

SAY YES TO EDUCATION

CMBA + LEGAL AID PARTNER TO HELP CLEVELAND'S CHILDREN SUCCEED

Dinola Phillips & Jennifer Himmelein

When Cleveland launched its chapter of Say Yes to Education in 2019, no one could have predicted that in the program's second year, the world would be reeling from a global pandemic — and families who were struggling already would be facing even more challenging circumstances.

Say Yes to Education is a national nonprofit that provides scholarships and supportive services to low-income children in public schools. One of those support services is free legal counseling and, when necessary, extended representation in civil legal cases.

"We're expecting a significant increase in requests for help through Say Yes," says Dinola Phillips, Esq., an attorney at the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, "because COVID-19 has impacted every area of legal stability for people."

Legal Aid is the official legal services provider of Say Yes Cleveland. As the designated Say Yes liaison, Dinola trains Family Support Specialists (FSS) at each participating school on how to identify when a child's family is struggling with an issue that can be solved with help from an attorney. The FSS can then facilitate referrals to Legal Aid through a streamlined portal or direct communication with Dinola.

Over the course of the 2019–2020 school year, Legal Aid handled over 130 Say Yes cases. This year, 26 additional schools joined the original 16 to bring the total participating schools to 42.

Jennifer Himmelein, Esq., an attorney at Brouse McDowell and Chair of the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association's Justice For All Committee, says CMBA members have a unique opportunity to make a difference in their community by taking a case with Legal Aid through the Say Yes partnership.

"Volunteering with Say Yes is a chance to give students and families in Cleveland a new perspective and remove barriers that have been limiting their hope for the future," says Jennifer, "A few hours here and there – spending that time to give back, you can make a huge difference."

Dinola says that many of the problems families encounter have legal remedies that are relatively simple for an attorney to handle. Common issues include establishing guardianship, negotiating with landlords to make home repairs, and obtaining public assistance benefits.

CMBA's partnership with Say Yes aligns well with its other pipeline programs, including The 3Rs program. These initiatives empower people with a positive experience of the justice system and increase access to justice.

"The benefits of volunteering definitely outweigh the time commitment," Dinola says. "And, Legal Aid makes sure all of our volunteers are supported." For example, Legal Aid offers trainings on different areas of the law, consults with staff attorneys, a robust online library of educational resources, and malpractice insurance. Volunteers can also earn CLE credits for taking a case with Legal Aid.

"We as lawyers are privileged to have this legal knowledge," says Jennifer. "Children become our city's adults, our city's future! We want future generations to have the opportunities that we had."

Help Cleveland's kids: households in Say Yes to Education schools need help with legal questions! Sign-up at: www.tinyurl.com/ProBonoSayYes.



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