

**LEGAL SERVICES VERMONT
AND
VERMONT LEGAL AID
STATEWIDE LEGAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

DECEMBER 4, 2024



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Vermonters face broad and substantial unmet civil legal needs. In the five years since the last study was completed in 2019, these needs have increased substantially. These needs are present across the entire spectrum of civil legal subject areas, but several areas stand out. In particular, the data clearly shows that housing problems for low-income Vermonters have reached a crisis level.

This study of legal needs reviewed a broad range of objective and subjective data, including requests for help to the system, web analytics, court data, and input through public meetings and surveys, to determine the most persistent areas of unmet civil legal need. When possible, the data is compared to comparable information from the previous study. Based on that data, the study shows these central trends:

- **There is a significant increase in demand for legal assistance.** Multiple indicators in this study show that Vermonters are asking for legal help in much greater numbers than five years ago. Requests increased during the COVID pandemic but have not gone down since then.
- **Vermont has an eviction crisis.** Five years ago, eviction was the most pressing legal need for low-income Vermonters. Today, this problem has reached crisis proportions, with some eviction metrics showing nearly a 45% increase.
- **People need help navigating the healthcare system and keeping insurance.** Healthcare was, and continues to be, a high and consistent area of demand for services to the system.
- **Family law continues as a high area of unmet need.** Legal assistance with family law continues to be an area of intense need, and one where the current system is still unable to provide a meaningful level of assistance in most cases.
- **Vermonters want more easily available and in-person legal assistance.** People in the more remote areas of Vermont and members of underserved communities cite the need for more direct presence of legal assistance and easier access to legal services.

As was the case five years ago, some of these legal needs may be met by adjusting case priorities to more closely match the demands identified by this study. But any meaningful efforts to meet the broad and persistent legal needs of Vermonters will only be met by expanding resources substantially beyond current levels.

The state's legal services partners—Vermont Legal Aid, Legal Services Vermont, the South Royalton Legal Clinic, the Vermont Bar Association, the Vermont Bar Foundation, Vermont Asylum Assistance Project, the Access to Justice Coalition, and the more subject-specific legal support agencies—should review the information in this report and use it to assess current case and intake strategies based on available resources. This discussion can then lead to a coordinated review of the best ways to address these unmet needs, and to identify new resources to expand the current legal services system.

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METHODOLOGY

This study collected and analyzed data from the following sources:

Intake and Helpline Data

We collected two years of data from cases and other client contacts at Legal Services Vermont and Vermont Legal Aid for the calendar years 2022 and 2023, as recorded in the Legal Server case management system. Data included both “cases” (full intake records) and “calls” (records of requests for assistance that did not result in a full intake for legal assistance). These data points represent the collected inquiries and requests for service made by the public for legal assistance from Vermont Legal Aid, Legal Services Vermont, and any of the partner agencies for whom Legal Services Vermont conducts intake. The information was analyzed primarily based on the subject matter of the inquiry, using the case management system records of Problem Area, Problems Code (based on the Legal Services Corporation CSR—case service reporting—codes), and Problem Detail (an additional level of information about legal issue type), to determine the highest volume areas of demand for service from those who were able to access the intake system. This information was then compared to equivalent data from the previous Legal Needs Assessment in 2019 to assess trends in the intervening five years.

Website Data

We collected two years of website analytics from the Legal Services Vermont/Vermont Legal Aid legal help website, vtlawhelp.org. We used the period January 1, 2022-December 31, 2023. We filtered the data to include only in-state web traffic and to exclude traffic from internal VLA/LSV staff. We also excluded page hits to the home pages and general information pages and included only hits to pages that contained some substantive legal information on a specific subject matter. The data were then analyzed based on the subject matter of the pages. We looked both at the broad legal categories of the page hits and at the specific subject matters viewed by users, paralleling as much as possible the same problem areas used for the Intake and Helpline Data.

Vermont Judiciary Data

We looked at data from the Vermont Judiciary system from fiscal year 2022, the most recent year for which information was available. We used the annual report of court statistics published on the Vermont Judiciary website. We focused on the reported data of newly opened cases from the Civil, Family, and Probate Divisions, excluding data from the Criminal Division and other smaller court divisions (since these cases are generally beyond the permitted scope of work under current VLA/LSV grants). Again, the information was organized as much as possible to parallel the same problem areas used in other data collection areas. We separately looked at court statistics for cases where only one party was represented to assess unmet legal needs within the court system.

Vermont 211 Data

We collected a year of data (2023) from the Vermont 211 website annual report. While this information does not specifically reflect legal needs, it does reflect areas where Vermonters were looking for short-term help for difficult situations, often involving legal implications. This information was, to the extent possible, organized to mirror the subject matters used in the other data collection areas, and analyzed to determine areas of highest need.

Community Listening Meetings

We conducted a series of public meetings to solicit feedback about community legal needs and concerns about accessing the intake system. These meetings were focused on bringing in voices from Vermont's communities of color and non-English speaking communities, who might not otherwise access the legal services system. These meetings also reached out to communities in the southernmost part of Vermont, where there are no on-site legal aid agencies. Meetings were held in Winooski, Brattleboro and Bennington. Notes from these discussions were then analyzed to assess major areas of unmet legal need.

Public Legal Needs Survey

We solicited public input about legal needs of Vermonters and barriers to access legal services by using a publicly available survey on Survey Monkey. We publicized the survey on social media and on our

websites, and through a widely distributed e-mail to our partner agencies statewide, along with requests to distribute the information widely. The survey was built primarily with open-ended questions to allow a wide range of feedback and included simple demographic identifying information to determine the audience responding to the survey. The survey was left open for public comment for a period of approximately two months, with periodic reminders on social media about its availability.

Community Partner Legal Needs Survey

We solicited input about legal needs and barriers to access to legal services from the staff at community partner agencies who provide services to low-income clients through a separate internal survey on Survey Monkey. The questions paralleled those in the public survey, but with a focus on trends seen by service providers who work with disadvantaged communities.

INTAKE AND HELPLINE DATA

Overall Demand

To assess the legal needs of Vermonters who have attempted to access legal services we collected the total number of inquiries made to the VLA/LSV intake system, based on the broad Problem Areas utilized for case service reporting by the Legal Services Corporation, for the years 2022 and 2023.¹ The totals of those inquiries are summarized below:

Table 1: Assistance Inquiries from 2022 and 2023

Problem Area	2022 Cases	2022 Calls	2023 Cases	2023 Calls	Total Cases	Total Calls	Grand Total	% of total
Benefits	556	492	294	572	850	1064	1914	5%
Consumer	323	527	133	678	456	1205	1661	4%
Education/Juvenile	171	201	147	146	318	347	665	2%
Employment	186	395	77	412	263	807	1070	3%
Family	643	1394	434	1441	1077	2835	3912	9%
Health	3919	173	2770	287	6689	460	7149	17%
Housing	3103	4071	2423	4564	5526	8635	14161	35%
Miscellaneous	430	3018	97	2696	527	5714	6241	15%
Individual Rights	1804	452	1604	364	3408	816	4224	10%
Total	11135	10723	7979	11160	19114	21883	40997	100%

Broadly, housing issues are by far the highest area of demand. Health represents the next highest area of demand. Family is a high demand area; the similarly high number under Individual Rights reflects the large number of people represented by VLA in involuntary mental health treatment cases, as well as many people seeking assistance as victims of crime. Consumer, benefits, employment and education reflect smaller but consistent areas of legal need. The high number in the Miscellaneous category primarily reflects the large numbers of contacts who are turned away for assistance, either due to lack of capacity or because their legal needs are not covered by our services.

¹ For this study, the two LSC legal problem areas of Education and Juvenile have been combined. There are very few contacts solely in the Juvenile area, and the concerns in the two areas often overlap.

Five Year Comparison

For comparison, the numbers from the 2019 Legal Needs Assessment appear in Table 2. In comparing the 2019 numbers to 2024, there are several important points to note:

- The data from 2019 did not include the cases from VLA's Office of the Health Care Advocate, which operates a separate helpline, or from VLA's Mental Health Law Project, which largely operates independently. Those numbers are included in Table 1 to provide a more complete picture of legal needs for the current assessment. Table 3 below shows the 2022-23 numbers with those two areas removed, to facilitate a comparison of changes in the last five years.
- LSV and VLA switched to a different case management system in October 2022. In both systems there are "cases" (typically instances where a client receives some level of representation) and "calls" (more often information or referral without representation). The old system and the new system, however, divided "cases" and "calls" somewhat differently. As a result, there are significant variances in those numbers between the charts in those two columns. The aggregate numbers of cases and calls, however, remain comparable.
- The "Miscellaneous" category covers several substantive legal areas where service may be provided, such as wills, estates, and other probate-related matters, along with requests for assistance with tort/personal injury cases, municipal legal disputes, and licensing matters (professional licenses and motor vehicle licenses). There is also an "Other Miscellaneous" category that largely encompasses areas outside the scope of our service (e.g. criminal defense) and contacts where we were not able to identify a clear legal issue. As a result, this area represents a large number of contacts.

With those provisos, here are the numbers from five years ago, and the recent numbers adjusted to facilitate direct comparison.

Table 2: Assistance Inquiries from 2019 Legal Needs Study²

Problem Area	2017 Cases	2017 Calls	2018 Cases	2018 Calls	Total Cases	Total Calls	Grand Total	% of total
Benefits	413	521	421	360	834	881	1715	6%
Consumer	571	783	607	734	1178	1517	2695	9%
Education/Juvenile	173	207	195	219	368	426	794	3%
Employment	126	557	156	440	282	997	1279	4%
Family	604	2309	604	1963	1208	4272	5480	19%
Health	215	263	212	262	427	525	952	3%
Housing	1529	3470	1796	3108	3325	6578	9903	35%
Individual Rights	80	322	217	401	297	723	1020	4%
Miscellaneous	316	2130	356	1977	672	4107	4779	17%
Total	4027	10562	4564	9464	8591	20026	28617	100%

Table 3: Assistance Inquiries from 2022 and 2023 Without Health Care Advocate and MHLP Cases

Problem Area	2022 Cases	2022 Calls	2023 Cases	2023 Calls	Total Cases	Total Calls	Grand Total	% of total
Benefits	556	492	294	572	850	1064	1914	6%
Consumer	323	527	133	678	456	1205	1661	6%
Education/Juvenile	171	201	147	146	318	347	665	2%
Employment	186	395	77	412	263	807	1070	3%
Family	643	1394	434	1441	1077	2835	3912	12%
Health	600	173	319	287	919	460	1379	4%
Housing	3103	4071	2423	4564	5526	8635	14161	43%
Individual Rights	484	452	260	364	744	816	1560	5%
Miscellaneous	430	3018	97	2696	527	5714	6241	19%
Total	6496	10723	4184	11160	10680	21883	32563	100%

General Observations:

These numbers immediately demonstrate some important changes between 2019 and 2024.

