Jennifer* lived in an abusive relationship for almost three years before her husband was sent to prison for beating her so badly she was sent to the hospital. The brutal assault happened in 2017. Her husband used pieces of wood and broken bottles to beat Jennifer over the head, resulting in six staples to close a three-inch laceration. Jennifer has cerebral palsy and her husband’s attack required her to start using a walker to get around.

Her husband went to prison for the assault, and was released after 18 months. At first, Jennifer thought things would be different. They were living separately, and maybe they could make things work.

“He was being good but that only lasted for about three months,” she said. “Then he started acting odd again.”

Her husband became increasingly aggressive. Suddenly, he told Jennifer he wanted a divorce and 50/50 custody of their two children, ages 7 and 4. Jennifer knew she couldn’t let him have partial custody of their children. That’s when she turned to Legal Aid of Nebraska.

Legal Aid of Nebraska’s REACH Initiative (Raising Effective Advocacy for Crime Victim’s Health and Safety) provides free legal assistance to victims and survivors of domestic violence in rural Nebraska. Under the REACH Initiative, Legal Aid represented Jennifer in her divorce and helped her get full custody of her children. That’s when she turned to Legal Aid of Nebraska.

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“We had to put an end to the relentless harassment she was being exposed to,” said Legal Aid attorney Danny Reynaga.

Throughout the process, Jennifer was extremely grateful to have someone in her corner.

“If my husband was trying to bully me, Danny told him to talk to him and not me.”

Ultimately, a custody order was entered that addressed Jennifer’s safety and the safety of her children.

“That would not have happened without Legal Aid,” she said.

If Jennifer had not found Legal Aid, the situation may still be unresolved.

“I would still be fighting back and forth with my husband to have custody of the kids,” she said. “I’m sure, had I not gotten a lawyer, it would have been much worse than what it was.”

With the divorce and custody battle behind her, Jennifer can look forward to the future.

“I basically have spent the last two years in limbo, and now I’m finally out of limbo,” she said. “Now I know exactly what’s going on. I can move forward from here.”

*Name has been changed for client’s protection.

The REACH Initiative is a VOCA (Victim of Crime Act)-funded program that provides information and FREE civil legal assistance to victims of elder abuse and financial exploitation across the State of Nebraska, and victims and survivors of domestic violence in 48 rural Nebraska counties.
Legal Aid is right-ly known for tackling immediate civil legal problems facing our low-income clients. A mother risking the loss of her child, a family faced with homelessness, a father seeing his low, hard-earned wages siphoned away to predatory lenders, a senior citizen abused and lost — Legal Aid is invaluable in our clients’ lives. But Legal Aid also prides itself on thinking ahead, reaching clients before problems become too deep or hard to handle.

Legal Aid not only helps those with immediate crises and problems find relief, but steps forward to meaning-fully help our clients get positively down the road. The REACH Initiative is just one of many Legal Aid efforts to be not just a legal resource for low-income Nebraskans, but a real life-changer. During this holiday season, please keep the good work of Legal Aid’s staff and volunteers in mind, and know that together we create hope and opportunity for so many who need and deserve it.

- Milo Mumgaard, Legal Aid of Nebraska Executive Director

Meet Emily Sands, the staff attorney for the new Pro Bono Connection Project – an effort to expand pro bono legal services for low-income Nebraskans in rural areas.

The Pro Bono Innovation Fund grant from Legal Services Corporation has enabled Legal Aid to begin working on the project. The Pro Bono Connection Project will greatly boost Legal Aid’s efforts to help bridge the massive “justice gap” in the state, in which nine out of ten legal problems faced by low-income Nebraskans go unaddressed.

Working in close collaboration with the Nebraska State Bar Association’s Volunteer Lawyers Project, the project takes direct aim on this challenge by taking into account Nebraska’s concentra-tion of attorneys in two major cities, the shortage of attorneys in rural areas, and the state’s large geographic size.

In order to address these challenges, the project will ex-plore the potential of connect-ing pro bono attorneys in urban areas with rural clients through technology. Virtual legal assistance, similar to a telehealth model, eliminates the requirement of travel for pro bono volunteers while providing the ability to meaningfully communicate, consult and provide legal assistance in a clinic setting.

