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Civil legal aid delivers 8.4x economic return to Wisconsin

New research measures payoff of assisting people who can't afford attorneys

MADISON — Research released today shows that for every dollar invested in civil legal aid in Wisconsin, the economy receives a return of \$8.40. The finding comes from a study commissioned by the Wisconsin Trust Account Foundation, Inc. (WisTAF) and conducted by The Resource for Great Programs, Inc. (The Resource).

“Civil legal aid” refers to providing legal assistance to people who can’t afford to hire an attorney but are facing life-altering issues related to civil law. Unlike in criminal legal matters, there is generally no guarantee of an attorney for someone facing a civil issue such as need for a restraining order; protection of rights related to health and safety, shelter, or financial independence; or determining child custody or guardianship.

“Everyone should be able to access solutions to legal problems, regardless of their income. This study paints the most complete picture we’ve ever had, of how much Wisconsin benefits when people of limited means have meaningful access to the legal system. Civil legal aid is often a missing piece people need to keep their families safe or stand on their own two feet,” Rebecca L. Murray, executive director of WisTAF, said.

Beginning in early 2022, The Resource gathered 2021 data from 12 participating civil legal aid providers. Together, the providers received 96 percent of civil legal aid funding in Wisconsin. Researchers combined case data with numbers from trusted government and other publicly available sources. They then calculated economic impact using proprietary financial models derived from their previous studies. The researchers’ findings are detailed in *Economic Impact of Civil Legal Aid in Wisconsin*, published today by WisTAF.

The return of \$8.40 on the dollar represented \$176 million in total measurable impacts of participating organizations’ work, divided by the organizations’ total funding of \$21 million from all sources during the same time period. Impacts fell into four categories:

- Clients avoided catastrophic circumstances that would have cost \$18 million in emergency services paid for by governments, charities, lending institutions and others. These services related to housing stability, medical treatment, and personal and family safety.

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- Clients recovered \$73 million in rightful assets or income, such as child support, health care coverage, and veterans' benefits.
- Providers recovered \$14 million in Medicare and Medicaid payments for health care providers including hospitals, pharmacies, and doctors.
- The state's economy received a boost of \$71 million from the economic multiplier impact of assets brought into Wisconsin and spent throughout the state, leading to revenue for businesses, which translates to jobs for Wisconsin workers.

The Resource also found civil legal aid is a catalyst for increasing the effectiveness of other charitable and government efforts. Researchers additionally noted that the measured economic impacts of civil legal aid are “the tip of the iceberg.” The study did not measure hard-to-quantify benefits like preventing lifelong impacts of childhood trauma.

For more information about the research, including the final report, visit WisTAF's website at wistaf.org/wisconsin/Study-The-Economic-Impact-of-Civil-Legal-Aid-in-Wisconsin 90386.

The Resource is an analytics firm with 30 years of experience producing economic impact studies for civil justice organizations. **WisTAF** is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization and the state's civil legal aid funding administrator established by the Wisconsin Supreme Court. The foundation works with civil legal aid organizations in Wisconsin to increase access to justice. WisTAF oversees funds and invests in services and projects to help people resolve legal problems.

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