



FINDING OPPORTUNITY AND COMMUNITY IN CRISIS

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Over the past year, one of the most pressing issues facing the civil legal aid community has been the threat to Legal Services Corporation (LSC) and other federal



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funding. When the administration announced plans to eliminate LSC, legal aid organizations understood the severity of the threat and knew we had to act. California's eleven LSC-funded programs recognized that working collaboratively we would be better able to respond to this threat than as individual programs. We came together to create a model through which we could collectively communicate the critical role that legal aid plays across the state, and the devastating impacts the proposed cut would have for the most vulnerable Californians.

Early Steps Toward Stronger Advocacy

Since the pandemic, Community Legal Aid SoCal (CLA SoCal) has engaged in consistent congressional outreach through semiannual emails to elected officials within its service area. While the specific messaging varied based on current events and programmatic priorities, each communication included a district-level dashboard generated through PowerBI. These dashboards provided elected officials and their staff with a clear snapshot of who CLA SoCal was serving in their district, the types of legal issues constituents were facing, and the scope of services being delivered.

These communications occasionally led to meetings with elected officials or district staff, creating

opportunities to discuss constituent needs and local service delivery. CLA SoCal also initiated outreach to request meetings when specific issues arose outside of our formal outreach calendar or strategy. Most of this work was done independently of other legal aid organizations, even in districts shared with sister programs.

Similarly, Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County (NLSLA) has long recognized the importance of cultivating strong working relationships with local, state, and national decision-makers and elected officials. The value of these relationships became unmistakably clear in 1994, when a devastating earthquake struck Los Angeles.

Within 24 hours, federal officials and decision-makers arrived in Los Angeles and turned to NLSLA leadership with a critical question: what was needed to begin serving the thousands of displaced Angelenos who were forced to take shelter in public parks after their homes were destroyed. Because of these established relationships, NLSLA immediately received funding for technology, mobile vans, and essential equipment to mobilize legal services directly in the field—even as our offices too suffered extensive damage.

The speed at which resources were accessed and delivered—within days—was extraordinary. That experience became a defining moment for NLSLA. From then on, we made a deliberate commitment to cultivate and nurture relationships with key decision-makers and elected officials who could help ensure ongoing support and provide the funding needed for us to deliver on our mission.

Today, NLSLA regularly meets with and educates representatives at the local, state, and federal levels about the work we do on behalf of their constituents and the legal issues facing the communities they serve. Frequently, elected officials seek our guidance and request our assistance in addressing systemic challenges impacting Angelenos.

As a result, NLSLA has earned a strong reputation

for effective policy advocacy—always conducted in full compliance with Legal Services Corporation (LSC) rules and regulations.

Collaborative Efforts and Stepping Up Together

Historically, California legal aid organizations came together to collaborate and jointly engage in legislative education through the Legal Aid Association of California's (LAAC's) "Day in Sacramento" and "Day in the District" events. These were opportunities for legal aid program staff to connect with state senators, assembly members, and their team. For many legal aid programs, these events were the few times each year that programs came together in a single place to collaborate on legislative outreach and education.

The semiannual emails, occasional meetings with elected officials, and annual LAAC events were reliable touchpoints, but the severity of the funding threats of the past year made clear these isolated efforts would not be enough.

In response, California's eleven LSC funded programs — Bay Area Legal Aid, California Indian Legal Services, California Rural Legal Assistance, Central California Legal Services, Community Legal Aid SoCal, Greater Bakersfield Legal Assistance, Inland Counties Legal Services, Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, Legal Aid Society of San Diego, Legal Services of Northern California, and Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County - worked under the auspices of the California Project Directors Association (PDA) to develop a coordinated outreach and education strategy. By uniting all of the LSC-funded programs across the state, PDA would offer congressional leaders a comprehensive picture of the critical role that legal aid plays across the state.

In June 2025, PDA took its first major collective step by hosting a congressional forum in Washington, D.C. at the Rayburn House Office Building. The forum was the product of months of planning and collaboration. PDA members worked together to develop an agenda that would reflect both the breadth of the impact of civil legal aid not only in California but across the country, tying it to the issues of concern on Capitol Hill. The PDS effort determined to focus on disaster relief and healthcare access — two areas where legal aid plays a critical role and where congressional interest was already heightened. The agenda also included a clear overview of civil legal aid services and return on investment, LSC funding, and statutory restrictions.

Planning for the event also included building

relationships beyond the forum itself. PDA members scheduled individual meetings with congressional offices; multiple leaders often attended a single meeting giving offices a fuller picture of legal aid's impact and modeling the collaborative advocacy that had been missing in prior state level efforts. PDA also invited LSC leadership and program officers to the forum and held a separate meeting at LSC headquarters to discuss the threats to LSC funding and ongoing legislative outreach efforts.