- Total demand for assistance is up significantly. Using the modified charts for direct comparison, the number of requests for assistance over a two-year period grew from 28,617 to 32,563, an increase of

² The 2019 study excluded cases coded as “Other Miscellaneous” from the total inquiries. The 2024 data includes that code, and the 2019 numbers listed here have been adjusted from the original study to include them to facilitate comparison.

nearly 14%. Notably, this increase does not represent a “COVID spike,” since the data comes from 2022 and 2023. COVID certainly exacerbated the level of need, but there is no indication that the current post-COVID high level of demand will decrease.

- Housing was the highest level of need in 2019, and that is even more true in 2024, by a dramatic margin. Using the adjusted numbers, housing inquiries accounted for 35% of the total in 2019, and in 2024 that figure has risen to a stunning 43%.³ This sharp percentage increase, in conjunction with the overall increase in case demand (9903 housing inquiries in 2017-2018, 14,161 in 2022-2023) demonstrates the pervasive severity of the current housing crisis for low-income Vermonters.
- Using the more inclusive numbers in Table 1, Health Care is the second highest area of need, at 17% of the total. This was certainly also the case in 2019, since the number of inquiries to HCA has been consistently high, and the percentage of demand in the more comparable numbers in Tables 2 and 3 did not change significantly in this area. Vermonters continue to struggle to obtain and maintain affordable healthcare and to navigate this highly complex system.
- Family legal issues remain a high demand area, though the percentage is somewhat lower in comparison to the sharp increase in housing need. There is a decrease in total number of family contacts over the five years, but that change may be attributable to the very limited service offered by VLA and LSV in this area other than in domestic violence cases—people may simply have stopped calling for regular divorce and custody issues when they know they are unlikely to get much help.
- The large increase in Individual Rights cases from 2019 to 2024 is specifically attributable to the addition of data from the Mental Health Law Project, which serves many clients each year.
- The other substantive areas—Consumer, Benefits, Employment, and Education/Juvenile—have remained relatively steady in percentage of the overall demand. There are some minor fluctuations that are

³ Even adding the large numbers of cases and calls in the Health Care Advocate Office, Mental Health Law Project, and Other Miscellaneous category, Housing remains at 35% of total demand, as seen in Table 1.

likely caused by a range of transient shifts in legal needs, while the overall need in these areas seems to be steady.

- The high number of “Other Miscellaneous” contacts in both periods comes from many factors but is likely attributable to the fact that many people call LSV and VLA when they don’t know where else to call (especially for criminal defense) and those callers are referred to other more appropriate agencies. This large area demonstrates a significant level of need in areas that LSV and VLA are unable to assist with.

Specific Areas of Demand:

Within the general areas outlined above, the following are the highest areas of demand, as defined by specific legal issues within the broader problem area, for the current period (2022-2023 data) and from the 2019 Legal Needs Assessment (2017-2018 data).

Housing

2022-2023 Housing:⁴

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| • Eviction for Cause/No Cause: | 25% |
| • Eviction for Non-Payment: | 18% |
| • General Landlord-Tenant Disputes: | 14% |
| • Homeownership (not foreclosure): | 11% |
| • Habitability: | 7% |
| • Mortgage Foreclosure: | 6% |
| • Emergency Housing: | 5% |
| • Subsidized Housing Vouchers: | 3% |
| • Security Deposit Disputes: | 2% |
| • Housing Discrimination: | 2% |
| • Other Housing Disputes | 7% |

⁴ In general, these sub-areas reflect the LSC “Problem Codes” which are used for case reporting purposes by all LSC agencies. For Housing cases, we have not used the LSC codes, which mostly reflect housing type rather than legal issue; instead, we have used our own “Problem Detail” codes to identify the most common legal issues in housing cases. Housing cases cover a broad range of issues, and so there are many categories that individually represent only a small percentage of inquiries, but collectively represent a fairly large percentage of calls, such as various disputes around subsidized housing, home ownership, property taxes, etc. Since housing is by far the largest overall area of inquiry, even the smaller percentage areas represent a significant number of callers.

2017-2018 Housing:

- Eviction for Non-Payment: 18%
- General Landlord-Tenant Disputes: 17%
- Habitability: 11%
- Eviction for Cause/No Cause: 10%
- Mortgage Foreclosure: 7%
- Security Deposit Disputes: 4%
- Housing Discrimination: 3%
- Other Housing Disputes: 30%⁵

These figures reveal a striking shift in the last five years. In the 2019 report, evictions represented 28% of all housing contacts; in 2024, that percentage skyrocketed to 43%. Even more striking, while the percentage of non-payment evictions remained the same, the percentage of “for cause/no cause” evictions jumped even more, from 10% to 25%. These percentages are compounded by the overall sharp increase in the number of housing calls, which went up dramatically as noted in the previous discussion. While we have not tracked the specific breakdown of for cause vs. no cause evictions, this shift is certainly attributable to a sharp increase in the number of no-cause evictions impacting low-income Vermonters. This shift clearly demonstrates the scope of the eviction crisis in Vermont and how many people are being impacted. Other areas, such as habitability, have dropped somewhat as an overall percentage, but this change is likely due to the sharp increase in evictions, and not an indication that the other issues are any less serious.

Family

2022-2023 Family:

- Custody: 30%
- Divorce: 24%
- Domestic Abuse: 23%
- Adult Guardianship: 7%
- Child Support: 4%

⁵ The 2019 study did not break down housing cases into as many categories, and therefore this “other” category is large. We have added additional categories to get a more detailed picture in the current study.

- Other Family: 12%

2017-2018 Family:

- Custody: 33%
- Divorce: 24%
- Domestic Abuse: 20%
- Child Support: 6%
- Adult Guardianship: 4%
- Other Family: 13%

The family numbers are relatively steady between the two assessments, with only a few minor variations. Custody, divorce and domestic abuse continue to represent the bulk of inquiries.

Consumer

2022-2023 Consumer:

- Debt Collection: 39%
- Bankruptcy: 17%
- Contracts/Warranties 16%
- Unfair and Deceptive Trade Practices: 9%
- Other Consumer: 19%

2017-2018 Consumer:

- Debt Collection: 35%
- Bankruptcy: 28%
- Contracts/Warranties: 18%
- Unfair and Deceptive Trade Practices: 9%
- Other Consumer: 10%

The one notable shift in consumer cases is a drop in the percentage of bankruptcy cases compared to other consumer issues. This shift is likely attributable to the sharp drop in bankruptcy court filings during the COVID pandemic and the immediately following years. Based on informal observations of 2024 inquiries, the bankruptcy numbers will likely rebound to previous levels, and possibly go higher as COVID-era economic supports end.

Benefits

2022-2023 Benefits

- Social Security 63%
- Food Stamps/3SquaresVT: 9%
- Unemployment Compensation: 20%
- TANF/Reach Up 1%
- Other Benefits 7%

2017-2018 Benefits

- Social Security: 69%
- Food Stamps/3SquaresVT: 10%
- Unemployment Compensation: 8%
- TANF/Reach Up: 3%
- Other Benefits: 10%

In public benefits, the primary shift is the much higher number of unemployment compensation cases. This change is likely due to the lingering effects of the COVID pandemic and the huge increase in people receiving these benefits; if the sample had been taken a year earlier the increase would have been even higher. The numbers dropped from 2022 to 2023 in this area, and long-term the overall demand in this area appears to be unchanged.

Education/Juvenile

2022-2023 Education/Juvenile:

- Special Education: 53%
- Neglect/Abuse: 4%
- Minor Guardianship: 9%
- School Discipline: 10%
- Other Education/Juvenile: 24%

2017-2018 Education/Juvenile:

- Special Education: 56%
- Neglect/Abuse: 11%
- Minor Guardianship: 8%

- School Discipline: 7%
- Other Education/Juvenile: 18%

The figures in this area show a few small shifts. The numbers in the neglect/abuse area are down, though these cases may appear under other categories related to victims of crime. The “other” category likely reflects an increase in complaints related to COVID-related disruptions in schools. Otherwise, the demand here seems generally consistent between the two studies.

Miscellaneous

2022-2023 Miscellaneous:

- Wills and Estates (63%)
- Torts (25%)
- Advanced Directives and Powers of Attorney (10%)

2017-2018 Miscellaneous:

- Wills and Estates (55%)
- Torts (24%)
- Advanced Directives and Powers of Attorney (14%)

Note that these numbers exclude the “Other Miscellaneous” category. The only shift here is a small increase in Wills and Estates over Powers of Attorney, but in general these Probate-related matters continue to dominate this category.

Employment

2022-2023 Employment:

- Wage Claims and Employee Rights (14%)
- Employment Discrimination (22%)
- Taxes (27%)

2017-2018 Employment:

- Wage Claims and Employee Rights (28%)
- Employment Discrimination (23%)
- Taxes (19%)

In employment, contacts regarding discrimination claims remained about the same; wage claims have dropped quite a bit while income tax disputes are up.

Individual Rights

2022-2023 Individual Rights:

- Crime Victim Assistance (67%)
- Disability Rights (16%)
- Criminal Record Expungement (8%)

2017-2018 Individual Rights:

- Crime Victim Assistance (48%)
- Disability Rights (19%)
- Criminal Record Expungement (9%)

Note that these percentages do not reflect involuntary mental health cases, which otherwise represent the great majority of cases in this category. The main shift in the five-year period is the significant increase in crime victim assistance cases, which may be the impact of more inquiries around non-family stalking cases.

