

Civil Legal Needs and Access to Justice in Connecticut

Key Findings and Recommendations from the
2025 Civil Legal Needs Assessment and Economic Impact Analysis
commissioned by Connecticut Bar Foundation



Prevalence of Civil Legal Needs

72% of Connecticut's low-income residents – over 400,000 residents in total – have experienced a civil legal need.



Note: "Low-income" residents include those with household incomes below 200% of the federal poverty line.

Low-income residents experience many kinds of civil legal problems impacting their health, safety, and economic security:

- **41%** of Connecticut's low-income families have experienced **two or more different kinds of civil legal needs**.
- **37%** have experienced **housing**-related problems, such as evictions and unfair rent increases.
- **27%** have experienced problems related to **family matters**, such as domestic violence and custody.
- **26%** have experienced employment-related problems, such as employment discrimination and wage disputes.
- **25%** have experienced problems related to **public benefits and health care**, such as access to public health insurance or disability benefits.
- **22%** have experienced problems related to **consumer and fraud protection**, such as debt collection and bankruptcy.
- **36%** of those with a disability have experienced problems related to **disability rights**, such as discrimination and access to services.

Impacts of Civil Legal Problems

Connecticut's low-income residents report far-reaching impacts of civil legal problems:



Increased stress or anxiety

78%



Impacts on physical or mental health

54%



Increased expenses

50%



Loss of income or benefits

35%



Loss of access to a basic need or service

27%



Most low-income residents cannot afford to hire a private attorney. Without legal aid, they are left on their own to navigate the complexities of the legal system.

“

The legal system in general is a maze that no simple person can get through.”

-Survey Respondent

Strengths in Legal Service Delivery

More than **20,700** low-income residents received legal aid services in 2024.



- **1,543** children



- **2,582** adults aged 60 years and older



- **5,868** individuals with a disability



- More than **500** veterans

Clients receiving legal aid services were

2.5X

more likely to
be satisfied

with the resolution of
their issue than those
who did not get help.

Connecticut's legal information and support services help self-represented residents navigate the civil justice system:

- In 2024, court support staff assisted nearly **187,000** self-represented parties at Court Service Centers and Public Information Desks.
- CTLawHelp.org provides plain-language resources to empower individuals to navigate civil legal issues on their own. The site was viewed nearly **678,000** times in 2024.



Civil Legal Aid Resource Gaps

Connecticut's civil legal aid system facilitates access to justice for many low-income residents, but the demand far exceeds the system's capacity.

Nearly 2 in 5



low-income

residents who sought legal aid **could not obtain help.**



Connecticut's legal aid hotlines are a vital but strained entry point to legal aid.



139,117

Total **incoming calls** received by legal aid hotlines in 2024



~31,000

Calls disconnected due to high call volume



25,000+

Calls received while hotlines were closed

Barriers to Accessing Civil Legal Aid

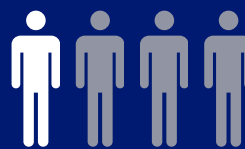
A large, light blue silhouette of Lady Justice, the personification of justice, is positioned on the left side of the infographic. She is blindfolded, holding a set of scales in her left hand, and a sword in her right hand.

Income eligibility requirements and lack of awareness of legal aid programs are substantial barriers to low-income residents accessing legal aid services.

Among low-income residents who experienced a civil legal issue but **did not seek legal aid**:



More than 1 in 3 said they **were not familiar with legal aid**.



Roughly 1 in 4 said they **did not think they qualified for legal aid**.

