



Maryland Attorney General's **COVID-19 Access to Justice Task Force**

The Maryland Attorney General's COVID-19 Access to Justice Task Force is a partnership between the Maryland Office of the Attorney General and the Maryland Access to Justice Commission. Through the work of this Task Force, we will strive in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic to keep Marylanders housed, safe and secure.

The Task Force has been convened because the COVID-19 pandemic presents challenges to access to justice on a scale and magnitude we have not encountered before. The economic hardship caused by the business closures and illness has created conflicts that only the civil justice system can resolve, like missed rent payments leading to eviction notices; disputes over medical or consumer debt; or people being wrongfully denied public benefits necessary to keep their families afloat.

Even before the pandemic, 71% of low-income American households faced at least one civil legal issue - like eviction, domestic violence or unemployment claim denial - every year. At the same time, only 14% of those people received adequate legal help. What that meant is that millions of Americans lost their fight to keep their homes, keep themselves safe, provide economic security for their family - not because they had done something wrong - but because they did not have the legal help they needed. These injustices disproportionately impacted Black, Hispanic and Native American families as those households make up an outsized number of low-income households.

Now, even more people will face civil legal problems and need civil legal help - at a time when emergency legal protections will be expiring; funding for legal services will be dwindling; court processes will be more complicated and challenging to navigate on one's own; and most critically, when the consequences of not receiving civil legal help will be inhumane and dire.

Here, again, communities of people of color - who are still enduring the trauma and lethal consequences of racism and racial inequities in the healthcare and criminal justice systems - are expected to bear the brunt.

The civil justice system will be the next testing ground. As just a few examples, an avalanche of evictions is predicted; unemployment filings have skyrocketed, yet many Marylanders still face barriers receiving their unemployment checks; and even as health officials recommend foregoing public transportation to avoid a resurgence in COVID-19 cases, consumers are poised to have their vehicles repossessed.

In forming this Task Force, we have intentionally brought together high-level and diverse leaders with expertise in a myriad of sectors, including health, disaster recovery, business, government and many others so that we can confront this challenge together - with innovation and resolve.

Our charge is to ensure that when Marylanders encounter the civil justice system, justice is accessible, fair and equitable. Striving for this in the civil justice system will protect public health, spur economic recovery and growth, and reduce inequities and further harms to the most vulnerable among us.