



CHRISTIAN LEGAL SOCIETY

CHRISTIAN
LEGAL AID

Starting a Christian Legal Aid program Frequently Asked Questions

- **Why start a Christian Legal Aid (CLA) clinic when there are other types legal aid programs in my city?**

First, in most areas the need for legal services for the poor is so great that it's rare to have *too many* legal aid programs. There is almost always more demand than there are legal aid providers.

But more importantly, Christian Legal Aid is a **ministry**. Often, clients' legal problems are tied to interrelated emotional, relational, and spiritual problems. So in addition to helping with the legal issues, CLA volunteers try to minister to clients holistically by providing a compassionate listening ear, spiritual counsel, and prayer. We also often refer clients to other ministries, Christian counseling or mediation, and churches. When appropriate, we share the Gospel and give out copies of the Bible.

Often clients are equally or even more blessed by the spiritual component of CLA than the legal services. Many of them come to CLA full of anger, despondency, and bitterness. They might not have friends to turn to and may never step foot in a church, but because CLA attorneys can help them with a tangible need, they are more open to sharing their lives and pouring out their hearts. CLA attorneys are there to be a witness to the love of Christ. And often the attorneys come out feeling more blessed themselves from having served people in such desperate need.

- **I would like to do legal aid but am unfamiliar with “poverty law” issues like landlord/tenant law and consumer law. Will I be able to participate?**

Yes! Very few CLA volunteers start off knowing any legal issues needed by legal aid clients. It will take some learning, but it is not as daunting as it seems. The fact that you have had three years of law school means you are much more knowledgeable than the clients who need your help. Even if you don't know an area of law needed by a client, you at least have the tools to research and figure it out.

Many issues addressed at legal aid clinics involve common problems that do not require extensive research or complex analysis. There is much freely available resources on common legal aid issues on the Internet (including from the secular legal aid programs in most cities). The [Christian Legal Aid Resource Library](#) has links to many free resources.

- **I already do pro bono work individually, why should I start a CLA clinic?**

That's great you already do pro bono work! Setting up a formal Christian Legal Aid program would allow you to expand to recruit and train more attorneys to serve with you, and make it more permanent. You would have a more systematic way of reaching more people in need. A formal CLA program is also a good witness to the community. Serving the poor and addressing legal injustices is a tangible demonstration of God's love.

- **Do I need to create a 501(c)(3) nonprofit to start a Christian Legal Aid clinic?**

There are many different models of CLA programs. Some CLA programs find a church or another ministry to sponsor the program under its auspices. Some operate out of a law firm. But most CLA programs do create a separate 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization so they can operate independently, get their own malpractice insurance (which is quite affordable for nonprofits), and receive tax-deductible donations. Forming a nonprofit corporation is not as hard as it may appear. Christian Legal Society can help you through the steps to do so.

- **Do CLA clinics work together with churches or other ministries?**

Even CLA programs that exist as independent nonprofits typically partner with churches or other ministries serving the poor. Partner ministries are helpful for:

- Providing meeting spaces to meet with clients
- Helping to advertise the program to client populations
- Helping to recruit volunteers
- Providing financial help and other resources
- Providing moral support

Note that many churches and ministries don't understand how important *legal services* are to the poor. Most people don't realize how many causes or factors of poverty have legal aspects - landlord/tenant disputes, foreclosure, consumer debt, scams, elder abuse, wage theft, government benefits, past criminal records, etc. It often takes some education before people understand the legal issues and how much they hurt the poor. Start by finding churches and ministries that already serve the needy and share how CLA can be a valuable partner.

- **I've tried recruiting attorneys to help and am having a hard time.**

Sadly, it can be difficult to recruit attorneys, even Christian ones, willing to serve the poor, despite the fact that we have a clear biblical mandate to do so. For instance:

Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute.
Speak out, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy. (Proverbs 31:8-9)

For the same reasons it may take time to find a partner ministry, it may also take time to find attorneys willing to help. But don't give up! It can often take multiple attempts at reaching people's hearts and educating them on the need before they express interest. Be persistent but respectful, and most of all – pray for God to lead you to the right people. All it takes is for two or three to gather in Christ's name to get a program going.

- **Do I need to raise money to start a CLA clinic? Do I need to buy malpractice insurance?**

If you are starting a volunteer-run CLA program, you do not need much money to start or operate it. The biggest expense is generally obtaining malpractice insurance, which is helpful to recruit attorneys because not all law firms permit their attorneys to do pro bono work, and some attorneys work in-house or are retired and may not have insurance. (Check your state bar rules on whether retired attorneys need an active license to serve.) Fortunately, the [National Legal Aid Defenders Association](#) (NLADA) provides very reasonably priced insurance for nonprofit legal aid programs.

Other than that, you might need some minimal funds to create a website, obtain software, and buy office supplies. These expenses are often paid by a partner church or ministry. Modest funds can often be easily raised through simple fundraiser events like a prayer breakfast.

Once you grow larger you may have more expenses, and possibly may want to hire some administrative help. Once you get to a certain size, you may decide to hire an executive director or staff attorney and become a full-service nonprofit law firm.

- **Are there state bar concerns in starting a CLA clinic?**

There are a few states that have restrictions on nonprofit legal services organizations. Be sure to check your state laws and state bar rules regarding such issues.

- **I'm a law student or not an attorney, can I start a CLA clinic?**

Because only lawyers are permitted to provide legal services, operating a CLA clinic does require attorney participation. However, non-attorneys can certainly help create new clinics by spreading the word about Christian Legal Aid and recruiting attorneys to start one. And CLA clinics can always use the help of non-lawyers to help with administrative needs, spiritual ministry, and other services.

Law students can serve in clinics by helping with legal research and other services under the supervision of attorneys. As for starting a new clinic, we would recommend waiting until you have at least a few years of legal experience, or recruiting more experienced attorneys with whom you can serve together.

- **I'm interested in learning more about starting a CLA clinic. What should I do?**

That's great, we would like to hear from you! Please contact Ken Liu (CLA@clsnet.org), Director of the CLS Christian Legal Aid program, to discuss more details and next steps.