Health

2022-2023 Health

- Medicare (40%)
- Long Term Care/Home Health Care (25%)
- Medicaid (28%)

2017-2018 Health:

- Long Term Care/Home Health Care (42%)
- Medicaid (37%)

As noted earlier, these percentages, for comparison purposes, do not include the large number of individuals assisted by the Health Care Advocate Office, which covers a broad range of health-care-related needs. The shift here is also largely related to a somewhat different method of counting; the 2019 study did not include Medicare cases handled by VLA under a separate grant but are included here. Otherwise, there is a small

increase in general Medicaid contacts compared to Long-Term Care contacts, but not by a significant amount in overall numbers. For a more detailed look at these cases, please see the annual reports of the Office of Health Care Advocate, available at vtlegalaid.org.

Conclusions:

Vermont's legal services providers have seen a significant increase in requests for assistance in the last five years. These numbers jumped up during the pandemic due to lost income and economic destabilization, but the overall demand has not decreased as we have moved into the post-pandemic era. While VLA and LSV received important pandemic-era support to increase services, these funding streams have largely ended, while the demand continues to stay at record high levels, putting further strain on the system of support.

In 2024, as in 2019, the primary legal areas where Vermonters request assistance are Housing, Health Care, and Family, with other areas falling significantly behind. The most notable change is not in this hierarchy, but in the dominance of housing problems compared to other areas. Housing disputes, specifically evictions, represent by far the highest number of requests for legal assistance. Low-income Vermonters faced a challenging housing landscape in 2019, but the impact of the pandemic and the increased economic pressures on an already tight housing market have reached crisis proportions.

WEBSITE DATA

Overall Website Traffic

Data from the joint LSV/VLA legal information website, Vtlawhelp.org, provides a different window into the legal needs of Vermonters. The website information gives us an important perspective on Vermonters' legal needs, both because of the high volume of traffic to the site, and because it includes many people who may not otherwise request legal assistance from VLA or LSV. In the last five years LSV has put significant effort into making this site more accessible and adding new features to assist people who otherwise are unable to access our services. The increasing importance of web-based resources means that these numbers provide highly valuable information about what is going on in the community.

This site gets very high traffic. Looking at unfiltered data, in 2018 there were over 100,000 unique users and over 250,000 page hits to the site. In the post-pandemic era, these numbers have skyrocketed. In 2022 the site recorded 285,248 unique users who engaged in 365,386 different sessions, with 614,854 page hits. These are unfiltered numbers and include out-of-state users and some other types of traffic. But even when filters are applied, the numbers are very high, especially given Vermont's small population. And because the site contains information about a broad range of civil legal issues, this large data set provides valuable insights into Vermonters' legal needs. This information is, of course, limited to people with access to the internet, but given the increasing number of people who have phone-based internet access, this includes a significant portion of the low-income population. Because there is no income screening for use of the web site, the data presumably encompasses users from a wide range of income levels, though the analytics do not collect this information. The usage also presumably encompasses both current and potential clients and service providers, as well as people who might not engage with the agencies at all.

The information in the following tables uses website data from a two-year period, January 1, 2022 through December 31, 2023. It includes data only from Vermont users and excludes traffic from users who are internal to VLA and LSV. It also excludes page hits to the landing pages and other general information pages, to focus specifically on the substantive legal

areas where users are looking for information. The overall usage of the substantive pages of the web site, organized by the broad Problem Area codes, is as follows:

Table 4: Total Website Hits by Problem Area 2022-2023 and 2019

Problem Area	Page Views	% of Page Views (Current)	% of Page Views (2019)
Benefits	9963	6%	3%
Consumer	9053	5%	9%
Education/Juvenile	3795	2%	1%
Employment	4550	3%	3%
Family	29098	16%	28%
Health	35808	20%	20%
Housing	65555	36%	26%
Individual Rights	13321	7%	6%
Miscellaneous	9676	5%	4%
Total	180819	100%	100%

The far-right column shows similar percentages of views from the 2019 legal needs study for comparison. As with call and intake data, housing dominates the traffic, accounting for more than a third of substantive page views. Health care and Family are the other areas of heavy traffic; together these three areas account for just shy of three quarters of all traffic. All other areas show a small but steady interest level.⁶

There are also notable shifts here in the five years since the last study. At that point Family was the highest traffic area, with Housing and Health trailing a little behind. Five years later the traffic to Housing pages has jumped sharply, Health remains the same, and Family has dropped by quite a bit. The Consumer area shows a relative decline as well. Given the overall increase in web traffic, the percentage drop in Family and Consumer may not reflect fewer people facing these issues but may reflect more of the steep increase in people facing housing problems—and this

⁶ In this instance the Miscellaneous category does not include a generic “other” catchall as it does in intake data, so this area is much smaller than in that data set.

outcome is consistent with the sharply increased housing need seen in the intake data.

Specific Legal Areas:

Within the broad categories above, the following are the pages with the heaviest traffic. These figures do not include general landing pages within the substantive areas. The listing includes the number of hits; the percentage indicates the percentage of web hits within that problem area, e.g., the divorce page represents 16% of the total hits on family law pages.⁷

Benefits:

- State Benefits/Fuel Assistance 45%
- 3SquaresVT (Food Stamps) 20%
- Social Security Benefits 19%
- Reach Up 14%

Consumer:

- Debt Collection/Repossession 37%
- Bankruptcy 23%
- Small Claims 22%
- Consumer Rights 5%

Education/Juvenile:

- School Attendance/Truancy 49%
- Special Education 27%
- Bullying 12%
- Suspension/Expulsion 10%

Employment:

- Unemployment Compensation 27%
- Workers' Rights 21%
- Income Taxes 21%
- Workers' Compensation 7%

⁷ These figures reflect the highest traffic areas, and so some percentages may not add up to 100%. Some topics on the site, like "Seniors," span multiple legal areas.

Family:

- Custody/Visitation/Child Support 28%
- Divorce 13%
- Name/Gender Marker Change 8%
- Relief From Abuse 6%
- Parentage 5%
- Guardianship 5%
- Parental Rights Termination 5%
- Grandparent Visitation 5%

Health:

- Medicaid 35%
- Long Term Care 15%
- Dental Care 9%
- Medicare 7%

Housing:

- Landlord-Tenant Law 27%
- Eviction 18%
- Habitability and Repair 7%
- Homelessness 5%
- Subsidized Housing 3%
- Security Deposits 2%
- Foreclosure 2%

Individual Rights:

- Criminal Record Expungement 31%
- Disability Rights and the ADA 28%
- Disability Services 7%
- Crime Victims 6%
- Immigration 4%

Miscellaneous:

- Wills and Estates 54%
- Power of Attorney/Advance Directives 32%

- Disaster Relief 14%

These numbers, while generally consistent with the case intake data, highlight a few additional areas of need. Fuel assistance does not represent a lot of cases in the intake data but gets a lot of web traffic, suggesting interest in the benefit but perhaps a lower rate of denial. School truancy gets quite a bit of traffic, but in Vermont those cases are represented by public defenders and so do not show up in the intake data reviewed here. Not surprisingly, people have more concerns about the highly contentious area of child custody, visitation and support than divorce in general. In housing, general landlord-tenant law is higher than evictions, but the two areas overlap heavily, and general housing disputes typically proceed an eviction. Criminal Record Expungement is an area of high interest and may indicate that the limited service we currently provide in this area is inadequate. Wills and estates, not surprisingly, represent the highest area of interest in probate-related matters.

VERMONT JUDICIARY DATA

Another parameter for measuring the legal needs of Vermonters is the number of newly filed cases in the Vermont courts. While these statistics encompass all Vermonters regardless of income, the statistics reveal which types of cases predominate in the legal system, and these numbers can be correlated to the types of cases shown in other measures. While the two previous sections looked at two years of data, calendar years 2022 and 2023, the most recently available Judiciary data is from the state's fiscal year 2022, so only that information will be reviewed below. (FY21 data still included periods of COVID-related court closure.)

The following are the legal areas with the highest reported new case filings in the Civil, Family, and Probate divisions of the Vermont Judiciary in FY 2022 (this survey is not reviewing criminal legal needs):⁸

Table 5: Civil Division Court Cases (9520 total cases)

Case Type	# New Filings	% of all Civil Cases
Small Claims (under \$5000)	3485	37%
Eviction	1344	14%
Stalking	1217	13%
Debt Collection (over \$5000)	1150	12%
Residential Foreclosure	405	4%

Table 6: Family Division Court Cases (9502 total cases)

Case Type	# New Filings	% of all Family Cases
Relief from Abuse	3469	37%
Divorce	1855	20%
CHINS/TPR	1218	13%
Mental Health	1179	12%
Delinquency	888	9%
Parentage	728	8%

⁸ The method used to report data used in the 2019 study was somewhat different than used in 2022, and the judiciary moved to a different case management system in the interim period, so the earlier numbers are not included for direct comparison here.

Table 7: Probate Division Court Cases (3749 total cases)

Case Type	# New Filings	% of all Probate Cases
Estates	2648	71%
Guardianship	724	19%
Adoption	321	9%

The first thing to note in Civil Division cases is that these five areas represent 80% of all Civil Division cases filed—and all are areas of need that fall within legal aid priorities for one of the parties (generally defendants). This statistic is a striking demonstration of the unmet need in the civil legal aid system, given the small number of legal aid attorneys in the state compared to the rest of the bar, and the very high percentage of these cases in the Civil Division.

By far the highest number of Civil Division court filings are in debt collection. (While the Small Claims category covers all types of small claims cases, at the time of this information this category overwhelmingly consisted of consumer debt collection cases; subsequent rule changes have shifted some of these cases to regular Civil Division.) Small Claims and other debt collection cases represent over half of Civil filings. Eviction cases are the next most frequent, followed by civil no-stalking cases. The predominance of debt collection is striking, especially given the comparatively smaller numbers of calls for assistance and webpage hits in that area. This data indicates that a high number of low-income Vermonters face debt collection, but likely have more pressing issues such as eviction or family problems that require more immediate attention. The high eviction numbers are consistent with previous data, but another indicator of the severity of the housing crisis. Civil stalking cases (threats of harm from non-family parties) are very high and are reflected in a similarly large number of calls in the case management system.

Family cases are similarly dominated by cases within legal aid priorities. Relief from Abuse is the area of highest need, followed by Divorce. These cases, along with Parentage, are often the subject of calls to the system (in the Judiciary statistics, Divorce and Parentage also encompass custody disputes). Involuntary Mental Health cases are also covered by Vermont Legal Aid, while CHINS/TPR (Child in Need of

Supervision/Termination of Parental Rights) and Delinquency cases in Vermont are handled by public defenders. But as with Civil cases, Family cases that fall within legal aid coverage areas represent 77% of all Family court filings.

