

AUSTIN COMMUNITY LAW CENTER

STRATEGIC PLAN

2019-2020



Law



Community



Justice

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Austin Community Law Center
Strategic Plan 2019-2020

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Mission

Austin Community Law Center is a nonprofit law firm. Our mission is to make legal representation radically more affordable, invest in a stronger community, and fight for justice.

Vision

Our vision is a world where a person’s ability to meet their needs is not dictated by their wealth, where they come from, what they look like, or who they love.

Message from the Executive Director

ACLCLC officially launched a little over a year ago. We have demonstrated our organizational model works: in the first half of 2018 alone, we saved clients \$51,725.22 and still thrived as an organization.

Our next steps are to grow and add important services for our clients.

With our **2019-2020 Strategic Plan**, we are planning to achieve important goals:

- **Growing** so we can serve more people who have nowhere else to go.
- Implementing **holistic services** to address clients' nonlegal needs related to their cases.
- Improving our **financial stability** with diversified revenue sources and a reserve fund.

The key to accomplishing our goals will be our new membership program – the **Friends of ACLCLC** and the **“300 Friends Campaign”** – which will establish a base of sustaining donors.

Growing the Friends of ACLCLC in 2019-20 will give us a flexible and reliable source of revenue to help us hire new staff and launch new programs more quickly than would be otherwise possible.

Sincerely,

Brian McGiverin

Brian McGiverin
Executive Director and Attorney



Brian McGiverin

Board of Directors

Aaron Johnson
Board President

Tracey Whitley
Board Vice President

Nikhita Ved
Board Secretary

I. Our Work

1. Access to Justice

People often have no choice but to engage with the legal system. Divorce, eviction, foreclosure, and juvenile or criminal charges can force you into court whether you like it or not. Further, a person's only recourse for domestic violence, consumer fraud, or a violation of their civil rights is often only available in court.

Many people cannot afford to hire attorneys and this denies them access to justice. As the Supreme Court of Texas' Chief Justice Nathan Hecht noted in his 2017 State of the Judiciary speech: "Justice only for those who can afford it is neither justice for all nor justice at all. The rule of law... has no integrity if its promises and protections extend only to the well-to-do."

ACLCLC bridges the gap in access to justice. Although free legal services are available to those who need help, eligibility is often limited to families below 125% of the federal poverty guideline, which is about \$15,000 annually for an individual or about \$26,000 for a family of three. That leaves a serious gap between families eligible for free service and families who can afford market-rate legal services, which in the Austin area typically range from \$200-\$400 an hour.

"The rule of law... has no integrity if its promises and protections extend only to the well-to-do."

Chief Justice Hecht

We are making legal services radically more affordable by charging sliding scale fees based on housing size and income. Our goal is to spare families the indignity of choosing between important legal services and their other critical needs.

2. Reforming unjust systems

Providing direct services teaches a person a lot about the common problems their clients encounter, including the unjust systems that commonly impact our community. With that knowledge, coupled with expertise in litigation and the government policymaking process, we are positioned to help reform those systems.

As practicing attorneys, we see firsthand the injustices our clients face in the courthouse, such as issues connected to bail, appointed counsel, default judgments, and policies and

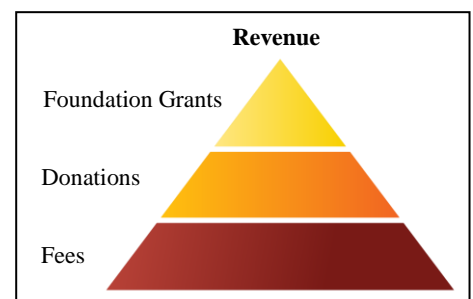
practices that are unnecessarily burdensome to low-income parties. We are uniquely positioned to push for change.