“I am excited to be a part of this new development in pro bono legal services,” Sands said.

Prior to joining Legal Aid in October 2019, she had a solo practice in Lincoln in the areas of family law and criminal defense.

In Spring 2019, Legal Aid Housing Justice Project attorneys Scott Mertz and Sara Rips were asked to testify before the legislature regarding how proposed landlord/tenant bills would affect their clients. This fall, two major positive changes related to that testimony went into affect, benefitting many current and potential Legal Aid clients.

“This is the first time in decades there has been substantive changes to landlord/tenant law that have actually benefited the tenant,” said Mertz.

Previously, landlords only needed to give a three-day written notice to tenants in nonpayment rent cases. This was extended to seven days, giving tenants more time before they lose their homes.

The other change concerns the obligation of security deposits. Before the change, tenants had the burden of submitting a written demand to receive their security deposit from a landlord. Now, the burden has shifted. Landlords must send the deposit or a written explanation within 14 days, or turn the deposit over if the tenant can’t be found.

Jonathan Seagrass, Native American Program managing attorney, traveled to Omaha, Santee, Macy, and Winnebago with tribal, state, and federal judges to hear from Native communities about how courts can better serve Native people and Tribes. Jon gave a “know your rights” presentation during the events.

Bellevue Public Schools students sent Legal Aid an envelope full of student-made thank you cards, complete with nice messages, signatures, and drawings. The cards were thanking Legal Aid staff for attending a parent resource fair and are now proudly displayed in the Omaha office breakroom.

Native American Program Outreach Coordinator Kirby Williams was selected to receive the Cherokee Phoenix Seven Feathers Community Award for her work against domestic violence in the Na-tive community. We’re happy to have Kirby on our team at Legal Aid.
The Health, Education & Law Project (HELP) directly partners with health care providers to provide free legal assistance for patients with legal issues that inhibit patient recovery, and to promote better health outcomes for those struggling with medical and legal issues.

This year, HELP expanded to its first rural partner, Columbus Community Hospital.

Legal Aid holds its first Lincoln LGBTQ+ Name Change Clinic

Legal Aid partnered with Indigo Bridge Books and Cafe in Lincoln to hold a LGBTQ+ Name Change Class and Clinic for anyone who needs help with the name change process. Other partners included the Nebraska State Bar Association’s Volunteer Lawyers Project and the Nebraska Law Civil Clinic.

A name change class was presented by Omaha attorney and advocate Joni Stacy, followed by a clinic where participants met with volunteer attorneys and students to fill out name change paperwork. The clinic assisted 24 individuals. LNKTV also recorded the class for future use and for those who weren’t able to attend.

More clinics are planned for 2020. Stay tuned!

Legal Aid on track for $15 million client impact in 2019

In the first ten months of 2019, Legal Aid has continued to have a profound impact on our clients. Through the end of October Legal Aid has documented a total financial impact of $13,498,223, including $1,837,403 in increased assets, $2,893,617 in increased income, and $8,767,203 in decreased debt! This means, for 2019 that Legal Aid surpassed expectations and will likely see close to $15 million or more in total financial impact for our clients.

| Total financial impact: | $13,498,223 |
| Average financial impact/case: | $32,536 |
| Increased assets: | $1,837,403 |
| Increased income*: | $2,893,617 |
| Decreased Debt: | $8,767,203 |

*Monthly income amounts are annualized.

Donate!

You can help Legal Aid of Nebraska increase our clients’ financial impact by making a gift at: legalaidofnebraska.thankyou4caring.org or by returning the enclosed donation envelope.
Legal Aid of Nebraska is partially funded with federal monies appropriated to the Legal Services Corporation and distributed throughout the United States to programs based upon the state’s poverty population. As a condition of receiving these funds, Legal Aid is precluded, by federal regulation, from participating in any activity prohibited by either the LSC Act or by PL 104-304.

Check out Legal Aid employees engaged with their communities across Nebraska to spread the word of equal justice.