Probate represents a small number of overall cases, and in general is less within the purview of legal aid priorities. The domination of estate cases is not surprising, but this figure is consistent with the relatively large number of calls to the system from low-income people looking for help with drafting wills.

Unrepresented Litigants

The Vermont Judiciary also provided data on cases where one or more parties were appearing *pro se*, i.e. not represented by an attorney. For the current study, the focus is on cases where one party is represented but the other is not; in other words, where there is a disparity of legal resources between the parties. In most cases, it is the low-income defendant who is unrepresented: the consumer in a debt collection case, the tenant in an eviction. The following chart shows two years of Judiciary data, FY22 and FY23, where one only one party was represented 85% of the time or more.⁹

Table 8: Judiciary Data of Cases with One Unrepresented Party

Case Type	% FY22	% FY23
Debt Collection—Credit Card	92.23	94.81
Debt Collection—Non-Credit Card	90.26	95.55
Debt Collection--Other	95.79	94.40
Debt Collection--Tax	98.64	97.67
Foreclosure—Nonresidential	86.67	92.00
Foreclosure--Residential	93.51	94.71
Eviction	91.78	87.69
Small Claims \$1000 or less	97.41	97.72
Small Claims \$1000-\$5000	97.09	97.69

⁹ Only case types with a substantial number of filed cases, typically over 100, are included.

These numbers are a clear indication of the deep need for legal resources in the types of cases that impact low-income Vermonters. In every instance, the court cases with the highest disparity of unrepresented parties are cases that most heavily impact low-income Vermonters. As noted above, debt collection cases heavily dominate the Civil docket, and these are cases where the debt collector almost always has an attorney, but the debtor almost always does not. In most of these unrepresented cases, the debtor does not show up to court at all and ends up with a default judgment against them. Foreclosure and eviction cases show a similar disparity, and the only reason these numbers are not higher is that VLA and LSV take on some of these cases for representation, at least on a limited basis.

It is important to note also that in many types of Family cases, both parties are unrepresented in the great majority of cases. For example, in Relief from Abuse cases both parties are unrepresented over 90% of the time. For low-income litigants, the situation is similar for divorce and custody matters. However, especially in the case of Relief from Abuse, there is already an inherent disparity between the parties, and so the fact that a person seeking a protection order is unrepresented often means that they have a lower chance of the order being granted.

VERMONT 211 DATA

Vermont 211 keeps annual statistics on the calls coming into its statewide helpline system, and where these calls were referred. 211 is primarily an information resource rather than a legal service provider, so these numbers encompass many different areas of need. Notably, though, 211 also provides after-hours intake for emergency housing. In 2018, Vermont 211 reported a total of 41,223 contacts; in 2023, this number grew to 50,157. Interestingly, while the number of contacts went up, the number of referrals made based on these contacts went down somewhat, from 26,436 in 2018 to 23,792 in 2023. The highest volume of referrals resulting from those contacts is as follows; this list includes all areas with 100 or more referrals in either year:

Table 9: 2023 and 2018 Vermont 211 Referrals by Volume

Referral Type	2023 # of contacts	2018 # of contacts
Housing/Shelter	9610	9119
Information Services	4145	3432
Disaster Services	2417	77
Tax Services	1997	2330
Public Assistance Programs	939	2272
Utilities	609	773
Government Offices	598	392
Mental Health Assessment/Treatment	424	705
Temporary Financial Assistance	339	902
Legal Services	328	626
Family Support Services	286	369

Food	267	353
Health Support Services	250	638
Youth Services	233	485
Transportation	187	491
Material Goods	117	481
Public Health Services	114	160
Substance Abuse Services	86	168
Consumer Protection	64	212
Legal Assistance Modalities	63	714
Disability Services	51	232
Law Enforcement Services	42	150
Older Adult Services	41	681
Consumer Regulation	32	164
Law Enforcement Agencies	13	106
Public Works	0	156

These numbers represent yet another window into the needs of Vermonters. Because of the nature of the 211 system, these figures typically represent callers who need assistance accessing the social support system, and who may not know where to turn for help. The referrals are not specific to legal problems, but represent areas of social need, often on an emergency basis. The problems reflected here may or may not have a legal component but track legal needs in a variety of ways. For example, a significant number of 211 callers are seeking emergency temporary housing; if the caller is denied housing, this then generates a legal need to challenge the denial. Another way to look at this information is that the need for emergency housing is high because the rate of eviction

and other housing problems is equally high. In certain cases, Vermont 211 refers the caller directly to VLA/LSV for assistance.¹⁰

Within those parameters, the numbers show some interesting trends. Overall, the total number of inquiries to 211 is up by nearly 22%; this figure is consistent with a similar rise in requests for assistance to the LSV-VLA Helpline and increased traffic to the website in the post-pandemic world. Housing referrals remain by far the highest area of inquiry, representing 40% of all referrals. Again, this statistic reinforces the continuing prevalence of housing needs across the state. The second highest category, "Information Services," likely tracks with the "Other Miscellaneous" category in the Intake data—people just looking for where they can turn for help. The largest change from 2018 to 2023 is in Disaster Services, which is specifically tied to the Summer 2023 flooding in Vermont. By contrast, this area only shows up minimally in the intake data, because LSV and VLA only started taking on disaster-related legal issues toward the end of 2023. Tax services and public assistance also have high demand, though in each case lower than five years ago. Most other areas of inquiry lag far behind these primary categories, and again most show a significant drop from the previous study. The reason for this drop is not clear, though some changes may be due to people contacting other resources directly rather than starting with 211.

¹⁰ LSV does periodic training for 211 staff to update them on the types of cases that are appropriate for referral within current priorities.

COMMUNITY LISTENING MEETINGS

LSV and VLA staff conducted a series of public listening sessions throughout the state. These meetings were targeted at Vermont's communities of color, New American communities, and those who might not otherwise be able to access legal services. We also put an emphasis on meetings in the far southern part of Vermont, where there are currently no offices for legal service providers. The meetings took place at the O'Brien Community Center in Winooski, The Root Social Justice Center in Brattleboro, and St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Bennington (in conjunction with the Vermont chapter of the NAACP). The meetings were well attended, with a total of 53 attendees.

During the meetings, attendees were asked several open-ended questions to identify unmet legal needs in their communities, and to identify any concerns or barriers to receiving service from our agencies. The VLA/LSV staff attending the meetings generally avoided asking topic-specific questions, but tried to let individuals identify issues on their own. The staff took notes during the meetings, noting down all individual concerns raised by attendees. These notes were then collated, and the comments sorted by topic to determine the range of issues identified by attendees.

Broadly, two issues dominated the comments: housing and homelessness, and access to legal services. The comments around housing generally echo the issues identified in other parts of this study, with primary concerns around evictions, lack of affordable housing options, and limited services for the growing number of homeless people. Significant concerns were also raised about housing discrimination generally, and specific discriminatory practices against people of color, families with children, migrant workers, and low-income populations. Concerns were also raised about landlords not following required practices, habitability issues, and police involvement in landlord-tenant disputes.

The meetings indicated strong and ongoing concerns about the ability of these communities to access legal services. Individuals in these communities indicated that they did not know what kinds of services were available, and noted language and other access barriers to services.

People in the southern Vermont communities strongly expressed their feelings of isolation, and emphasized the need to have embedded, in-person community legal services to address these needs.

Two other areas of significant concern were a range of civil rights issues and lack of access to social services. These are areas that generally do not show up strongly in other data measures but are clearly of concern to these communities. Civil rights concerns specifically noted police involvement in civil legal issues, people being marginalized by entrenched municipal bureaucracies that exclude outsiders, and broad issues of discrimination against communities of color. Just as participants in the southern part of the state felt isolated from access to legal services, they similarly felt isolated from other social service supports.

Other legal areas that were raised less often, but still of concern, were employment, education, and health care.

The following is a summary of comments made by participants in all sessions, grouped by legal topic area:

Housing:

- Evictions are a very serious issue.
- Landlords are taking huge advantage of undocumented workers, sometimes charging them 2- or 3-times normal rent for very poorly maintained places. This is not just happening in rural areas, but in cities as well.
- Finding affordable housing is difficult. Housing in general is a huge issue. People are moving out of the area, or out of state, because of lack of housing.
- Hotels, restaurants, construction firms and farms are employing large numbers of undocumented workers. Some of these jobs also have housing provided, but people are stuffed into tiny spaces, and then just get kicked out with little or no notice and no legal process. It is basically slave labor/human trafficking.
- There are problems with Section 8. One household member over 18 was required to participate in the LEAP program and was required to do some kind of financial savings plan and was told they had to sign some paperwork, but the document was not explained, and the

person did not know what they were signing. They felt like they were being made to jump through hoops for no reason. The agency was tracking their money. The person felt this was invasive and it felt like they were on probation. Housing authorities are not explaining things to people.

- People in refugee resettlement are experiencing housing discrimination. BIPOC people also have a hard time cashing checks—there are many public accommodations barriers.
- Landlords are charging first and last month's rent and a security deposit, even though they are not supposed to. There are many predatory landlords making unsupported charges and application fees.
- One person discussed experiences with dangerous neighbors and the difficulty in getting assistance with safety. People don't always know about crime victim services. People of color are sometimes fleeing the area due to harassing neighbors.
- There is a great deal of housing discrimination against families with children.
- Some apartment buildings are being classified by police as a "high response property" if police are called there—this is prejudicial against tenants facing domestic violence or harassment.
- One participant noted she knew of older women who were going around town knocking on doors looking to rent a room because they cannot afford rent. But there are problems with people letting others stay in their houses for free, due to benefit eligibility issues.
- There is a stigma around being subject to legal issues like eviction and foreclosure—people don't want to ask for help or let others know.
- There are many evictions, especially from slum lords. The local town does not enforce code violations. There is one person from the Dept. of Health (Town Health Officer) but he doesn't have much authority.
- There is widespread housing discrimination, along with lack of housing and lack of transportation.
- Landlords are charging application fees and background check fees even though they are not supposed to.
- The low-income housing providers require overly frequent recertification.