Further, as attorneys, we have powerful tools at our disposal to assist partner organizations, individuals, and mass movements fighting for change. Topics ripe for action in the Austin area include police abuse; housing discrimination, particularly against people with disabilities or conviction histories; physical barriers at public accommodations that violate the Americans with Disabilities Act; and discipline in the school system that disproportionately impacts children of color or with disabilities.

ACLCLC's funding structure (explained more in the "Independence, resiliency, and accountability" section below) sets our reform work apart from other organizations. First, we are not limited to representing clients below 125% of the federal poverty guideline, nor are we burdened with other foundation-based restrictions, such as the prohibition of filing class actions. Second, our focus is the Austin area, which permits greater synergy between litigation, policy advocacy, and local coalition efforts, which makes us more effective. Third, we are free from potential conflicts of interest that can arise when an organizations' survival hinges on the support of wealthy donors or pass-through funding from governmental entities. We are accountable to our clients and our community.

3. Independence, resiliency, and accountability

Most nonprofits providing legal services rely heavily on foundation grants, followed by donations. ACLCLC flips the traditional budget on its head: we rely on legal fees to fund our core services; donations to enhance our services; and grants for temporary programming.



ACLCLC derives important benefits from our funding structure.

First, deemphasizing grants helps us preserve our independent judgment. The long-term grants available to legal services providers typically come with major restrictions. Funds from the Legal Service Corporation, for instance, cannot be used for:

- Representing clients above 125% of the federal poverty guideline
- Performing criminal defense
- Filing class actions
- Representing most people who are not U.S. citizens
- Engaging in community organizing activities

Second, legal fees are a more reliable source of revenue than grants. Nonprofits that rely heavily on a few large grants risk of losing a large percentage from their revenue from one year to the next. Legal fees are more predictable and that makes us more resilient.

Third, relying primarily on legal fees keeps us accountable to our clients. Nonprofits that rely heavily on grants are accountable to their grantors, and sometimes a foundation's priorities diverge from those of the client community the nonprofit serves. In contrast, if we provide inadequate services or fail to focus on what our clients feel is important, they will go elsewhere. We use grants and donations when they are available to expand and enhance our services, but our survival relies on keeping our clients happy.

The lynchpin to our 2019-20 plan is building a base of sustaining donors through memberships in the [Friends of ACLC](#). A sustaining donor program is consistent with our ongoing independence, resiliency, and accountability. When donors commit to giving monthly for at least a year, those funds are more predictable than individual donations, they come without the strings typically attached to foundation grants, and their continuing availability is contingent on the good will of the community. And, as described in the "Our Plan" section at the end of this report, that source of revenue will help us hire new staff and launch new programs more quickly than would be otherwise possible.

II. Our Goals

1. Grow the organization

The community's need for affordable legal services is greater than our current ability to satisfy. Our goal is to hire new attorneys to help more of the people who need us.

Further, each attorney is a revenue-generating staff member. At their full potential, a staff attorney can pay their own salary and generate a modest surplus. As we hire more attorneys, the surplus they generate will help support the salaries of other staff, such as social workers who can offer our clients holistic services.

2. Implement holistic services

Our goal is to hire a full time social worker to implement a holistic services plan for our clientele.

Holistic services help clients address underlying needs that may have brought them into the legal system, or new needs created by the legal system – such as housing, mental health, drug use, child care, employment, and more. Providing clients with holistic services will help us achieve better outcomes in their immediate cases, and reduce their chances of returning to the legal system.

3. Improve financial stability

Our first financial goal is to improve our stability by building an operating reserve fund large enough to cover at least two months of operating expenses.

The lynchpin to our 2019-20 plan is to develop a base of sustaining donors through memberships in the Friends of ACLC.

Our second goal is to diversify our revenue sources, primarily by developing a base of sustaining donors through memberships in the Friends of ACLC, which will be a new stream of predictable revenue. We will also begin producing Continuing Legal Education (CLE) on topics relevant to our mission and

appealing to attorneys and charging audiences to access it. Third, we will have more frequent fundraising events and more detailed plans for a major gifts campaign to fund one-time expenses.

