

Step Up to Justice: COVID-19 Inspires Innovations & Adaptations

By Michele Mirto, Executive Director, Step Up to Justice



As our world continues to move through the COVID-19 pandemic, we can all use a little good news. Although Step Up to Justice has closed our physical office and canceled on-site clinics at courts and neighborhood centers, we are as active as ever helping low-income

residents of Pima County overcome barriers to civil legal justice.

Step Up to Justice has always embraced innovation and technology. We believe that leveraging technology – in any situation – allows us to be flexible and to reach clients where and when they need us. Because of the pre-pandemic work that Step Up to Justice did to integrate technology into our service delivery model, the organization had the necessary building blocks in place to quickly respond to new social distancing precautions, with no interruption in client services. Together with our volunteer attorneys, we have moved from in-person meetings to secure remote video and teleconferencing with all clients, including confidential phone-based interpretation services for our clients who do not speak English.

To further accommodate our clients, attorney volunteers, and staff, Step Up to Justice integrated additional technology into our office and services. Staff created e-signature forms for clinic legal disclaimers, and new writable online forms for our clinics. We worked with the courts to gain secure, remote access to court documents. And, Step Up to Justice added new online feedback surveys for clients and attorney volunteers to monitor and improve the service experience. We also added a full Covid-19 page to the Step Up to Justice website with active links to resources for clients who need help with housing, family law, internet access, jobs and unemployment, child food security, bill payments, court information, and other issues: <http://www.stepuptojustice.org/covid-19>.

Covid-19 has exposed harsh inequities for low-income families grappling with unemployment, eviction, domestic violence, bankruptcy, family law, and an array of other civil legal issues. Step Up to Justice has experienced an increase in community applications and referrals for legal assistance in all of these areas, but particularly for housing and eviction matters. In response, we increased the frequency of our HOME clinics, helping tenants remain in their homes. In May, we trained twenty-five volunteer attorneys to appeal wrongful evictions, and we created and disseminated a community education flyer regarding the right to appeal if wrongfully evicted. For many months, Step Up to Justice has been an active participant in a community stakeholder eviction prevention task force. Through the taskforce, Step Up to Justice helped to staff a community-wide eviction prevention fair, connected with partner agencies to refer clients in need of rental assistance, and actively advocated for the extension of Governor Ducey's eviction moratorium.

Step Up to Justice has also seen a spike in requests for help with family law matters. Domestic violence referrals from Step Up to Justice's community partners doubled in May and June; and, we responded by increasing the number of clinic appointments available to serve that need. Step Up to Justice also recruited additional volunteer support, bringing in experienced family law attorneys from

the American Academy of Matrimonial lawyers to provide the needed expertise in this area.

Over the course of the last few months, and in direct response to community need, Step Up to Justice has also launched new initiatives to broaden the scope of our services. In the spring, we trained twenty volunteers to appeal unemployment denials. And, in July we set in motion plans for our Prep with Tech: End of Life Planning Project. Prep with Tech will enable volunteer attorneys to quickly – and remotely – generate the documents necessary to help clients express their end-of-life wishes and plan for their future.

Step Up to Justice is facing new challenges every week, but we have responded creatively and efficiently, leveraging technology and volunteer support from our homes and office. We extend our appreciation to everyone who has continued to volunteer and support Step Up to Justice. Our board and staff deeply appreciate your kindness and generosity during these particularly challenging times. And, for those new to Step Up to Justice, please join us. We encourage you to become involved and help your neighbors during this challenging time. We invite you to volunteer, donate and spread the word.

To refer an applicant please visit the Step Up to Justice website at <http://www.stepuptojustice.org/apply-for-help>. For additional information or questions please email Michele Mirto at mmirto@stepuptojustice.org.

MARIPOSA Family Services

Mariposa Family Services (MFS) is a Tucson based 501(c)(3) non-profit organization with the mission to assist victims of domestic violence.

MFS helps victims obtain protective orders, escape planning, finding shelter, and other related services free of charge.

Please contact MFS' Executive Director, Kristen Kiernan, at mariposadvocacy@gmail.com for information about our services or how you can support MFS' mission.



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