

Enhancing Enforcement Through Collaboration with Civil Legal Aid

Introduction

Civil legal aid can help support federal agencies achieve their enforcement objectives by providing insights and information based on their client work and community engagement serving low income populations. The White House Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable encourages federal agencies to develop and strengthen collaborative partnerships with civil legal aid providers to help enhance their programs.

While many agencies have varying types of collaboration, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC)'s Legal Services Collaboration is a prime example of a successful collaboration between an enforcement agency and civil legal aid. The FTC's experience and successes showcased here may be useful to other interested agencies.

FTC's Legal Services Collaboration

The FTC launched the Legal Services Collaboration in 2010, on the heels of the mortgage crisis, based on the recognition that, by forming robust relationships with advocates for poor and underserved communities, it can more effectively fight deceptive practices affecting those communities. As part of the FTC's broader outreach strategy, the Legal Services Collaboration has since grown from a modest project to a highly effective and institutionalized program with multiple components. It enables the FTC to reach out to community-based legal aid organizations throughout the nation to learn about consumer protection problems. These partnerships not only inform the FTC's law enforcement priorities but also allow the agency to alert local communities about scams and respond to local concerns.

Examples of FTC's Collaboration Tools

Over time, the FTC developed a multitude of tools to achieve effective collaboration.

- ✦ **Building and strengthening relationships** with legal aid providers through regular communication to learn about consumer protection issues affecting their clients and to encourage them to file complaints with the FTC on behalf of their clients and make case referrals. Additionally the FTC's headquarters and regional offices host **periodic legal services brown bag events** for regular, institutionalized communication.
- ✦ **Hosting regional conferences** in which consumer advocates, legal aid providers, state attorney general offices, and local law enforcement discuss creative approaches and share information to protect consumers. See <https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/blog/finding-common-ground> for more information on FTC's "Common Ground" conferences.
- ✦ **Sharing expertise through quarterly webinars** on consumer protection issues for consumer advocates and legal aid providers through the Legal Services Corporation and the National Association of Consumer Advocates.
- ✦ **Sharing consumer education materials and soliciting feedback** on them to effectively reach legal aid clients and to improve the materials based on feedback from legal aid providers to better meet the needs of their clients.
- ✦ **Launching a pilot program** to collect and track reports from legal aid advocates about scams affecting their clients.



Developing Collaboration Step-by-Step

The FTC's Legal Services Collaboration staff, who also work as enforcement attorneys, share the following as key lessons learned in their efforts to develop robust and sustainable collaboration with civil legal aid:

- ✦ **Begin with an action plan** with concrete goals and incremental objectives. The FTC's initial action plan included visiting legal aid offices and developing contacts.
- ✦ **Engage regional offices.** Each of the FTC's regional offices has designated a person to serve as a point of contact for local legal aid programs. Also each regional office hosts periodic legal services brown bag events and [Common Ground](#) conferences.
- ✦ **Seek legal aid's input** on improving consumer education materials and topics for regional conferences, training events, and brown bags. [Consumer.gov](#), a plain language website with comprehensive consumer information, was developed based on input from legal aid.
- ✦ **Find common ground and build trust** with legal aid providers through identifying common goals; finding ways to be helpful to them in the short-term without over-promising because enforcement actions take time to develop; helping to connect legal aid providers to other stakeholders, such as the state attorney general's office; and recognizing their contributions publicly, when appropriate, through press releases or blogposts.
- ✦ **Engage the agency's leadership.** At the FTC, the commitment and support from its top leaders was crucial to securing necessary resources, involving regional offices, and sustaining the initiative.
- ✦ **Be persistent!**

Fruits of Collaboration

The following examples show how the FTC's collaboration with civil legal aid supported its enforcement objectives.

- ✦ A referral from AARP's Legal Counsel for the Elderly led to an FTC win against a company called Real Wealth for peddling bogus work-at-home offers. 50,000 refund checks went to scammed consumers.
- ✦ The FTC's case against Loma International came from a referral from the Esperanza Center, an office of Baltimore Catholic Charities, which collected stories from victims of the scams. The FTC won the case, and the court ordered the business to repay up to \$616,000 to immigrants they'd scammed.
- ✦ Texas RioGrande Legal Aid identified a problem with Freedom Companies – a company supposedly offering mortgage relief services to Spanish-speakers – and helped get a consumer declaration. The FTC obtained a court order to halt the business and freeze the assets.
- ✦ A report from Arkansas Legal Aid led to a series of FTC undercover investigations and 11 warning letters to used car dealers about abuses, and a case against Abernathy Motor Company for failing to display the required Buyers Guide at its Jonesboro, Arkansas location.

For more information, see FTC Bureau of Consumer Protection Director Jessica Rich's blogpost at <https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/blog/id-thank>, and an FTC attorney's article "The Federal Trade Commission and Legal Services Collaborate to Combat Fraud Against Spanish-Speaking Consumers," available at <http://povertylaw.org/index.php?q=civicrm/mailling/view&reset=1&id=590>. For questions relating to the FTC's Legal Services Collaboration, please contact Monica Vaca at mvaca@ftc.gov.