III. Our Plan

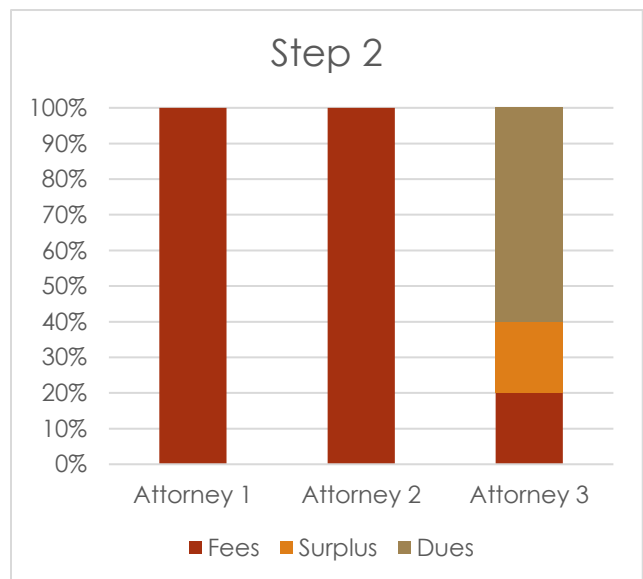
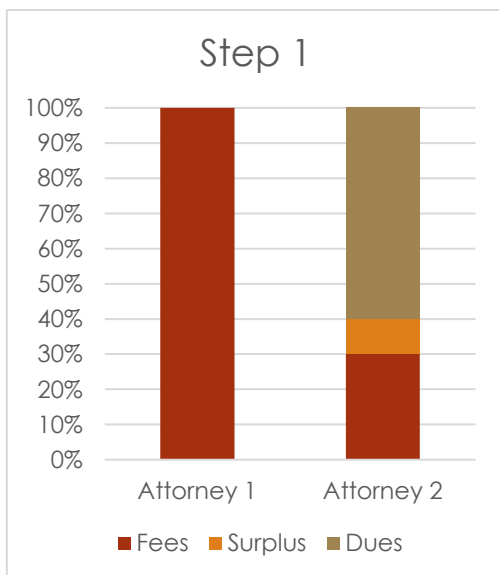
The lynchpin to our 2019-20 plan is to develop a base of sustaining donors through memberships in the **Friends of ACLC**.

At \$10 a month, 300 members would generate \$36,000 annually.

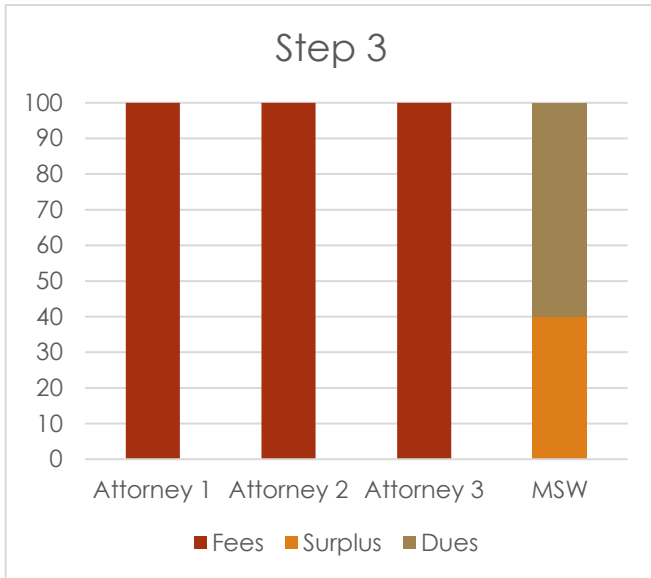
We will start by launching our **“300 Friends Campaign”** to add 300 sustaining donors. At \$10 a month, 300 members would generate \$36,000 annually. Separately, we will explore additional price points such as larger “lifetime” memberships and law firm membership.

