

**OPINION**

# Marin Voice: Civil legal services focused on sheltering an at-risk community

By **STEPHANIE HAFFNER** |

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Civil legal services are an unseen but essential part of the safety net fabric in this time of COVID-19.

For 62 years, Legal Aid of Marin has served vulnerable members of the Marin community — seniors, immigrants, people without homes, people with disabilities and the 19,183 people living in Marin County who are poor. In the last six weeks, I was more convinced than ever that civil legal services are imperative for our community's health and safety.

When “shelter in place” was first imposed, our office joined the ranks of those moving to remote services. We put out word that we could be reached by telephone and by a web request for appointment. We immediately received a steady stream of calls, primarily from Spanish-speaking immigrants, who seemed stunned at the sudden loss of income, and frankly terrified about what this would mean for their families.

We were able to explain: the courts are closed; for now, you are protected; take care of your basic needs first. This message, while reassuring, was met with hesitation and needed to be reinforced many times.

Members of our small staff — five lawyers and three legal assistants — reached out to partners around the county to ask about needs. Within a day or two, attorney Asya Sorokurs learned that the Marin County Sheriff's Office was still carrying out eviction notices, notwithstanding the public health order, to shelter in place.



She took action, working in concert with partners at Canal Alliance. The evictions stopped. As members of Marin Organizing Committee, we joined forces with, and helped lead, efforts to put in place protections for Marin tenants.

Two ordinances have since passed establishing tenants' rights to continue to shelter in place, now with a 90-day window to repay. Sorokurs and bilingual legal assistant Gabriel Spellberg recognized, though, that tenants would not know unless we took action.

They began an urgent public education campaign — Facebook live presentations, a Zoom video call, radio shows and, by request of a partner at San Francisco-Marine Food Bank, flyer drops at food distribution sites.

Through the generosity of Novato's Unicorn Group, which has donated all printing of Legal Aid of Marin's tenant information flyers, 3,700 flyers (and counting) have been distributed at pop-up food pantries and distribution sites.

As just one example, a partner recently contacted us to let us know that an entire building in the Canal community had received three-day notices to pay rent or move. Tenants were frightened and unsure what to do.

Notwithstanding all our efforts, tenants still had not heard how to invoke county and state legal protections (by giving notice of decline in income, and documentation, to the landlord).

Now, we are jointly running Facebook ads with Canal Alliance, using animation Legal Aid of Marin created, to give a simple explanation of renter rights. We continue to hand-deliver tenant information sheets to North Marin Community Services, Canal Alliance, SF-Marine Food Bank, West Marin Community Services and San Geronimo Community Center. When we tweeted about it, Multicultural Center of Marin tweeted back a request to deliver flyers, which we accepted.

Our board has recruited 50 volunteers to join in protecting Marin residents. Pro bono legal volunteers are researching and lining up for the impending flood we anticipate as "shelter in place" lifts, and renter protections ease, but incomes do not recover to the same extent.

When tenants know where they stand legally, they can choose, right now, to feed their family rather than send scarce funds to a landlord. As restrictions lift, we are continuing to craft policy solutions (rent increases should be prohibited, as should evictions based on lost income during this time).



Our board continues to recruit an army of volunteers to help. Our organization is not a pronounced provider of basic needs, and we have not seen the much-deserved bump in individual giving that direct providers of food have seen. But our partners who feed members of the Marin community so impacted by COVID-19 have taught us: in times of COVID, civil legal services are a necessity.

*Stephanie Haffner is executive director for Legal Aid of Marin*

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