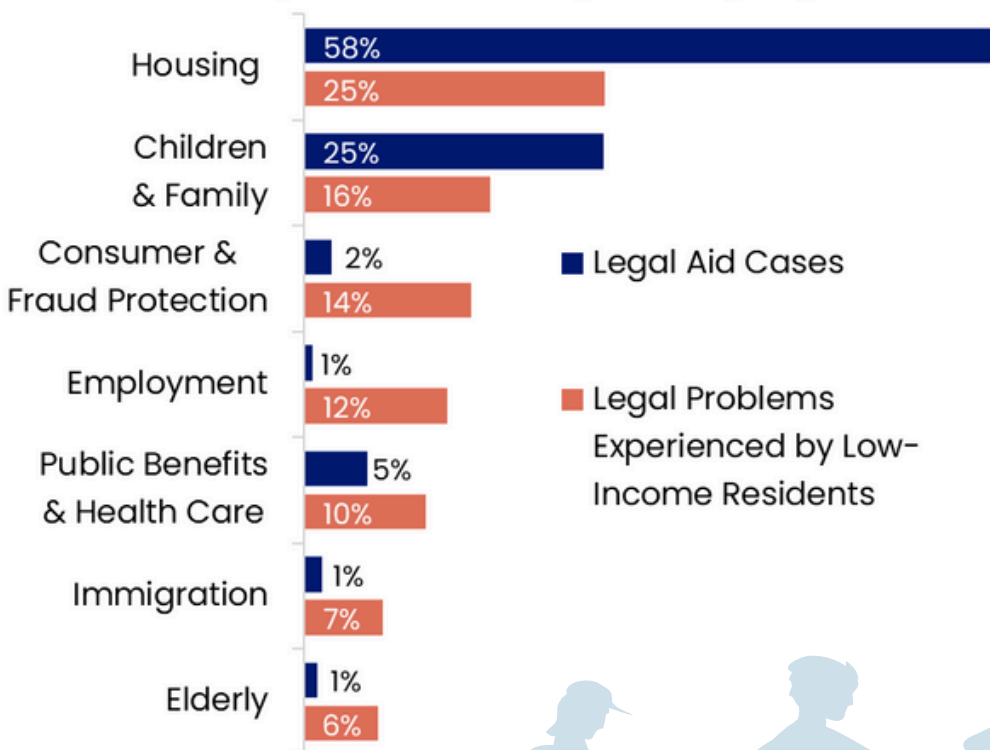
2,000+ individuals who called the legal aid hotline in 2024 were denied services due to being over-income.

Legal Problems Underserved by Legal Aid

Legal needs related to **consumer and fraud protection, employment, public benefits and healthcare, immigration, and elder law** are underserved by Connecticut's legal aid system.

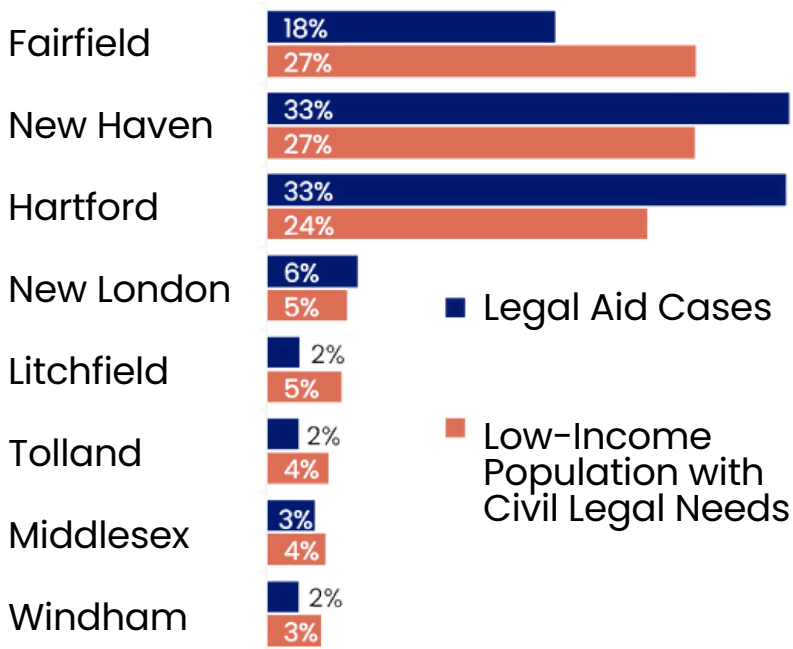
- These problem areas make up roughly half of low-income residents' most recent civil legal needs but only 10% of legal aid cases in 2024.
- **More than 4 in 5** legal aid cases relate to housing or family issues. While these urgent needs must be addressed, underserving other legal issues leaves gaps that jeopardize residents' financial stability, health, and wellbeing.

