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# COVID-19 exacerbates inequality — and it musn't | Opinion

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The COVID-19 crisis and the ongoing civil unrest nationwide have exposed years of systemic, racially insensitive policies that have unduly harmed communities of color. COVID-19 has exacerbated long-standing inequalities faced by low-income individuals and families who were already struggling to get by.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Legal Services of the Hudson Valley (LSHV) has been a legal emergency room for those affected by the crisis and have nowhere else to turn. This pandemic has been a devastating catastrophe for the many Americans who were already living on the edge of poverty and instability. Families who were just getting by are now facing unemployment, potential loss of housing, food insecurity, increased risk of domestic violence, and — for some — the urgent need for a will or a healthcare proxy to make medical decisions. Free civil legal services are essential to these people.

Since 1967, LSHV has been fighting for the right of all individuals to free representation in civil matters. Specifically, and most importantly, those that cover basic human needs such as housing, child custody and domestic violence. Women, children, families of color, the elderly and people who have disabilities are disproportionately affected by an inability to afford legal representation.

Even with a combination of federal, state, local and privately raised money, LSHV is unable to meet the needs of everyone who comes to us for help. Before the pandemic, over 500,000 individuals were eligible for our services in the seven counties we cover. Unfortunately, we see that number growing as more and more households become eligible for our services due to job loss, illness, or loss of benefits.

Recovery from the pandemic in New York State cannot happen without civil legal services. It is abundantly clear that thousands more Hudson Valley residents are eligible for our essential services, yet we face the real threat of budget cuts. Civil legal problems will spike, especially for

those already struggling to make ends meet. The economic hardship caused by business closures and illness will create conflicts only the civil justice system can resolve.

Addressing the legal issues of an individual not only keeps them from falling further into poverty and despair, but it also saves communities the high cost of providing shelter, increased social services and acute care that often becomes necessary when legal intervention cannot be secured. Beyond meeting the critical “safety net” needs for those in need, nationally recognized experts, commissioned by the Permanent Commission on Access to Justice in New York, have determined that investing in civil legal services provides substantial economic benefits to our State -- specifically, more than ten dollars for every one dollar of funding. That is a substantial return on investment.

But just as important as the “Why,” is the “Who.” The people we help at Legal Services of the Hudson Valley are our neighbors, our daughters, or our sisters. In fact, 70% of them are women, and 40% of those impacted are children. So many of the people we help are just like us with the exception that they endure one major illness, one job loss, or one tragedy, and the result is a desperate situation and someone in need of a helping hand. Oftentimes they need access to fair treatment by the courts. They need an attorney to fight for their rights. They need justice! That’s where Legal Services of the Hudson Valley makes a difference.

Investing in and supporting organizations like Legal Services of the Hudson Valley is one of the most efficient and effective ways to create systemic change that benefits not only individuals in need, but communities as a whole.

Legal Services of the Hudson Valley is built on the principle of justice for all, not simply those who can afford it. Justice is not a product or a service but a promise that we make to each and every member of our society.

*Barbara Finkelstein is the CEO of Legal Services of the Hudson Valley, a nonprofit organization that is the only provider of free civil legal services in the seven counties north of New York City.*