



2018
ANNUAL REPORT

Mission statement:

The Ohio Poverty Law Center's mission is to reduce poverty and increase justice by protecting and expanding the legal rights of Ohioans living, working, and raising their families in poverty.

What we do:

While our sister legal aid organizations provide direct civil legal services to low-income Ohioans, the Ohio Poverty Law Center works to ensure these Ohioans are considered when policies are enacted. We work to educate decisionmakers on the challenges low-income Ohioans face and how policy changes can give them opportunities to improve their lives.

Photo credit:

Photo courtesy of Capitol Square Review and Advisory Board

LETTER FROM THE CHAIR



Created by the Ohio State Bar Association in 1966 to assist with the war on poverty, the Ohio State Legal Services Association provides a voice for low-income Ohioans in the courts and the legislature, and with administrative agencies. The Ohio Poverty Law Center (OPLC) was separately organized in 2009 to further and coordinate the work of the legal aid community statewide. We have stayed true to our mission to make legal services more available for Ohio's families living in poverty.

Today, OPLC is recognized as a key resource and voice of legal aid practitioners and clients at the statehouse and as an advocate for policies that improve the lives of low-income Ohioans.

Nearly 15 percent of Ohioans live in poverty and government officials make decisions every day that impact their ability to raise and feed their children, access health care and addiction services, and work to support themselves and their families.

In 2018, OPLC continued to focus on its policy work by hiring Susan Jagers, an experienced government relations professional, as its new director. She and former public defender Megan O'Dell joined staff attorney Graham Bowman and Ohio Legal Assistance Foundation fellow Patrick Higgins. Take a minute to read about their important achievements and work experience.

Some of OPLC's 2018 successes—including payday loan reform and policies to reduce out-of-school suspensions for Ohio's youngest students—are highlighted in this report. We are helping to stabilize families and move them out of poverty. Please continue to support OPLC as a way to help our state develop sound public policies promoting opportunity and justice for all of our citizens, regardless of where they may live or the wealth they may possess.

We appreciate your support,

Jonathan W. Marshall
Chair

OPLC Board of Managers

PURSuing OUR MISSION

Working to reduce poverty, increase justice



Family Stability

Reforming payday lending

Ohio went from among the worst states in terms of outrageous interest rates on payday loans to enacting model reform legislation. Stalled for more than a year, House Bill 123 finally made its way to Gov. John Kasich for his signature in July. Knowing that many low-income Ohioans seek out payday loans for a variety of reasons like medical emergencies, car repairs and sometimes just to make ends meet, and end up in a long-term cycle of debt that they cannot get out of, we supported the payday reform legislation sponsored by Rep. Kyle Koehler (R-Springfield) and Rep. Michael Ashford (D-Toledo).

HB123 regulates payday lenders and enacts consumer protections that will cap interest rates and fees, and limit required monthly payments. The total amount of fees and charges cannot exceed 60 percent of the original loan amount. Its regulations will apply to short-term loans issued after April 27, 2019.



OPLC Director Susan Jagers testifies in support of HB123 in the Senate Finance Committee

Kindergarteners suspended? Not anymore

In the 2016-17 school year, the Ohio Department of Education reported 34,000 suspensions and expulsions among students in kindergarten through third grade. Data showed that the rates of suspensions and expulsions were higher for black, male, and economically disadvantaged students. Studies by the American Academy of Pediatrics and others show many negative outcomes associated with suspensions and expulsions, including academic failure, increased dropout rates, and negative attitudes towards school. OPLC and others working to break the cycle of poverty worked to raise awareness about the growing number of suspensions and expulsions occurring in elementary schools and develop protections for young students.

The General Assembly passed HB318, which prohibits out-of-school suspensions and expulsions for students in pre-K through third grade for any behavior that is non-violent or not extremely disruptive. The legislation also specifies that in-school suspensions must be served in a supervised learning environment. In addition, school districts will be required to develop a Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) framework as an alternative to suspension for students who are disruptive, but non-violent, in the classroom. OPLC supported this legislation by providing research on suspensions prior to its introduction and through meetings with lawmakers and testimony.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Medicaid expansion and proposed work requirement

In August, the Ohio Department of Medicaid (ODM) issued a report showing that the expansion of Medicaid eligibility is critically important for low-income Ohioans to be able to keep their jobs and care for their families. Without reliable access to health care, manageable health problems grow into disabling conditions over time.

As required by the legislature, ODM submitted its proposed Medicaid waiver to the federal government, hoping to gain approval to apply work requirements to the Medicaid expansion population. The waiver requires most able-bodied adults to work or participate

in a sanctioned community engagement activity, like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) education and training activities, for 80 hours a month to be eligible for Medicaid.