Homelessness:

- There is a new ordinance about “Acceptable Community Behavior” that is clearly targeting homeless people. The local government is trying to exit homeless people from the area. People in emergency housing situations are often segregated by various categories. There are extensive discrimination issues underlying emergency housing.
- There are housing units sitting empty, but landlords won’t allow “undesirable” people in them.
- People get put in motel rooms through the emergency housing program, but they have no transportation and no food. There is no coordination of services, and people get stranded. People getting services need coordinated service plans—the service providers don’t talk to each other. There is a great need for coordinated behavioral health services.
- Transportation is a big problem—there are some services available, but it takes time to get them set up.
- There needs to be community safety—a culture of safety. Homeless people don’t have supports.

Access to Legal Services:

- People in New American communities do not use the phone or the internet to reach out for help. You have to work through a trusted person in the community and set up in-person meetings with interpreters where people will come. Some people do use What’s App. But you need to bring the legal services to the community.
- Some people do look at Facebook, but it would help to have posts in other languages. We need to do more to increase Facebook following, have people like the pages, and boost the posts so that they reach people—increase strategies to drive web traffic to these pages.
- One visitor reported a situation where her landlord was trying to take advantage of her and asking her to pay fees for allegedly bringing a mouse into the house. The landlord said he did not pass the Section 8 inspection and tried to make the tenant pay more money when in fact he had passed inspection.

- People in new American communities think they can't access legal services because of immigration status.
- We need more public knowledge about available services.
- There needs to be a legal community resource center. We need more local legal information sessions—live and in person. There should be a space for in-person connection that is well publicized, so people can discuss issues before they turn into a crisis.
- People in crisis don't have the bandwidth or energy to access legal resources.
- Reach out to youth through Instagram and Tik Tok—make a short reel directing people to the website. More info about legal resources should be in schools.
- There should be local offices for legal services in southern Vermont, especially for people with language barriers. Many new American women don't drive.
- Lots of enthusiasm for a mobile legal aid office/justice bus and for having legal clinics at local spaces like The Root. Have meetings like this one more often.
- We need legal Community Navigators/Advocates. They need to have cultural competency to provide support. People are wrapped up in multiple systems that they have to navigate. It's too complicated. These advocates need to be someone within the community that other people will listen to. These advocates need to have a physical presence in this community—without that there is no ownership of the needs of the community. The advocates need to build credibility in the community. Someone who is known in the community—people who are working for the community and can build relationships. You can't just come in for a day and fix the problems.
- There are not enough lawyers in the community—there are lots of conflicts so they can't do the work that people need. The legal community is very cliquish. There is a small, tight network of lawyers who won't fight against each other.

Civil Rights:

- One person was concerned about being required to sign up for the draft, and about military people visiting in schools—was concerned this may be a civil rights issue.
- Concern about restrictions on religious items hanging in cars, or bumper stickers.
- Language access—not all entities that get federal funding provide language access services.
- DCF is regularly violating people's rights.
- Issues with stop and arrest, especially BIPOC people.
- Homelessness, immigration and deportation are big issues in the community.
- There are barriers to trust in the community. There is retaliation for speaking up. People may not come to public meetings like this one out of fear. It is challenging for people to tell their stories due to the consequences and lack of responsiveness to their needs. There is no accountability among town officials.
- Police are targeting people who are trying to recover from opioid addiction. The police are not accountable. "Unwanted" people are invited out of the community—they are "those people." There is clear targeting of people of color and anyone who is "other." Police bad behavior get hidden.
- There is no inclusive representation on community committees. Strong public advocates are targeted for retaliation. The town officials are hoarding power. There is a culture of abuse of power. All of the people in power are friends, and there is an inbred police culture.
- Bennington is isolated. It is a forgotten community.
- Many people's voices aren't valued. There are lots of control mechanisms.
- The community feels disempowered and so they don't show up—people are discouraged.
- There is a great deal of discrimination against people with low socio-economic status and people with disabilities.

Access to Social Services:

- In accessing benefits, the paperwork for state services is a huge barrier. There is a 28 page form for food stamps. There are also language barriers for the application process.
- Grandparents are taking on family duties for parents who can't provide a safe environment. The grandparents don't know about services—the parents don't know about them either.
- People need more help with forms for court and services. Forms need to be in plain language—court, DCF, schools, etc.
- Vermont sees itself as exceptional, but we're not. We need to look at other models from other states.
- Police are going to landlords saying, "you don't want this person in your apartment." This kind of behavior is officially prohibited in town policy, but it still happens.
- There is a lot of corruption in town management and the police.
- People are working two jobs and are exhausted just meeting their basic needs. They don't have the time or energy to do advocacy.
- There is a constellation of issues—housing, health and safety. There is discrimination across the board.
- We should be maintaining COVID-era community and financial support.
- Lack of response from Social Security when people apply.

Health Care:

- New American communities also are facing health care issues, but in that area, it is easier to find support.
- Many people are facing complex health care and insurance issues.
- There is widespread discrimination against people in recovery.

Education:

- School to prison pipeline issues—concerns about School Resource Officers and bringing police into schools.
- There are lots of problems with schools and IEPs. There is not enough legal support for school issues. Schools can't keep up with IEPs and 504s. Schools are actively encouraging parents to take their kids off IEPs or shipping them out of the district. The schools

have staffing shortages—uncredentialed people are taking on students. There is a lack of classroom assistance which can lead to abusive situations. Parents don't know their rights. Schools are more concerned with litigation than with student services. There needs to be institutional advocacy for parents—they are relying on volunteers. Unaddressed behavior problems lead to lack of learning in schools.

- There needs to be an educational ombudsman to help families.

Employment:

- Labor law violations and unfair labor practices for New Americans are a big problem in that community.
- New Americans will often go to work for temp agencies—the agencies fish for people to work with them—but then they do not have a secure job or any benefits. The companies who employ temps will often bring on people and then let them go the minute they don't need them. Some temp agencies will provide transportation to people to a job site, but then people who don't have a car are essentially trapped working for the temp agencies. People need support to be directly hired into regular jobs.
- There is really no regulation of the temp agencies. Assignments can be cancelled at will. When they are let go, people are told to apply for unemployment, but then they have a very hard time trying to figure out the system—they wait on the phone for hours, and sometimes just give up. The 3 job search contacts rule is a problem for these populations—very hard for LEP communities. Temp jobs are not close to where they live, or not a job they want to do. Many people wind up getting disqualified for Unemployment, but they don't want to take the time or effort to appeal. This then affects their health and mental health. Many New Americans come from highly traumatic situations and already have PTSD, and this makes it worse.
- There is no support for people to report unfair labor practices. They don't file complaints because they feel too overwhelmed.

COMMUNITY PARTNER LEGAL NEEDS SURVEY

We solicited a broad range of Community Partner agencies to complete a survey of community legal needs. We made the solicitation through an email request to our outreach list of partner agencies and through social media. Twenty community partners responded to the survey. The survey included yes/no, multiple choice, and open-ended questions. The responses received are as follows, followed by some observations about the responses:

1. Have your clients ever used the services of Vermont Legal Aid or Legal Services Vermont (formerly “Law Line”)?

Yes 20

No 0

2. Vermont Legal Aid and Legal Services Vermont provide free civil (not criminal) legal services to Vermonters who qualify for our services. Of the following areas, please check the three most important legal areas where we should offer help.

Housing/Eviction	16
Family/Divorce/Custody	9
Benefits/Social Security/Other State Benefits	7
Elder Law	6
Disability Rights	6
Health Care	5
Victims of Crime	5
Money/Debt Collection/Bankruptcy	2
Education	2
Employment	1
Wills and Estates	0
Other	0

These two questions indicate that the partner agencies access legal services for their clients (though arguably people who do not also did not answer the survey), and that they identify the same legal needs as seen in earlier discussions. A few areas, such as disability rights and elder law, likely reflect the specific focus areas of these providers.

3. From your perspective, what are the most pressing civil (not criminal) legal needs you see in your community?

- No-cause evictions resulting in homelessness, people with disabilities being controlled by landlords (not understanding tenants' rights and being taken advantage of), lack of protections for Vermonters with disabilities in court (parental rights, etc.)
- Housing that is safe, legal, and accessible. This means unpolluted air, no violence or unauthorized entry from landlords against tenants, and timely maintenance by staff who do not enter unless they have provided adequate warning time. Also, elders and people with disabilities are being targeted for financial abuse by banking firms and we receive several dozen reports yearly of folks who were told that their fully paid mortgage wasn't legal anymore after their bank was purchased by a larger bank conglomerate. Finally, this complaint comes from literally every single person I have ever worked with in this job, local doctors provide poor service to everyone and will frequently belittle individuals with disabilities when they visit the doctor's office. Patients who report poor behavior from doctors are met with a shortage of adequate doctors as well as retaliation from the doctors they report. Doctors will often refuse to mark an illness that an individual has repeatedly sought treatment for and instead write that the person is hypochondriac, argumentative, and "resisting treatment", while failing to provide any adequate care.
- In the Chittenden County area housing is definitely the biggest issue I see. There is not much available housing, and it allows landlords to bully and control their tenants. Issue as landlords are able to evict their tenants. They are able to issue them evictions without much justification and denied them their rights under the ADA/FHA and tenants are afraid to speak up against them.

- We are currently serving the unmet needs of disabled people attempting to navigate an ongoing and worsening pandemic including people at high risk of harms and newly disabled Longhaulers. They are losing access to their jobs, homes, medical care, education, and-in some cases-kids. They have been pushed out of all aspects of society including even the most basic right to vote but due to collective trauma and mass desire to move on, we are seeing things such as even neonatal surgeons and cancer doctors refusing basic protections and accommodations (that used to be provided pre-pandemic). There is also a lot of reasonable fear due to threats of educational neglect/truancy cases being pushed by AOE and the feds, and bias and even violence for people who continue to take common sense measures to protect their health (especially given the mask bans happening in even blue areas such as New York).
- Housing and interpersonal civil disputes
- Divorce and parentage. There are often folks in DV situations who have a difficult time navigating.
- Tenant rights, LTC Ombudsman, financial planning/advice for benefits programs (namely LTC Medicaid)
- Housing related needs
- Evictions, child custody
- Unhoused individuals.
- Helping people avoid eviction or get the eviction dismissed.
- Housing. Representation in Family Court custody disputes. Victims of crime, including but not limited to domestic abuse.
- Assistance for renters facing rent increases, terminations and evictions, retaliation and legally questionable lease terms.
- Family Law
- Healthcare, employment, education, hospitalization, financial: bankruptcy, foreclosure, scams, etc., domestic violence, family law

These comments provide valuable details and insights into the specific nature of these legal issues, especially the scope and depth of the housing crisis.

