



## **Starting a Christian Legal Aid**

### *Frequently Asked Questions*

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

First, the need for pro bono legal services is so great that it's unlikely for an area to have too many legal aid programs. But more importantly, **Christian Legal Aid is a ministry**. Often, legal issues are tied to interrelated emotional, relational, and spiritual issues. CLAs seek to minister to clients holistically by providing a compassionate listening ear, spiritual counsel, prayer, and referrals to other ministries for support. When appropriate, we encourage you to share the Gospel.

Clients are often more blessed by the spiritual component of CLA than the legal services. Many of them come full of anger, despondency, and bitterness. They may not have healthy friends to turn to and may never step foot in a church, but because CLA attorneys can help with a tangible need, clients 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. You will leave the appointment feeling blessed for having served people in such desperate need, and gratitude for the life God has given you.

#### **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 allows you to recruit attorneys to serve with you and creates a more predictable and permanent ministry for your community. And selfishly, it's more fun serving with others! Many friendships have formed within CLAs.

#### **I would like to do legal aid but am unfamiliar with “poverty law” issues. Am I qualified?**

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 are many available resources on common legal aid issues online, including secular legal aid programs in most cities.



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

Not necessarily. There are many different models of CLA programs. Some CLAs 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, obtain malpractice insurance, and receive tax-deductible donations. Forming a nonprofit corporation is not as hard as it may appear. [Contact Christian Legal Society for resources.](#)

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

Yes! 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
- Helping to advertise the program to client populations
- Helping to recruit volunteers
- Providing financial help and other resources
- Providing moral support

Start by identifying churches and ministries already serving the needy and share how CLA can be a valuable partner. Often, they've already been praying for your help!

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

It may take time to find attorneys willing to help but don't give up! It often takes 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 get a program going.

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

Not necessarily. If you are starting a volunteer-run CLA program, you do not need much money to start or operate.

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.) **Also, ask CLS about its professional liability insurance grants! The expense may be fully covered.** Fortunately, the National Legal Aid Defenders Association (NLADA) provides very reasonably priced insurance for nonprofit legal aid programs.

Minimal expenses and office supplies are often covered by a partner church or ministry. As the CLA grows, you may have more expenses, and possibly want to hire administrative help. Some CLAs fund an executive director or staff attorney and become a full-service nonprofit law firm. Your program can be as big or small as you choose! Grow at the speed of prayer.

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

Nonprofit legal service organizations are allowed in every state, but they must comply with state nonprofit corporation laws, charitable solicitation rules, and attorney licensing regulations. Be sure to check your state laws and state bar rules to ensure compliance.

### **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 recommend waiting until you have at least a few years of legal experience or recruiting more experienced attorneys to serve with you.

### **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 us at [\*\*CLA@clsnet.org\*\*](mailto:CLA@clsnet.org) to discuss more details and next steps.