OPLC worked to draft, coordinate, and submit comments to the ODM and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) opposing Ohio's application to CMS to establish work requirements to maintain Medicaid eligibility. OPLC argued that the work requirements do not further the purpose of the Medicaid program, would be costly to administer, and would result in thousands of Ohioans losing their medical coverage.



AKRON BEACON JOURNAL

SATURDAY, MARCH 3, 2018 // *Informing, Engaging, Essential*

They want to work

Graham Bowman, Ohio Poverty Law Center

Access to health care can help unemployed Ohioans move to employment. For many low-income Ohioans, Medicaid provides that access to regular, quality health care.

Although the majority of non-disabled adults without children on Medicaid are already

working, a new proposal in Ohio would make work a condition of eligibility. This is a misguided public policy because it assumes that those without jobs do not want to work or are lazy. It is never that simple. Many unemployed people would like to work but can't

There are thousands of people in Ohio like my former client who desperately want to work but have an injury or health condition that makes it hard for them to find a job.

a job due to chronic health conditions that are not severe enough to leave them disabled but limit their employment options. A few years ago, there was a severe cold snap

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

No to SNAP photo ID

In addition to working to support legislation to help low-income Ohioans, we also focus on ensuring that harmful policies are not enacted. We worked to oppose House Bill 50 which required a photo on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards. Since all members of a household are required to apply for benefits together and are all able to use an EBT card, we were concerned that requiring photos would lead to some participants being denied access to benefits. OPLC researched the impact of this policy on retailers and SNAP participants in other states. We prepared a white paper detailing the problems with similar legislation, met with targeted lawmakers, and testified in opposition to the legislation. HB50 did not become law in 2018.



Advocacy strengthened lead rules

Long-term exposure to lead causes permanent developmental delays in young children. The Ohio Department of Health drafted rules to implement the lead-safe rental registry program, a list of rental properties that have passed a lead inspection. We know that lead contamination is mostly invisible. The proposed rules were inadequate to protect families because they would have allowed a visual inspection of the property.

OPLC worked with legal aid and other partners to advocate with legislative and administrative stakeholders to ask that the proposed rule be changed to require that dust sample testing for the presence of lead—not just visual inspection—be required for inclusion on the registry.

As a result, the Ohio Department of Health released its revised proposed rules, replacing visual inspection with dust sampling in order for a property to be included on the Ohio Lead-Safe Rental Registry. The change will help ensure lead-safe rental housing for children and families.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS



OPLC staff members Megan O’Dell and Patrick Higgins attend the HB336 bill signing with Governor John Kasich



Removing Barriers to Employment

Driver’s license reinstatement fee amnesty initiative

Suspended driver’s licenses and the fees associated with reinstating them often prevent Ohio’s poor from taking advantage of opportunities that could improve their lives. The driver’s license reinstatement fee amnesty initiative was created by the legislature in HB336 to allow the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles to forgive reinstatement fees of eligible driver’s license suspensions for qualified participants. For many, the ability to reinstate their driver’s license allows them to seek higher-paying jobs or pursue educational opportunities that will make a long-term difference in their lives. The temporary program began January 31, 2019, and will run for six months. OPLC worked with the sponsors of the bill and provided testimony in support of the legislation.

Expanding record sealing eligibility

There are nearly 2 million Ohioans who, because of their criminal record, face significant and often insurmountable barriers to employment, housing, and other resources critical to self-sufficiency and supporting a family. These impacts fall disproportionately on low-income people and communities of color and perpetuate cycles of poverty. Ohio’s Conviction Record Sealing Law permits “eligible offenders” to reduce these barriers when a court, among others, makes the determination that the petitioner’s interest in having the record sealed outweighs the state’s interest in maintaining it. SB66 expanded the definition of who is eligible for record sealing—allowing more Ohioans to increase their employment and housing opportunities. OPLC advocated for this legislation.

WORKING TOGETHER FOR CHANGE

The Ohio Poverty Law Center partners with other advocates to amplify our voice. These were just a few of our key partnerships in 2018.



Advocates for Ohio's Future

Advocates for Ohio's Future, a nonpartisan coalition of nearly 500 state and local organizations, promotes health and human service budget and policy solutions so that all Ohioans live better lives. OPLC is an active member and serves on the executive, steering, and policy committees of the coalition.

In partnership, Advocates for Ohio's Future developed budget and policy priorities that support healthy children and families, quality communities, and pathways to prosperity so all Ohioans can live better lives. The coalition agenda incorporates many of our priority issues.

Vision 21

Through the Ohio Attorney General's Office, OPLC partners on the Vision 21: Linking Systems of Care Initiative Grant. The Vision 21 project will assist agencies in developing methods to identify child victims across existing services and improve links to resources. OPLC chairs the policy workgroup for the Vision 21 project.