4. From your perspective, what are the most important civil (not criminal) legal areas where people need help but can't get it?
- Access to housing, and access to adequate doctors who do not abuse their patients.
 - An issue that I am seeing the growing number of people need assistance with but cannot get any legal help is applying and appealing SSI/SSDI benefits. My clients are almost automatically denied these benefits after they first applied and don't really know where to go afterwards for help. There are also getting kicked off or charged with overpayments and do not know what to do when this happens. They cannot find any legal help when this issue comes up.
 - Housing is number one, always. But after housing, it is healthcare, employment, education, and public accommodations.
 - Help with creating agreements with other neighbors addressing quality of life issues between them
 - Housing
 - Family court matters. I refer folks to the Network, but it is difficult to get representation. In addition, even basic legal questions of what their rights are or how to pursue pro se is challenging.
 - Workers comp issues, issues related to racial discrimination
 - Bankruptcy, money matters
 - Family law.
 - Helping people avoid eviction or get the eviction dismissed.
 - Family Court Representation and Child Support legal support /services are really challenging for clients.
 - Representation in Family Court Custody matters.
 - See above, particularly around no cause lease terminations and unusual circumstances with extenuating circumstances (fair housing, disability complications for example) that arise very frequently for renters (fire/water damage, exorbitant add-on maintenance fees, contract terms that aren't clear, etc.).
 - Evictions
 - Healthcare, employment, education, hospitalization, financial: bankruptcy, foreclosure, scams, etc., domestic violence, family law

These comments also emphasize some of the same concerns in the last section, but with greater emphasis on the unmet needs of clients in family court representation, which is the area mentioned with greatest frequency.

5. Are there barriers that prevent Vermonters from getting civil legal services? What are they?

- Barriers such as mistrust of state/government agencies either due to trauma and/or TBIs/developmental disabilities/intellectual disabilities/dementia and other mental health issues
- Yes: cost, as well as an education gap between lawyers who want to help and the issues that arise when a disabled person is being abused or refused treatment by their doctors. I truly believe that if there were a larger number of lawyers with a strong familiarity with Vermont's medical system, there would be less "explaining time" needed from each individual seeking help.
- There is not enough available free/low cost legal services for people who are low income and the services that are available take a very long time to play out as the lawyers who are available to the services are often very overworked with a high caseload.
- Funds, time, spoons.
- money, education, perceived intimidation of the legal "system"
- Money in general. I work with mostly low income folks who cannot afford any legal services.
- Income, not available or getting calls back
- eligibility requirements
- There is money and also time. When we have called it was a long time for them to receive help and by the time Legal Aid contacts them they are already evicted and unhoused.
- Money, awareness, and sometimes it hard to get a response back in time / schedule an appointment when a client is available.
- The process can be challenging for those without support services/advocacy.
- Definitely. 1. Accessing phone services within the limited time they are available; 2. Service response wait times that aren't helpful to the urgency of the situation; 3. Income limits to access Legal Aid but people can't find or pay for private lawyers (the VBA LRS hasn't been

able to keep up with demand); 4. Intimidation of the process and defeatism based on prior experience (with any legal system, not necessarily within VT).

- Financial
- money, access to legal services, too many agencies but few willing to take on the tasks

These comments highlight the impact of limited resources in the legal services system. Most comments focus either on there not being enough assistance, or the wait times for a response, which are both symptomatic of limited resources and low staffing.

6. What can Vermont Legal Aid and Legal Services Vermont do to make it easier to access our services?

- Plain language, posters in places like grocery stores/libraries (many people do not have computers and many don't have access to a phone with data), holding workshops/services in public places like libraries
- Being clear about waiting times, the issues that can be helped with, and if possible, the pricing for civil legal assistance elsewhere would all be helpful.
- Provide a listing of all low-cost legal services available to people on each different subject so that they may know where to go for help in addition to VLA.
- Have an option to email or text rather than have to wait for a callback which requires immediate answering.
- More walk-up days perhaps? Some people get frustrated it takes a while for a call back. We explain how busy and overloaded staff are and also understand the anxiety people face. Maybe some other "how tos" that are easy to digest if that isn't already an option?
- Increase intake staff to answer phones
- Your services are great and are very accessible!
- Call them back.
- ensure the courts are educating the public.
- More staff and less of a wait time
- If it was easier to schedule an appointment to speak to someone. Once I've made contact people have been so incredibly helpful but it

can be hard to line up client and legal advocate to be on the phone at the same time.

- Add capacity! I highly appreciate the work that you all do and know you are not currently staffed to meet community needs.
- I find that access is less of a problem then capacity
- meet the clients where they are, listen to them, don't be afraid to advocate zealously for them.

Besides the previous emphasis on expanding limited resources, there are helpful suggestions here around making services more accessible through language services, more public information, and increased presence in communities.

7. Have your clients used the VtLawHelp.org web site?

Yes 12

No 4

No Response 4

8. What legal resources would be most helpful to have on a statewide web site?

- It varies from person to person. Would be helpful to have more information for community partners to better help individuals. Community partners still have to wait 2-3 weeks for a response.
- A fast way for people who are being neglected by their doctors to report the issue, since it is extremely common.
- list of mediators willing to facilitate difficult conversations
- Defining some of the terms on forms to help it be more digestible for the client or the service provider trying to help
- Renters' rights, parental rights
- The website is terrific - really well done.
- I find the website very helpful

In general, it appears that clients are using the website, but there are helpful suggestions for further enhancements.

9. Do you have any thoughts about other ways that we can serve Vermonters better?

- hold discussions and open meetings in public places like libraries and ask Vermonters what their needs are
- Obviously more staff would be wonderful whenever possible, but I am aware that there are cost limitations to free legal advocacy. The work you're doing is impactful and deeply appreciated, and I would love for more of that to be available to more people!
- Continue to send out information to service providers!
- legal clinics with interpreters and cultural liaisons present
- I had a client that reached out and were told they would be called back and never were. They tried to reach out numerous times.
- Free walk-in legal clinics weekly for half hour consults on simpler matters.
- Family Law - The power imbalance between parents/spouses that can afford an attorney and those that can't is extremely frustrating for the clients and the court

There is a notably emphasis here on the need for greater opportunities for in-person legal assistance within communities.

10. What county do you live in?

Chittenden	6
Washington	4
Addison	3
Bennington	1
Caledonia	1
Grand Isle	1
Rutland	1
Didn't Answer	3

This is a reasonable geographic spread, with some representation from Vermont's more remote and rural counties.

11. How do you know about Vermont Legal Aid and Legal Services Vermont?

- community partner
- VCIL refers folks to VLA and LSV every week for a variety of concerns!
- I am a peer advocate who works with people with disabilities will often need legal assistance. I am also a person with a disability who has worked with the Disability Law Project on healthcare related issues.
- Organizational and personal experience
- have known about VLA from personal experience and client experiences
- Peer partner
- I work at a police department.
- I'm a social worker and often refer clients and collaborate with your lawyers
- I used the service years ago and community agencies
- Through personal and work experience
- By practice. The folks who work there are amazing!!
- I work for the statewide VT Tenants program at CVOEO in Chittenden County.
- Resource manual
- refer clients to you

12. Thanks for your help! If you want to find out more, please visit Vermont's legal help website, vtlawhelp.org. Is there anything else you would like us to know?

- Thank you for all your continued hard work! I know it is not easy to serve in a field where there is always constant need. Your service is noticed and appreciated!
- Thanks for all you do!
- Thank you for the work you do.
- Thanks for your work.

PUBLIC LEGAL NEEDS SURVEY

We conducted a public survey through Survey Monkey to get another window into the broad legal needs of Vermonters. The survey was open from early September through the middle of October 2024. The survey was publicized on social media and on our websites, by e-mails to community partner agencies, and by handouts at various events and at community listening sessions. A total of 31 people completed the survey. The results of the survey are as follows, with comments following the questions:

1. Have you ever used the services of Vermont Legal Aid or Legal Services Vermont (formerly “Law Line”)?

Yes	17
No	14

2. Vermont Legal Aid and Legal Services Vermont provide free civil (not criminal) legal services to Vermonters who qualify for our services. Of the following areas, please check the three most important legal area where we should offer help.

Housing/Eviction	21
Disability Rights	14
Family/Divorce/Custody	9
Health Care	8
Victims of Crime	8
Education	6
Money/Debt Collection/Bankruptcy	5
Benefits/Social Security/Other State Benefits	4
Elder Law	3
Employment	3

Wills and Estates	2
Other	
Tax issues for recently disabled	1
Encroachment	1
Civil Rights	1
Post DV legal aid for a middle class individual	1

Housing, family and health care still show up as the central areas. The interesting difference here is the prevalence of disability rights. Given the relatively small response pool, this could reflect a specific segment of Vermonters who saw and responded to the survey (perhaps at the encouragement of service providers who also answered the community partner survey).

