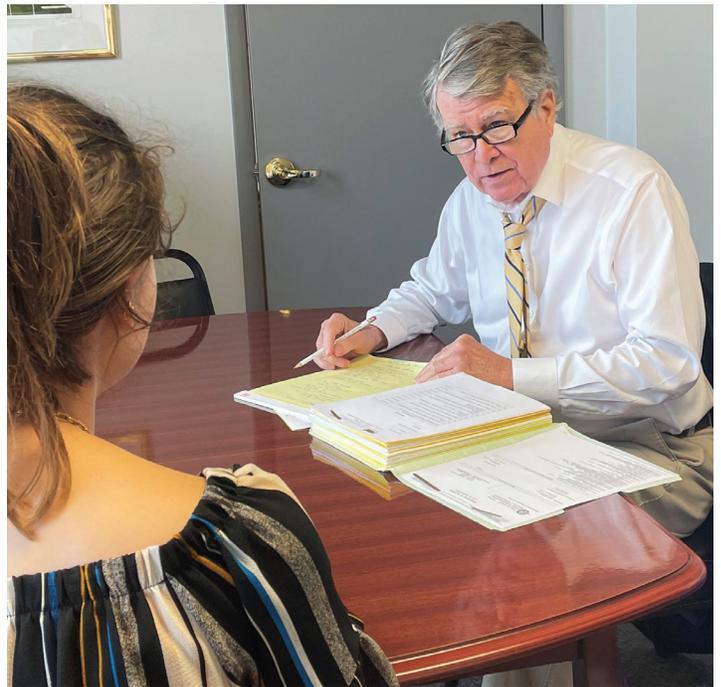


SPEAKING OF JUSTICE

NEWS FROM THE FLORIDA BAR FOUNDATION
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Asia Anderson, right, sought help from Community Law Program to obtain a reasonable custody arrangement with her ex-husband for her daughter Gabby, left. An Engle grant made her lawyer's work possible.



Thomas McGowan, Community Law Program's lead attorney funded under the Engle Grant, meets with a client.

Nine Engle grants impact thousands of Floridians in Middle District

Megan*, a Seminole County mother of two daughters, was caught in a precarious living situation after the COVID-19 pandemic began taking its toll on Floridians in 2020. She had lost income and owed four months in back rent. By the time she reached out to Seminole County Bar Association Legal Aid Society (SCBALAS), she had received a writ of possession and had 24

hours to move out, with nowhere to go.

But, thanks to the decision of a four-judge panel of the Middle District of Florida to distribute sanctions from Engle tobacco litigation to civil legal aid, The Florida Bar Foundation had created a grant program that funded a lawyer that helped Megan.

"The court made an innovative and heroic move in dedicating these funds to legal aid,"

Donny MacKenzie, the Foundation's executive director, said. "In 2019, when these funds were entrusted to the Foundation, no one could have known how desperately so many Floridians would need representation in court as a result of the myriad problems COVID-19 caused. It was serendipitous."

Megan's SCBALAS lawyer, funded by an Engle grant, immediately helped her file

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a notice of appearance and an emergency motion to stop the writ. The judge granted the motion, but Megan was still in jeopardy. Her lease was about to expire, and her landlord did not want to renew it without receiving her back rent first.

SCBALAS advised Megan to apply for Seminole County's Emergency Rental Assistance Program. She was approved, paid her back rent and was able to stay in her home with her daughters. Megan's was just one of 545 eviction cases SCBALAS opened during the two-year period of their grant.

Nine legal aid providers were awarded \$3.3 million in Engle grants, and eight have exhausted their funding. Jacksonville Area Legal Aid extended their grant contract and will complete their project in June of 2023. As of January 2023, more than 3,300 cases have been opened as a result of Engle grants.

Community Law Program (CLP), which was awarded \$72,600, used their grant to expand the availability of high quality free legal representation in family law proceedings to low-income litigants in the Middle District, particularly in cases where the opposing party was represented so that there was a level playing field in high stakes situations.

CLP recovered \$375,121 in financial benefits consisting of child support, alimony, and equitable distribution for their clients. They opened 88 cases and helped 10 different clients obtain, preserve, maintain, modify, or enforce custody and timesharing rights.

One of those clients was Asia Anderson, who sought help after her nine-year-old daughter Gabby's father, who lived in North

Carolina, filed a paternity action against her in Pinellas County seeking to have a judge award primary timesharing to him. That would have meant Gabby would leave her younger brother, mom, her school and her friends to live with her father for the majority of her time.

Community Law Program noted that Gabby's father was a successful engineer, had a larger home, and had hired one of the very best family law attorneys in Pinellas County to represent him. In addition, he had hired a guardian ad litem (GAL), who had investigated both sides of the case and made a recommendation to the court that Gabby should move to live with her father.

"In family law proceedings where a GAL is involved, most judges give great weight to their recommendations regarding timesharing," Kimberly Rodgers, CLP's executive director, said.

Despite Asia's financial struggles, Gabby was doing well in school and was well adjusted. CLP lawyer Tom McGowan provided zealous advocacy, and after a two-day trial, the judge ruled in favor allowing Gabby to remain with her mother and younger brother during the school year, with liberal timesharing with her father during summer and school breaks.

"This case was truly an example of an uneven playing field that tipped in favor of the parent with money. Asia certainly is not a bad parent; she just had not had an opportunity to finish school and was struggling financially."

*This client requested anonymity. Her name has been changed to protect her privacy.



Brevard County Legal Aid lawyer Ashley Ferrell, in pink, with paralegal Amy Howerter, third from left, with clients who have on an ongoing paternity case with issues of child timesharing and support. Their work is funded by an Engle grant.



Engle Grant Highlights

Bay Area Legal Services

- Closed 89 cases with positive outcomes in 86 cases
- Obtained judgments, awards, fees, costs, benefits, etc., of \$15,281

Brevard County Legal Aid

- 1,177 cases opened: 280 full representation litigation; 863 brief counsel/legal advice
- Obtained judgments, awards, fees, costs, benefits, etc., of \$1.5 million

Community Law Program

- See story, left

Florida Legal Services

- Provided legal assistance in 527 cases for 463 clients over two years, including 388 cases for prisoners and 139 cases for immigrants
- In litigation, obtained successful outcomes in 50% of immigration cases resolved, and in 69% of cases for prisoners that were resolved

Jacksonville Area Legal Aid*

- Served 711 litigants, including 78 who have obtained citizenship or a similar status, 33 who secured Medicaid or insurance and 36 who avoided eviction

Legal Aid Service of Collier County

- Project yielded \$407,673 in direct dollar benefits such as client savings in waiver or forgiveness of fees, costs, etc.
- Assisted 87 clients

Seminole County Bar Association Legal Aid

- See story, page 1

Southern Legal Counsel

- Won a case to prevent individuals experiencing homelessness from being incarcerated for sleeping or resting in public, saving taxpayers an estimated \$364,782 over four years, what it would have cost to jail 264 people for 5,393 nights in jail

Three Rivers Legal Services

- Provided bankruptcy advice to 140 clients and provided brief service to an additional 14 clients
- Increased disposable income for clients through discharge of debts of \$4,116,351

*JALA's project has been extended to June 2023