Unequal Access to Legal Aid by Legal Problem



Populations Underserved by Legal Aid

Unequal Access to Legal Aid by County



The data reveal unequal access to legal aid among Connecticut's low-income residents depending on **where they live**.

- Two out of three legal aid clients live in New Haven or Hartford Counties, but residents of these counties make up only about half of Connecticut's low-income population with civil legal needs.
- The largest discrepancy between legal needs and legal aid services is in **Fairfield County**, which constitutes roughly 27% of low-income residents with civil legal needs but only 18% of legal aid cases.

Older adults are less likely to access legal aid for their civil legal needs.



Adults 60 years and older make up 32% of Connecticut's low-income residents with civil legal needs but only 19% of legal aid cases.



Return on Investment in Legal Aid

Civil legal aid has a high economic return on investment.

- In 2024, \$10 million in direct benefits to clients generated \$12.4 million in economic activity.



- Recurring benefits from successful client outcomes for veterans and greater educational attainment for children yielded \$11.7 million in increased household income over 5 years.
- Over the 5-year period from 2020 to 2024, \$66.8 million in public funding yielded \$190.9 million in total economic activity.

Return on Investment

\$2.90

In economic activity generated for every \$1 of public funding invested



These findings are from the Economic Impact Analysis conducted by Downstream Strategies.

Key Recommendations for Strengthening Access to Justice

Strengthen hotline capacity and coordination

to serve a greater proportion of callers.

Increase resources for service delivery

to address unmet legal needs.

Expand service models to include community

justice workers and social workers to close the justice gap and meet clients' needs.

Modernize technology and information management

to track unmet need and improve service continuity.

Leverage new technologies on CTLawHelp.org to facilitate

access to resources, potentially including AI-enabled search, automated document drafting, and chatbot navigation.

Address geographic gaps through regional innovation,

including mobile and virtual legal aid, community lawyering, and partnerships with local organizations to ensure equitable access statewide.

Build capacity to serve a wider range of civil legal

problems beyond housing and family issues.

Strengthen pro bono engagement,

including centralizing the pro bono service model and standardizing training and mentorship, to expand the system's capacity.



About the Report

This report, commissioned by the Connecticut Bar Foundation (CBF), summarizes findings and recommendations from a Civil Legal Needs Assessment conducted by CTData Collaborative and an Economic Impact Analysis conducted by Downstream Strategies. CBF commissioned these reports not only to understand the current civil legal needs of Connecticut residents with low income and the return on investment for civil legal aid, but also to examine how people access justice, identify strengths and unmet needs in the current system, and develop actionable recommendations for improvement.

The Civil Legal Needs Assessment utilized data from a Survey of Low-Income Residents' Civil Legal Needs conducted by the University of New Hampshire Survey Center, interviews with legal aid providers conducted by CTData Collaborative, administrative data from Connecticut's legal aid organizations and the State Judicial Branch, hotline call data from Statewide Legal Services of Connecticut, and website analytics from CTLawHelp and the Judicial Branch. Survey data were weighted to match the county of residence and demographic characteristics of Connecticut's low-income adult population based on Census Bureau data. All analyses were conducted by CTData Collaborative.

The Economic Impact Analysis used data on client outcomes for a selected set of services provided by four legal aid organizations, legal aid funding data from the Connecticut Bar Foundation, and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics wage estimates. The estimated return on investment includes increased household income, local economic impacts from successful legal aid outcomes, and economic activity resulting from the provision of legal aid services. All analyses were conducted by Downstream Strategies.

The full reports are available at ctbarfdn.org/ctlegalneeds.