3. From your perspective, what are the most pressing civil (not criminal) legal needs you see in your community?

- No-Fault Evictions. Barriers for low-income, or people with disabilities accessing support
- People need help accessing housing that they can afford. Tenants need to know their rights and how to stand up to abusive landlords. Housing is the most urgent need by far, and your website provides a lot on that front. I am most concerned about educational rights and protections for students in our community.
- Disability rights-tax/debt/medical esp, related to disability
- Help with filing appeals that my ex-landlord continued discrimination against me.
- mediation, neighbor disputes, environmental violations
- Personally I have been unable to find a job for close to a year because of a complete lack of remote work options or flexibility, up to and including flatly illegal pre-employment questions regarding disability. So that feels very pressing to me.
- Neighborly disputes. As a queer woman with long time disability and costly chronic health conditions it's difficult to go against neighbor encroaching with more privilege power and access to resources. This impacts my day to day well being on levels I have never imagined. I worked very hard to achieve health to be a

homeowner on disability. I'd love to see your services expand into this area for those of us who qualify. I help issuing no trespass when there are easement rights

- Health care, elderly issues, property and housing
- Tons of kids not being provided FAPE or services and no accountability
- Corporate impunity / no way to be made whole / get compensated appropriately when wronged.
- Divorce/custody stuff involving intimate partner violence. So many lawyers are so bad at supporting survivors.
- Discrimination
- Housing issues
- I regularly hear from parents of disabled kids that their children are being denied an appropriate education.
- Assisting people in need is paramount. It's a "whack a Mole" situation, I appreciate the concept of Vt Legal Aid, housing shortage, unscrupulous landlords and disasters put an untenable pressure on the organization. That said, without addressing the need for change in the laws that perpetuate the issues, Laws that get a landlords attention and motivate a mediation settlement vs the current process of no accountability discouraging repeat Bad Actors. The workload and "lather rinse repeat" method is a waste of precious resources and a recipe for burn out. Even when a landlord has a judgement against them in Court, the burden of collecting is on the victim. Where is the logic and how does it discourage any landlord from repeating. Where does a plaintiff learn how to collect their judgment? Where are the safeguards against landlords filing delaying tactics prolonging the process? That burden is one the average person can't do on their own. Where are the penalties for landlord laws? What's the point of winning a judgment you'll never collect? Change is needed in the law. The laws are Pro landlord. Is this the best use of the limited resources of legal aid when nothing changes? Where is the department addressing these Bad Actor landlords who are hiding in plain site?
- health and safety as homeowners in a mobile home cooperative and possibly discrimination issues toward home owners
- VT is too expensive for normal people. housing too expensive. discrimination everywhere

- Lack of FAPE for youth with disabilities
- Family and probate issues.
- Services for victims of crime and housing-related issues are the most pressing, I feel.
- property and neighbor disputes, civil rights issues
- DV, Housing EOL/ACP for those with no POA/ guardianship
- Family/divorce/custody needs. Victims of crimes
- housing, people not knowing what their landlords can and cannot do, what they as tenant can do or not
- Getting courts to act timely
- Education and disability
- Housing rights
- Eviction and other housing related issues
- family/child custody/eviction housing

These comments broadly reflect the major areas of housing and family law as frequent concerns. There is also an emphasis in these comments on need for support in Special Education cases, and area that has seen a significant decrease in available legal assistance in the last ten years.

4. From your perspective, what are the most important civil (not criminal) legal areas where people need help but can't get it?

- No-Fault Evictions. Barriers for low-income, or people with disabilities accessing support. Especially the online glitches for applying to programs, the hours long wait on hold to talk to an Agent, and finally the lack of information around Medicaid prescription rules.
- People who speak limited English are not able to access many of the supports that already exist, even with a fully translatable website. There is a huge gap in education of new Americans as to what their rights are and what they should expect from employers, landlords, their kids schools, their health insurance provider, etc. VT Language Project does good work to translate legal info and USCRI/AALV help with families they directly case manage, but there are far too many adults and children who are being taken advantage of and don't know when, who, or how to get help.

- For me, understanding the law, in regards to employers (ADA), was difficult when suddenly very ill. I did not know where to turn and lost health insurance/job/etc.
- Systemic racism in housing.
- standing up to powerful entities that are funded by tax dollars, for example, filing complaints or expressing frustration with municipalities, hospitals, lawyers that protect those organizations sometimes really victimize whistleblowers
- Employment law.
- Property and housing issues
- Education.
- Getting support for disability accommodations in schools / workplaces (with the increasing number of disabled people from the ongoing pandemic, this will be very important), fair housing
- Evictions/bad landlord stuff
- Education and hospitals denial of ADA accommodations
- Housing issues
- Parents of disabled kids have little to no support when fighting for their kids' right to an education.
- Help is available but the resources are limited so housing civil rights AND changing Landlord laws in Vermont. Accountability! Using the limited resources to fight a valid civil matter is critical BUT when there is monetary judgement with no law or penalties to come full circle, something is very wrong and needs to change.
- we need help in civil area's where we can't afford attorney's as we are low to middle income and some of us are disabled and or retired and our rents pay for lawyers that only seem to protect a board of directors not the residents whose money pays for their services
- discrimination
- Education
- Family and probate issues.
- I am not sure.
- medical or end of life or estate planning
- Personally- affordable legal help post DV. Community - eek. I repeat my own issue, as well as a strong need for education to folks working in the legal/ courts on DV/SA.(There's some ancient thinking and uninformed judges out there in this state.)

- Family/divorce/custody needs. Victims of crimes Probably housing also
- Last minute landlord issues, where they get threatened and do not know how to handle
- All areas
- Education
- Family/divorce/custody- not in DCF cases where representation is provided but in cases where parents do not get along and need to separate but cannot do so amicably and don't know how to navigate.
- Legal representation during eviction proceedings
- child custody cases

These comments are a helpful reflection of the scope and depth of the unmet legal needs. The topics covered here are broad and specific, likely reflecting actual unmet needs of the participants. Eviction, family, and disability rights are central topics, but the need is widespread and deep.

5. Are there barriers that prevent Vermonters from getting civil legal services? What are they?

- There are those who have transportation or mobility issues. Cost is also a barrier.
- LANGUAGE, illiteracy, and lack of access to technology.
- It is hard to know who to call, who can help.
- cost
- Lack of knowledge about what rights are being violated, too much self-advocacy required
- Finances. Disability. Weighing out buying medicine to risk retirement and ability to maintain housing.
- Money
- Money
- lack of funds / lack of people to support them, unclear ways to get help
- The timelines/waitlists are bonkers. Situations move faster than the system does. Also discrimination--transphobia and bias against folks with disabilities or poor folks are common when seeking legal support

- Pandemic denial, cost, lack of precedent, immune supremacy
- Money, not knowing things
- Resources and the ability of some people to present a case affectively that meets the criteria of a winnable case. Again.. what's the point if landlords aren't held accountable?
- the biggest barrier that i see is money and that these cooperatives use our own money against us
- only help with some things
- Too much effort to access
- Money to pay attorney fees.
- Lack of knowledge about whom to contact.
- Cost are intimidating--sometimes just need to find a place to get few legal questions answered without seeking representation
- Yes. Absolutely. Because I put myself through school as a younger person (using loans & scholarships) , and have a " good " job, I have * not once * qualified for * any * help during the 10+ years of DV- or after our abuser died. I was told to "settle his affairs" after his death, even though a divorce was granted shortly prior. I've never been able to recover from the financial abuse and I feel as if I will be privy to high interest rates, denied loans, living in a rental until I die, passing inherited debt to my children who I single handedly raised (to be college students - not perpetuating this cycle). I cannot afford an attorney to help sort through the financial mess I was left after my abuser stole my assets and identity. This has left me feeling hopeless, bitter and cynical of this "system." I don't like to compare sad stories, but this theme has been shared with me from other survivors who work their lives away to stay afloat, but can't get an ounce of assistance bc of that.
- Absolutely there are major barriers: financial, lack of availability of attorneys, legal aid caseloads being too high, lack of public information available.
- Knowing who and where to call, understanding their rights, listening to people who are not professionals and believing what they are told.
- Cost'
- Resources, cost, access
- Learning differences- inability to read or process information, or write.
- Lack of knowledge, fear, distrust

- too much income make to much to get services.

These comments reflect many barriers, but the primary theme is lack of money. Several comments focus on those who make too much money to qualify for legal services but still cannot possibly afford an attorney. Language and transportation barriers are also notable.

6. What can Vermont Legal Aid and Legal Services Vermont do to make it easier to access our services?

- I think you do a great job. If there was more funding; you could hire more workers :)
- Hire multilingual staff to do community outreach to get this info out to communities not fluent in English and/or individuals who are not literate and can't use your website. Remove assumptions of what your clients already know and provide clear, culturally accessible info for new community members. In particular do NOT assume that other organizations (local schools, hospitals, etc.) are considering the needs of these populations and actively provide info about what individuals should expect in terms of protections and services from these institutions.
- Maybe simple print (6th grade or less) versions of fliers in community spaces; doctors, laundry mats, etc. Also with examples of what you help with.
- Hiring more attorneys to help poor, black and Hispanic people.
- more outreach
- I think some sort of hotline would be excellent.
- Expand on offerings to include what I wrote here for example. These issues matter and impact health negatively.
- More resources, more advice. Even property owners need help.
- I believe your strategy isn't aggressive enough to have an impact broadly
- Free / low cost service without qualification, more referrals
- Increase capacity to reduce timelines? Easier said than done, I know. Just get way bigger! lol
- Offer assistance to those facing discrimination due to their disability not only cases you think you can win.

- Not sure
- Online basic videos or audio explaining different areas of housing rights, examples, the process and the reality of best case scenario including collecting monies owed or judgements in their favor.
- have people answering your phones and get back to Vermonters asking for help in a timely manner issues for the people that call for your help are very real to them and if nothing else deserve to be heard.
- more lawyers
- More info on how you access and what they can do
- Pop-up legal clinics monthly.
- Distribute information to food pantries, grocery stores, and the bus terminal.
- Walk in clinics. Info sessions on common topics Increase employees or volunteers expand eligibility expand hours?
- I haven't accessed for the reasons noted above. Another "no you make * too much money * might push me over the edge.
- Somehow increase client capacity. Put money into outreach and advertising.
- Better education, maybe start before they are adults, introduce their services in junior high and high school so when they are adults they have some idea, meet them at fairs, at farmers markets, parades and such
- Bring more lawyers to our area
- Have more contact points- in Dr offices, etc.
- Southern Vermont could use some local access in person, if this does not already exist.
- Promotion and outreach, easy online communication via website
DESIGNED FOR PHONE
- change the rules on how much income you can make.

The general theme here is the need for expanded resources and more direct community-based support. Expanded public education is also a prominent theme.

7. Have you used the VtLawHelp.org web site?

Yes

18

No 12

No Response 1

8. What legal resources would be most helpful to have on a statewide web site?

- Who to contact, along with procedures, for challenging program decisions.
- Way more about educational law in this country and particularly how it differs from other places. Making a section like the one in Special Education but about students' rights to education regardless of language barrier and the legal requirement of schools to provide English Language services and accommodations (phenomenally lacking in VT schools). Provide info to parents (and anyone) about how to advocate and lodge complaints if their rights are not being respected.
- ADA rights. SSI help Medical billing help/rights And what the financial guidelines are to access services.
- More of what landlords can do to retaliate against ex-tenants
- community social services, hotlines, low cost legal options
- Free or low cost attorney. 303 an hour is not affordable.
- Property law, family law
- Ways to get in contact with a human who can help with different categories of issues
- ADA accommodation request forms with the law included, complaint forms and the body they go too, disability trust forms and information
- Additional forms for debt, dealing with collectors, tips, i.e.: if you agree to a payment plan you flag your account and the clock starts over for when it falls off your credit report. How to negotiate debt effectively.
- help being advised about civil suits and the filing of suits if they have merit
- fill-in forms
- Easy to fill forms.