Parity at 10 campaign

October 2018 marked the 10th anniversary of the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act, the federal law designed to end health insurance discrimination against people with mental health and substance use disorders. Regrettably, such unlawful practices still exist.

In the 10 years since its passage, enforcement of the parity law has been lacking in Ohio. An analysis of Ohio's insurance laws revealed that they do not fully comply with federal parity standards. As a result, Ohio residents are denied equal access to the treatment services that they are entitled to under the law, and when people do not have access to behavioral health care, the economic health of Ohio is drained by the money spent on jails, prisons, foster care, ambulance runs, emergency room visits, hospitalizations, lost productivity and unemployment.

The Parity at 10 campaign is working to raise awareness and obtain full enforcement of the Parity Act.

THANK YOU

THANK YOU FOR YOUR GENEROUS SUPPORT

Friends of OPLC, who generously donated in 2018.

Sandra Anderson
Mary Asbury and Bob Newman
Ian Beniston
Judy Bird
Sally Bloomfield
Richard and Betty Brooks
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The Honorable John and Mrs. Kathleen Solovan
John Stevenson
Sara Strattan
William Walker
Tom Weeks and Elizabeth Copley
Christopher Williams

We thank the following foundations that supported the work of OPLC in 2018.

Ohio Legal Assistance Foundation
Ohio State Bar Foundation
The George Gund Foundation
The HealthPath Foundation of Ohio

OUR TEAM



Susan Jagers, Director

Susan joined the Ohio Poverty Law Center as its director in February 2018 after 10 years as a government affairs and communications consultant. As a consultant, she helped clients develop messages and strategies to successfully move their issues at the Ohio Statehouse. Susan served as director of the government relations department of a large Ohio nonprofit and was the co-chair of the successful 2006 SmokeFreeOhio campaign. She received her law degree in 1993 from Case Western Reserve University School of Law.

Graham Bowman, Staff Attorney

Graham joined OPLC in June 2017 and focuses on health, public benefits, and family law policy. Prior to his work with OPLC, Graham completed an Equal Justice Works Fellowship and served as a staff attorney with the Law Project of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless from 2013-2017. He organized legal clinics for homeless youth at shelters, health clinics, and high schools throughout Chicago and successfully advocated for various changes to state law and policy regarding the rights of homeless youth to apply for public benefits and access health care. He received his law degree from Loyola University of Chicago School of Law in 2013 with certificates in public interest and health law.

Megan O'Dell, Staff Attorney

Megan joined the Ohio Poverty Law Center in June 2018 and focuses on issues related to barriers to employment, reentry, and housing. Prior to joining OPLC, Megan spent four years as a staff attorney at the Franklin County Public Defender's Office where she provided criminal defense to indigent individuals. In addition to her regular docket, Megan was the Attorney Coordinator for CATCH Court, representing victims of human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and prostitution. Megan graduated from the Ohio State University in 2014 with her law degree and master's degree in public policy and management. She spent her time in law school as a certified legal intern at the Moritz College of Law Justice for Children Clinic and at the Public Defender's Office, as a Staff Editor on the Journal of Dispute Resolution, and as the Director of Operations for SPEAK, a student-led diversity outreach organization. Megan also served the legal aid community as a legal intern at OPLC working on education law and the Legal Aid Society of Columbus working in the housing unit.

Patrick Higgins, OLAF Justice for All Fellow

Patrick joined the Ohio Poverty Law Center in September 2016 as an Ohio Legal Assistance Foundation Justice for All Fellow. He works on workforce issues and addresses legal barriers to employment, particularly those related to criminal records. Patrick received his law degree from the University of Cincinnati College of Law in 2016 where he was an Arthur Russell Morgan Fellow in Human Rights, a position within the Urban Morgan Institute for Human Rights. He served as the Senior Articles Editor with Portfolio for the Human Rights Quarterly.

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TOM WEEKS RETIRES AFTER DISTINGUISHED CAREER WITH LEGAL AID

After 34 years at the Ohio State Legal Services Association (OSLSA) and a career dedicated to ensuring access to justice for low-income Ohioans, OSLSA Executive Director Tom Weeks announced his retirement for early 2019. Tom was critical to establishing OPLC and has been one of its greatest champions.

“Tom’s advice and direction has been a critical factor in allowing OPLC to be a key advocate for Ohio’s poor. He navigated the twists and turns that the center passed through, always concise and direct to the point, yet always with humor.”

Zach Schiller, long-time OPLC Board Member

“Tom had the vision and perseverance to ensure that OPLC could be the hub of statewide advocacy for the benefit of the legal aid’s client community. He rallied support for OPLC on more than one occasion when its continued existence was in doubt. OPLC’s current strength is one of Tom’s important legacies.”

Mary Asbury, Legal Aid colleague and long-time OPLC Board



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