

FACT: Legal Aid helps law enforcement

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Legal Aid empowers people to resolve problems through the civil legal process rather than resorting to violence and other destructive and wasteful conduct.

The resources of law enforcement are taxed by the need to respond to domestic violence, and the availability of legal aid has been proven to reduce the likelihood of further violence against a victim and her children.

The author of a recent economics scholarly study analyzing DOJ statistics on declines in domestic abuse in the 1990's stated, "**Legal services are the only service that decreases the likelihood women will be battered.** Since legal services help women achieve economic power and self-sufficiency, **they are a good place to spend public money.**"

- Legal Aid helps minimize domestic violence policing by **assisting victims with Orders For Protection**, which separate parties, minimize explosive contact between them, and make it easier to arrest re-offenders. Domestic violence calls are a major cause of police officers' deaths.
- Legal Aid, with other community partners, helped create **Child Safety & Visitation Centers** protecting kids and reducing the incidence of police calls related to domestic abuse in visitation situations. Safety Centers help decrease police involvement in visitation exchanges and resulting altercations, and were developed, in part, as a response to those needs.
- Legal Aid also works to **establish safe housing** to protect victims and prevent further criminal violence.
- Legal Aid staff **train police** on domestic violence issues, and work with police and prosecutors to **implement intervention projects**.
- Many officers carry legal aid's domestic violence **brochures** in their patrol cars to give to victims.

Child abuse, neglect, delinquency and truancy complaints can take a significant amount of police time, and much in those areas is preventable through civil law intervention. Custody and visitation disputes also pose problems for police. Legal Aid helps by

- **Providing for the protection of children** through various types of family law work, including OFPs and Harassment Restraining Orders, divorces, custody changes and visitation actions.
- **Preventing juvenile delinquency.** Children exposed to domestic violence have higher rates of physical violence, deliberate property damage, involvement with drugs and alcohol, and other behavioral disturbances. Reducing their exposure to domestic violence reduces these negative behaviors.
- **Helping families eliminate child neglect situations** through assistance to parents in maintaining jobs, and obtaining food, clothing, shelter, health care, subsistence income and appropriate educational programs.
- **Keeping kids in school**, thus reducing truancy and delinquency.

- **Providing information on how custody orders** in family court and how **adjudication of paternity**, or lack of it, affects custody rights. This helps law enforcement enforce orders and save time sorting out custody disputes when answering calls related to domestic abuse and other family disputes.

Legal Aid staff have served as a training resource for police and other justice system personnel to respond safely and effectively to persons with mental illness. After the deaths of two persons with mental illness, Minnesota Disability Law Center staff convened a work group regarding police interaction with those experiencing mental health crises. MDLC enlisted the assistance of a criminal justice professor who is a national expert on police training. The group learned that peace officers in Minnesota received no required training — either pre-licensure or post-licensure — on how to de-escalate situations with those in crises, in particular persons with mental illness. The group identified a number of needed actions. In this area achievements include:

- Work with the Peace Officer Standard and Training Board, police and sheriffs to improve and expand training in this area.
- Legislation creating a Department of Public Safety Citizen Advisory Council to advise the Commissioner of Public Safety on these issues.

Legal Aid also helps law enforcement by the following:

- **Preventing homelessness** through housing and income maintenance work. Homelessness causes public safety and public health problems which increase police calls.
- **Providing an outlet to resolve landlord-tenant disputes.** Through community education, early intervention, and mediation, legal aid seeks to resolve disputes before they erupt into evictions thus helping to prevent homelessness with its attendant law enforcement and social costs. When matters have escalated, Legal Aid offers a civil remedy thus reducing the need for police intervention.
- **Helping vulnerable adults prevent or ameliorate fraud, theft, and financial abuse** through community education, and personal affairs legal management tools, such as powers of attorney, conservatorships and guardianships.
- **Working with law enforcement personnel to do joint community education and training** on protecting seniors from abuse, break-ins, and family exploitation; street crime and theft; and consumer fraud and commercial exploitation