Annual donor revenue of \$30,000 or more will help us overcome the biggest obstacle to hiring new attorneys – cash flow. Attorneys ultimately pay for themselves and create surplus revenue to help support other staff, but it predictably takes several months before a new attorney reaches their earning potential. Annual donor revenue would be a bridge, supplementing new attorney’s earnings until they reach their earning potential.

Our goal 2019-20 is to hire at least two new attorneys. Once they reach their earning potential, we will be able provides salaries for additional staff who don’t generate revenue directly, such as a social worker to facilitate holistic services.



In both Step 1 and Step 2, dues funding will be an important stair-stepping tool to give the new attorney breathing room to build their book of business to a self-sustaining level.



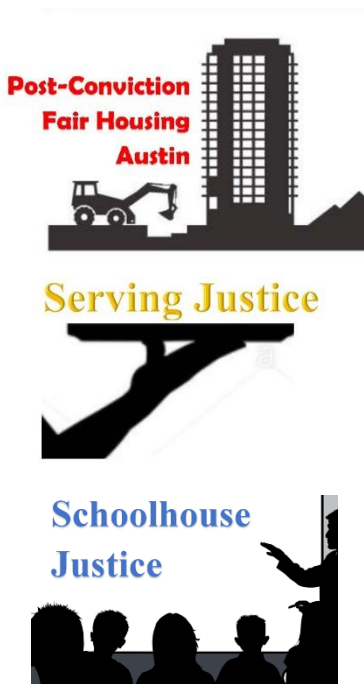
Once we have reached our goal to hire two new attorneys, dues revenue and surplus revenue generated by the larger attorney staff can be diverted into hiring non-fee-generating staff members. The top priority will be a social worker to facilitate holistic services (referenced in “Our Goals”).

To help execute our **300 Friends Campaign**, we will engage a Leaders Council to help recruit members from their social networks.

We will also begin offering a set of member benefits, including:

1. Picking ACLC’s reform campaign priorities:

Support from sustaining donors will allow ACLC to engage in annual reform campaigns; its only fair they help us pick the campaigns. Top options for 2019 include:



(a) Post-Conviction Fair Housing

Using the Fair Housing Act to systematically challenge apartment complexes’ policies or unofficial practice of barring renters with arrest and conviction records.

(b) Serving Justice

Challenging gender discrimination, wage theft, and FLMA discrimination in Austin’s food service sector.

(c) Schoolhouse Justice

Challenging race-based disparities in school discipline and under-enrollment in special education programming.

2. Access to Services and Continuing Legal Education

Members will get access to an online database of CLE we will develop. The CLE will cover topics that are useful for practitioners and address the legal needs of ACLC's core client community.

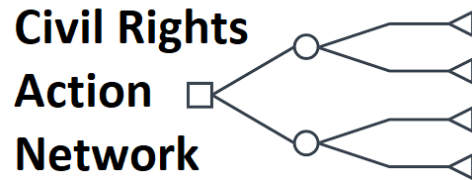


They will also be entitled to lock-in a flat fee for a specified list of common legal services (e.g. drafting a will, contesting a traffic citation, jail release) for themselves (if income eligible) or another income-eligible person they identify.

3. Participation in ACLC's "Civil Rights Action Network."

In 2019-20, we will formalize our program for screening and referring civil rights cases for pro bono representation to law firm members of the Friends of ACLC.

Austin Community Law Center



Many people with meritorious civil rights matters have difficulty hiring an attorney because their case is unlikely to generate a large damage award. And although some law firms periodically accept such cases, potential clients typically don't know how to find them. ACLC's will connect the dots.

When ACLC cannot take a potential case itself, it will screen and vet the case and connect the clients with law firms in our network. Not only will it help the community by increasing the total amount of pro bono civil rights representation locally, it will also increase ACLC's visibility to potential partners and donors.