private practice. As the Mobile Justice Squad ("MJS") Attorney, Geraldine serves residents of Broward County, 60 and older, who are homebound or face challenges with transportation through the use of the MJS van which is a fully-equipped law office on wheels. The MJS Project has been recognized as a trailblazing project in publications within the state and around the nation. Most recently, CCLA's MJS Project was recognized by 211 Broward as the 2023 Nonprofit of the Year in the Innovation Category. It is one of only a few mobile law offices in the country. Outside of the office, Geraldine is dedicated to community involvement with an emphasis on education, women's rights, the environment, LGBTQ+, and minority rights. Geraldine completed her undergraduate and law studies at the University of Miami. Geraldine may be reached at gdebianchi@legalaid.org.
- 3 Jeff Hittleman, Esq. is the Supervising Attorney for Coast to Coast Legal Aid of South Florida's Senior Citizen Law Project. He supervises various areas of law, including landlord-tenant disputes, foreclosure defense, consumer rights, immigration, elder abuse and exploitation, and health and public benefits law. Jeff joined Coast to Coast Legal Aid of South Florida in 2016. He began his legal career as an Assistant Public Defender in Broward County. Jeff went to law school at the University of Florida, completing his law

- degree in 2012. Originally from Broward County, Jeff was born and raised in the community he serves. Jeff may be reached at jhittleman@LegalAid.org.
- 4 In 2019, Victoria Sexton, Esq. graduated from Georgetown University Law Center as a Jeffrey Crandall Award recipient. She was a member of the Georgetown Domestic Violence Clinic and participated in Georgetown's Asylum Practicum. Victoria spent her internships and externships clerking for a child abuse and neglect judge, working with domestic violence survivors, and serving veterans at the VA. While in law school she discovered her passion for survivor advocacy. She was awarded a 2019 Equal Justice Work's Fellowship from Funding Florida Legal Aid (formerly known as the Florida Bar Foundation); the fellowship was hosted at Coast to Coast Legal Aid of South Florida (CCLA). Her fellowship focused on providing free civil legal representation to, and advocacy for, survivors of human trafficking in Broward County. In 2021, CCLA was awarded an OVC grant for Victoria to continue working with survivors of human trafficking. Victoria is the co-chair of the S.T.R.I.P.E.S. Committee for the Broward Human Trafficking Coalition and on the 2024-2025 Board of the Broward Domestic Violence Council.

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She is a member of the Broward Victim Right's Coalition, Sexual Assault Response Team for Broward County, and South Florida Human Trafficking Taskforce. She is a member of the Florida Bar and Broward County Bar Association. In 2024, Victoria became CCLA's Outreach Manager, coordinating all community outreaches for CCLA, in-person and virtual. Victoria may be reached at vsxton@legalaids.org.

- 5 Mia Stevenson is a second-year law student at Marquette University Law School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She received a 2024 Public Interest Law Society Fellowship from Marquette University Law School and spent the 2024 summer working as a legal intern at Coast to Coast Legal Aid of South Florida in the Family Law & Victims of Crime Unit.
- 6 Yasuaki Sawamura interned with Coast to Coast Legal Aid of South Florida during the summer of 2024. During his internship, he helped both the Senior Law Unit and the Family Law & Victims of Crime Unit, particularly in assisting with domestic violence cases for underserved clients. Currently, Yasuaki is pursuing a B.S. in Psychology at Nova Southeastern University while working as a legal assistant at the Law Office of Morrie I. Levine, P.A. in Hollywood, Florida.