Alicia is a Seattle area mother of four. It’s an already challenging role, notwithstanding the fact that the youngest of her children suffers from muscular dystrophy. Last year, she faced a crisis. Alicia was sick – very sick – and her family quickly found themselves struggling. Eventually, she had to be hospitalized.

Already under incredible stress, things quickly became much worse. While fighting for her health in the hospital, Alicia was unable to work and quickly fell behind on her mortgage payments. One day, the family’s home where Alicia raised her children, was sold at a foreclosure sale while she was in the hospital. She needed help.

The legal path forward was something that remains somewhat of a mystery to many Americans – the civil justice system. Civil cases include employment disputes over wages and improper firings, issues with medical bills, obtaining a protective order against a violent or abusive partner, as well as housing disputes such as Alicia’s. Unlike criminal cases, individuals in the civil legal system do not have a
constitutional right to an attorney if they cannot afford one. As a result, the vast majority of low-income people are forced to face their civil legal problems alone – with more than three-quarters (76%) of individuals who face these problems not receiving desperately needed legal assistance.

There was hope for Alicia however.

The Northwest Justice Project (NJP), which provides critical civil legal assistance and representation to thousands of low-income people in cases affecting basic human needs, was able to step in on her behalf. Funded by the non-profit Legal Services Corporation, NJP works to create fair and equal access to justice for low-income individuals and families.

![Image](https://southseattleemerald.com/2016/07/17/the-justice-gap-the-case-for-civil-legal-aid/

From left to right: Northwest Justice Executive Director Cesar Torres, Congressman Adam Smith, and Harry Korrell of Davis Wright Tremaine LLP. Photo courtesy of Adam Smith

An NJP attorney was able to rescind the improper sale of Alicia’s home, eventually securing a mortgage modification to reduce her monthly costs. Now needing to work fewer hours during the week, Alicia was able to devote more attention to her kids – and make a full recovery herself.

While the outcome for Alicia was positive, her situation is unfortunately unique. She is one of the lucky few that are able to get the help they need. The most recent U.S. Census Bureau data shows that 63 million Americans met the income requirements for civil legal aid, with seven in ten low-income households in my home state of Washington facing at least one significant civil legal problem annually.

In 1974, Congress chartered the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) to promote equal access to justice in the civil judicial system by providing low-income Americans with high quality legal aid. While federal grants through LSC subsidiaries, such as the Northwest Justice Project, exist to help Americans in need, the income threshold of 125% of the federal poverty line ($14,850 per year for an individual and under $30,375 for a family of four) means that many earn too much to qualify for help, yet too little to afford a lawyer. Even for those who currently qualify, grant funds remain tragically low.
Whether it’s facing medical debt that is now in collection, loan default due to predatory lending practices, or having to secure a protective order against perpetrators of domestic violence, the Northwest Justice Project provided legal help to 1,426 people last year in the 9th District alone. Since 2003, the average number of these problems per household has nearly tripled – from 3.3 to 9.3 annually.

Victims of domestic violence and sexual assault experience by far the highest number of these problems per capita, with fully 100% of the victims reporting additional problems with healthcare, housing, employment, or family law. The widespread lack of knowledge of the legal system means that the most vulnerable of Washingtonians have difficulty identifying the legal dimensions of their problems and do not think to turn to an attorney for help.

The impact of not having legal representation during these proceedings has real-world consequences. Of individuals facing eviction without having a lawyer present, two thirds lost their homes. In contrast, when clients had adequate legal counsel, two thirds were able to keep their housing. Without groups like Northwest Justice and other LSC funded organizations, thousands more Americans would be left on their own to fight this uphill battle.

While the need for aid continues to grow, federal funding for it remains a target for many in Congress. The fact is that our justice system is built upon the principles of being open and balanced – settling disputes in a fair and impartial manner. Failing to ensure that those in our communities are afforded access to the help they deserve is unacceptable. It is my sincere hope that stories like Alicia’s can shed light upon this desperate need. Now it’s time for Congress to listen.

*Congressman Adam Smith represents the 9th District of Washington in the U.S. House of Representatives.*

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