To reinforce the messages from both the forum and meetings, PDA members prepared takeaway folders with organizational dashboards, statewide LSC data, and LSC fact sheets. The folders themselves were branded with all eleven logos to reflect the statewide scope of the coalition. Organizations also shared client quotes, testimonials, and photos which were displayed on foam boards throughout the room.

On the day of the forum, PDA focused on participation. Invitations were sent via email in advance and reinforced in-person through same-day outreach. Box lunches were served to accommodate staffers and interns navigating packed schedules. The costs for the materials and food were shared across the participating programs. The result was a well-attended forum that highlighted the impact of civil legal aid at a moment of funding uncertainty.

Next Steps

The impact of the forum extended well beyond a single event. By planning and presenting together, PDA members strengthened relationships across programs and increased their collaborative work. The forum created space for shared learning and coordination.

That collaboration is now shaping future advocacy efforts. PDA members have committed to hosting a congressional forum every other year to coincide with the arrival of new members of Congress, ensuring that civil legal aid remains visible and well understood as legislative priorities shift. The group is also exploring opportunities to host a similar forum in Sacramento,

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bringing the same model of collective engagement to the California legislature.

The forum has also prompted deeper collaboration at the district level. PDA organizations are increasingly partnering on in-district meetings, recognizing that many congressional districts span multiple legal aid service areas and that a shared approach can offer elected officials a clearer picture of constituent needs.

Beyond direct advocacy, PDA members continue to collaborate on joint initiatives, including coordinated comments on LSC performance standards. Together, these efforts reflect a growing commitment to using moments of crisis not only to respond, but to build strong relationships and structures that strengthen the statewide legal aid ecosystem over time.

Planning Your Own Congressional Forum

For organizations thinking about hosting their own congressional forum, PDA's experience highlights a few practical takeaways. The following tips reflect what worked well and what we learned along the way.

- **Plan for representatives' schedules:** Congressional representatives aren't always in Washington, D.C., so it is important to choose a week when they will actually be in town. The House calendar,³ and Senate calendar,⁴ highlight those weeks. Scheduling your forum and/or meetings during these periods increases the likelihood that members can attend.
- **Book the room early:** Public access to meeting rooms in the Capitol complex is limited. To host a forum, you need to have a House or Senate office reserve the room for you. It helps to have a local contact who can sponsor the request and guide you through scheduling and security requirements.
- **Coordinate logistics with the office:** Many congressional offices have coordinators who can help with room setup, tech, and catering. PDA rented easels for posters and received tech support for

microphones, projectors, and other equipment from the Rayburn House Office Building.

- **Reserve a hotel block for attendees:** A group rate helps simplify logistics and ensures everyone has a convenient place to stay.
- **Plan forum agenda:** Highlight areas of law that are particularly relevant while being mindful of the current political climate. Highlight client stories, ideally including past clients as part of the panel discussion.
- **Assign roles ahead of time:** Identify who will handle introductions, moderate panels, take photos, and track follow-ups, and make sure each role is clear in advance.
- **Prepare takeaway materials:** Printed materials were ordered in advance from a local Staples, with folders assembled onsite the day before the event
- **Incentivize attendance:** Consider providing box lunches and light refreshments.
- **Track attendance:** Create a sign-in sheet. We found it easier and quicker to ask for attendee's district number rather than the representative's name.
- **Plan follow-up:** After the forum, send thank-you notes, share materials, and keep the conversation going.
- **Ongoing visits in the districts:** Be sure to regularly connect with your representatives in their district offices. Building strong, consistent working relationships with elected officials can lead to meaningful outcomes — including stable and increased funding, as well as stronger collaboration in addressing the pressing issues facing their constituents.

1 Kate Marr has devoted her 25-year career to working in legal aid, first as staff attorney assisting survivors of domestic violence and other violent crimes, then as managing attorney, and since 2017 as Executive Director of Community Legal Aid SoCal (CLA SoCal). Kate led CLA SoCal through a major rebrand and a restructuring process to create specialized substantive legal units. From this process, a pro bono program and case management program were established to provide more extensive, holistic services to clients. Currently, she is developing a legal services coordinated entry system (Just OC) in collaboration with other legal aid organizations — Asian Americans Advancing Justice Southern California, Elder Law & Disability Rights Center, Public Law Center, and Veterans Legal Institute — to develop a single point of entry for legal services in Orange County.

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