- Housing and victims of crime.
- List of expungement clinics, pro bono resources, social service agencies, low cost/ no cost mediation options restorative justice centers
- I've used this website for the patients I work with who need to access services. The irony is nauseating. - victim advocacy - real, practical and viable/ actually in existence in VT resources for assistance for those who don't fit into your box.
- Easy access to: Information about your services. Legal forms, and clear instructions on each. Clear instructions and guidance on each filing process for each district. Contact information for each district.
- Most up to date info on what is happening with housing, any changes with benefits that may affect people in general,
- Help for parents of children with disabilities navigate the school systems
- Direct links with examples using plain English stating what the problem that needs to be addressed
- VT Legal Aid legal services toll-free numbers and local numbers and list of names of lawyers.

There are many good suggestions about further potential enhancements for online resources.

9. Do you have any thoughts about other ways that we can serve Vermonters better?

- Reach out to the communities affected by COVID- I am one of the essential workers disabled with LC. Many worked in schools, health care, nursing homes and we need your help. Fired and left without insurance. Refused accommodations. We need help. Also, once you get disabled, legal help for financial ruin. I had no savings and now have a huge tax bill I can't pay.
- Give more help for us
- more expungement clinics and limited or restricted legal advice (sometimes someone just needs a few simple questions answered.. maybe help with legal paperwork for some the documents alone are too daunting to consider (learning disability, severe anxiety)

- Please provide a callback number when one is working and misses call it can often be weeks more before another callback happens. I don't make us do the like multiple times!!
- More assertive on behalf of clients rights. Neurodiversity training and education for staff
- Help organizations understand immune supremacist policies violate immune compromised people's civil rights and access needs. You do you doesn't work with public health.
- Change the housing Laws. Get penalties and timelines into law that landlords must meet or additional penalties will automatically be attached to the original judgement. Design a program showing how to collect a judgement. Give renters a fighting chance AND discourage the landlords including those in the judicial System by making their name and all judgements a matter of public record. Then make the information available to the public, easy online access to a list of cases, judgements, dates and names of the property and the owners.
- i think by helping in more areas of civil law such as people's rights and maybe working with other agency's such as CVOEO and other organizations to get Vermonters the help they need
- Free legal clinics. Mediation services.
- Help with paperwork
- See above.
- Increase your capacity, availability. I've heard of many people being turned away or not receiving any help, or even a call back.
- Local forums and education opportunities all ages, also in work sites landlord education
- I think you do a great job.
- Help people who are disabled and also help the homeless people.

Again, the primary theme here is the need for more resources.

10. Please answer a few questions to let us know who you are.

What county do you live in?

Chittenden	13
Lamoille	4
Addison	3

Windham	2
Bennington	2
Franklin	1
Washington	1
Caledonia	1
Essex	1
No Response	3

11. My gender is:

Male	3
Female	26
Non-binary	1
No Response	1

12. I identify myself as (please check all that apply):

African-American	1
Asian	0
Black	0
Hispanic	2
Native American	0
Pacific Islander	0
White	27
Decline to Answer	1

Other (French Canadian) 1

The demographics show a good geographic distribution across the state. The respondents were overwhelmingly female; the race distribution is not surprising, but please see the notes above from the in-person community sessions for input from communities of color.

13. Have you been involved with any civil (not criminal) legal actions in the last three years?

Yes 14

No 16

No Response 1

14. If yes, were you able to get an attorney to help you?

Yes 6

No 9

Didn't have a civil legal case 12

No Response 4

Less than half of those who reported legal cases were able to get representation.

15. How do you know about Vermont Legal Aid and Legal Services Vermont?

- posters, word-of-mouth, physical building
- I live a block away, and I've known people who have used VT Legal Aid.
- Just vaguely heard about it. Didn't need it until now.

- I was helped before and was disappointed with the way it went through.
- knew someone who worked there
- Tried to get legal assistance from you for a disability discrimination case, unsuccessfully.
- I work in human services and have been on many disability and mh related boards
- The building
- VCIL
- I work in the survivor support field. Thanks for all you do!!!
- I attempted to use the service and was denied assistance.
- Conference about trans people at uvm
- Online search
- i learned of legal aid for the Vermont attorney generals office for consumers
- just name. . legal aid, been around I guess?
- Worked as a paralegal before retirement.
- From news articles.
- Worked nearby
- I'm an RN care manager for the major health network in VT. Aside from this, the survey on Clarina's page struck my interest as I've had difficulty accessing services bc I "make so much money"....
- Referral from domestic violence organization.
- I have used them 1st as a client and second as a professional advocate
- Google
- Have contacted online and via phone. Never connected beyond the "intake"
- The internet
- Awareness and community knowledge, client used VLA to avoid eviction in court
- Your website and brochure

16. Thanks for your help! If you want to find out more, please visit Vermont's legal help website, vtlawhelp.org. Is there anything else you would like us to know?

- A sincere thank you for doing what you do.
- Ok I know that the staff has changed and I am hoping that we are treated with more respect and dignity especially in the housing situation...
- Keep doing your work. I love referring people to you!!
- You are appreciated.
- I appreciate the mission statement for the work but change needs to be part of the process.
- Thank you!
- Outside of the box thinking is good.
- I think for the most part Legal aid does a great job and during COVID did fabulously under terrible conditions with constantly changing rules by DEC and the state, appreciate your work.

CONCLUSIONS

Vermonters, especially low-income and vulnerable Vermonters, continue to face broad and substantial unmet civil legal needs. By virtually every measure in this study, the most pressing legal problems are more severe in volume and scope than they were five years ago. Vermonters grapple on a daily basis with serious and life-changing legal challenges and are often unable to get the legal assistance they need to negotiate the legal system. Substantial needs are present across the entire spectrum of civil legal subject areas, but several core areas persistently rise to the top of the legal needs list: housing, healthcare, and family.

Vermont's housing problems are at crisis level. Five years ago, housing was the highest area of demand in requests for service to the intake system and was consistently the most frequently identified need by participants in public meetings and in surveys. Today, those problems have deepened by wide margins. In the 2019 study, around 10,000 people contacted us about housing problems; in the current study that number is over 14,000. More disturbing, the number of eviction calls has jumped even further, from 28% to 43% of those calls. Every other measure in this study, across multiple data sets and communities, confirms the pervasive and destabilizing impact of evictions and homelessness on low-income Vermonters. While legal aid providers have been able to provide some assistance in these cases, the level of unrepresented tenants remains very high, and the current system is unable to provide much-needed legal support. This problem will only be exacerbated by the ending of COVID-era housing funding in 2025.

Healthcare remains an area of consistently high demand. Most measures in this study show healthcare as the second highest area of demand. The VLA Office of the Health Care Advocate receives a high volume of calls, and healthcare is also an area of high traffic on the web site. The persistent complexities of the healthcare system, the ending of COVID-era safety nets and sharply increasing healthcare costs all serve to fuel this need.

Legal assistance with family law also remains a high and persistent area of need, often with the fewest available legal resources. Within the context of current VLA/LSV case priorities, which

heavily favor housing cases, family law continues to represent the greatest area of legal need that is not being addressed by the current system. Virtually every measure of legal need showed that Vermonters are facing an enormous volume of legal problems in these areas, with few resources to meet the demand. The study identified the difficulty of navigating the family court system, the need for advice about how to pursue legal issues, and the need for in-court representation in contested cases, and especially direct representation for victims of domestic violence and other crimes..

The study continues to show smaller but still significant areas of legal need in a range of other subject areas. The specific level of need in these areas varied more widely depending on the particular measure used and with small variations since the last study. In general, the most persistently identified of these areas are in the income and financial areas: consumer debt collection (including medical debt), bankruptcy, and public benefits (especially Social Security). Other areas came up regularly in smaller but still significant numbers: crime victim assistance, wills and related probate matters, employee rights, taxes, special education, truancy, and criminal record expungement.

Beyond the specific needs by legal subject matter, the most important need identified by the study, especially in the more subjective measures, continues to be the deep desire for more direct face-to-face contact with legal service providers. Not surprisingly, one persistent theme was the desire for more full representation by LSV and VLA staff. But barring this option, people throughout the state, and especially in more rural areas, want to see an ongoing and readily accessible presence in their communities. As it did five years ago, the study identified a need for regular in-person advice clinics for housing, family, and general legal issues, the ability to access simple advice, help with forms, and basic help negotiating the system, located in community venues where clients typically would go—social service offices, libraries, and similar venues. There is also a need for more legal education in the community, both for potential clients and for the service providers who work with them. Obviously the COVID pandemic stopped efforts toward in-person services, but significantly increased remote options. But even with these remote options in place, the desire for in-person support remains strong.

Some of these identified legal needs may be able to be met by shifting some of the resources within the current service delivery system, by adjusting case priorities to more closely match the specific needs identified by these various measures. **But in many cases, any meaningful efforts to meet the broad and persistent legal needs of Vermonters will only be met by expanding resources beyond their current level.** This was the case five years ago and is even more critical now. This is especially true in light of the ending of many important streams of funding related to the pandemic. While the health crisis has ended, the increased need for legal assistance has shown no signs of going away. Persistent, crisis-level needs are ongoing, and without more extensive legal support they will continue to get worse. The current system simply does not have the capacity to come anywhere near meeting current need.

The state's legal services partners—Vermont Legal Aid, Legal Services Vermont, the South Royalton Legal Clinic, the Vermont Bar Association, the Vermont Bar Foundation, Vermont Asylum Assistance Project, the Access to Justice Coalition, and other legal support agencies—should review the information in this report and use it to assess current case and intake strategies in light of available resources. This discussion can then lead to a coordinated review of the best ways to address these unmet needs, and to identify new resources to expand the current legal services system in an ongoing effort to bridge the justice gap.