

Massachusetts Office For Victim Assistance

MOVA

Victim & Witness Assistance Board

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FREE CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES AVAILABLE FOR MASSACHUSETTS CRIME VICTIMS

BOSTON (October 11, 2017)—The Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation (MLAC) announces today that it has received a two-year, \$8 million grant from the Office for Victim Assistance (MOVA) to increase access to civil legal services for victims of violent and economic crimes in Massachusetts.

Victims of crime are often left with significant legal needs beyond those addressed in the criminal justice system. Child custody, immigration, healthcare or access to stable housing are just some examples of the civil legal needs faced by many victims following a crime.

This funding will increase access to these services for the most vulnerable victims of child abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault, and elder abuse—as well as to victims of non-violent crimes like fraud, financial abuse, or theft. Services are free and accessible to children, elders, non-English speakers, and people with disabilities. Referrals are also made to other social service providers to meet each client’s individual and long-term safety needs.

“Victims of violent and non-violent crimes are often incredibly vulnerable and may face challenges that are not addressed as part of the criminal prosecution process,” Attorney General Maura Healey said. “This grant ensures that more victims will have access to the critical legal services they need and can seek the justice they deserve.”

“After being violently attacked by my husband in our home I found myself involved in multiple court situations beyond the criminal justice system,” said Danielle Sicard, MOVA Board member. “Four years past this life changing ordeal, I continue to find myself in need of legal assistance and services in both district and probate courts to battle my ex-husband’s continued attempts at abuse. As a survivor of domestic violence it thrills me to see the launch of this program and I know these services will be instrumental for victims as they navigate through a complex court system during some of the most stressful situations.”

Created in 1983, MLAC is the largest funding source for civil legal aid in Massachusetts, supporting 14 civil legal aid programs that provide legal information, advice, and representation to low-income individuals and families facing civil legal issues. Working in partnership with the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute (MLRI), MLAC will disburse funds to regional and statewide civil legal aid programs to increase capacity to serve individual clients at the local level. The MOVA grant will also be used to increase the network’s capacity to coordinate services on a statewide basis.

“Successful criminal prosecution may bring justice to victims, but often additional civil legal assistance is required,” said Lonnie Powers, Executive Director of MLAC. “Victims of domestic violence, for instance, frequently need access to protective orders, assistance with child custody and support, divorce, and property distribution. Unfortunately, due to lack of funding, civil legal aid programs are forced to turn away thousands of eligible residents who seek services. This grant will help us begin to address funding shortages and serve more clients in need, and it is an important step forward in our effort to ensure equal justice for all people in Massachusetts.”

Georgia Katsoulomitis, Executive Director of MLRI, echoed that sentiment, saying, “We are proud to partner with the MOVA, MLAC, our fellow legal services programs, and advocates for domestic violence survivors and other victims of crime to launch this initiative. Through this grant, we will collaboratively create a coordinated system that will assist victims of crime across the state.” Katsoulomitis also highlighted the unique training that will be the foundation for services provided through the grant. “We will provide robust training to legal advocates on trauma-informed service delivery that is designed to address trauma while providing high quality civil legal assistance. This holistic approach recognizes that victims are not statistics or case numbers—they are people who have been often severely impacted in many aspects of their lives by the crimes perpetrated against them.”

In 2014, the Boston Bar Association’ released a report “Investing in Justice: A Roadmap to Cost-Effective Funding of Civil Legal Aid in Massachusetts” which highlighted the importance of investing in civil legal aid services in the state. One of the report’s key findings demonstrated the economic benefits of legal aid: for every \$1 invested by the state in in civil legal services, \$2 to \$5 is returned to the state and its residents.

“The BBA’s study demonstrated that providing civil legal aid to the vulnerable is not only the right thing to do but also provides the Commonwealth with a return on investment,” said BBA President Mark D. Smith, of Laredo & Smith. “This generous grant from MOVA will help expand access to justice for victims at a critical moment in their lives.”

“As a longtime supporter of MLAC and its efforts to increase access to legal aid, the Massachusetts Bar Association is thrilled that this valuable infusion of funding will directly help some of the most vulnerable members of our commonwealth,” said MBA Chief Legal Counsel Martin W. Healy. “This grant makes it possible for more crime victims to access important legal services and resources beyond the criminal justice system, without which they risk being further victimized.”

“Impacts of crime affect every aspect of a victim’s life which can require civil legal remedies to achieve long-term safety and stability,” said Liam Lowney, MOVA’s Executive Director. “This funding bolsters MLAC’s existing network of regional legal aid organizations to provide services to victims in or around their hometown. In addition to civil legal services, victims can also receive referrals to other area providers who can assist with other rehabilitation and recovery needs. We are thrilled to partner with MLAC and MLRI to provide these critical services to better serve crime victims throughout Massachusetts.”

Information on civil legal assistance funded by this grant and provided by MLAC, MLRI, and other programs around the state can be accessed at www.massclavc.org.

Funding for this program comes from the Victim of Crime Act (VOCA) Crime Victims Fund administered by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime. MOVA grants VOCA funding to government and community-based victim services throughout Massachusetts. To learn more please visit www.mass.gov/MOVA or call (617) 586-1340.

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