



# An Ambitious Agenda for a New Executive Director of a Legal Services Program

By Jan Allen May, Executive Director<sup>1</sup>  
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## Introduction

Those of you who are executive directors no doubt recall the anxiety you probably felt when you first assumed your new position. You probably felt somewhat overwhelmed and wondered how you should best be spending your time, which of the many challenges you should be addressing and where should you be directing your energy. Those of you who have contemplated becoming an executive director have perhaps also wondered how one goes about deciding where to start, where to focus, or how to discern whether you are touching all the right bases. Questions like this have often arisen in the context of discussions at MIE's New Executive Director trainings. As a result, I have compiled below a list of what I call "An Ambitious Agenda" as a kind of roadmap for such quandries. MIE uses this document in New Executive Director Training, but we thought it might also be useful to long-time directors, as well as senior leadership team members and those contemplating such roles in legal services in the future.

## An Ambitious Agenda

1. **Actively listen to staff, Board and others** about their concerns, goals and ideas about the organization. Take note of recurring themes and serious concerns. Ensure that they know you have heard them and, where appropriate, let them know that you have or will address their concerns. In the event that you uncover or are confronted with critical issues that threaten the survival of the organization, give those issues your immediate and sustained attention. If you have been promoted from colleague to boss in the organization, deal with those issues promptly, directly, diplomatically but firmly.
2. **Clean house at the Board level.** Encourage departure of deadwood and those clinging to outmoded ways of doing business and those whose efforts are counterproductive. Establish board term limits (if they do not already exist). Recruit new blood for the Board based on program needs and legal requirements. Encourage revision of by-laws as needed.
3. **Analyze and address any and all LSC and other grantor compliance issues.** Work with grantors to ensure their buy-in with changes made.
4. **Set in motion a process to review and revise as needed program mission, vision and case priorities.** Involve all stakeholders in this process and ensure that everyone ultimately is on the same page regarding your mission and priorities. Then configure or reconfigure your delivery systems and resource allocations in a way that most effectively carries out your vision, mission and substantive priorities and best meets the needs of the client community.
5. **Develop a fundraising plan** and system with specific goals and measurable outcomes. Analyze every funding opportunity in terms of how well it furthers your mission. Involve the Board and staff significantly in the fundraising process. Remind staff that fundraising is everyone's responsibility.
6. **Review personnel, structure, qualifications and management team.** Do you have the right people on the bus? Make changes as necessary and hire and or develop strong and competent managers. Ensure that your hiring process is a fair one and yields a diverse pool of qualified candidates. Address morale issues through program-wide facilitated meetings, discussions and celebratory events with staff input and planning.
7. **Review and revise as needed workable and ethically and legally compliant systems for legal management:** reports, record-keeping, case tracking, performance reviews, accounting and financial record-keeping.

8. **Review and revise as needed quality control systems**—Review and revise as needed organizational chart, supervisory structure, norms for case acceptance, case reviews, consultations, closure reviews, measurable program goals, capture of outcome and productivity data by advocate and unit and the organization as a whole.
  9. **Network with other community groups, pro bono firms and other legal services providers** to connect with the client community, maximize and leverage resources and create or maintain program image as a collaborator and team player. Remember that lasting systemic change is usually brought about through collaboration and coordination with a group of entities not just one organization.
  10. **Develop a comprehensive public relations plan** for all outside interests. Set measurable goals and assess progress at year's end.
  11. **Develop comprehensive staff training needs assessment** and training and development plan for all staff. Implement same.
  12. **Take a meaningful vacation** of a reasonable length to get re-charged and encourage all staff to do the same.
- 1 Jan Allen May is the Executive Director of AARP Legal Counsel for the Elderly (LCE), the primary provider of legal services to low and moderate income older people in D.C. Jan has written many articles on legal services and trained on substantive legal and management topics in legal services throughout the country for over thirty-five years. He currently is one of the trainers for MIE's popular New Executive Director Training. He is the Legal Services Developer for D.C. and the Chair of the MIE *Journal* Committee. Jan may be reached at [jmay@arp.org](mailto:jmay@arp.org).
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## INTERIM EXECUTIVES: ADDED VALUE IN TRANSITION

By Barbara Lauer<sup>1</sup>

When I left my last full-time nonprofit executive position after nine years, I felt a duty to stay until the last moment. I was approached at the time by a



firm that suggested an interim executive as part of the transition process. I quickly declined, determined to finish the job in the way I thought was best. I stayed till the next CEO was hired and on board. Ironically, my next career was as an interim executive.

Over the last thirteen years, I have served as an interim leader for eleven nonprofit organizations in the Washington, D.C. area. I have returned to three organizations, as they went through additional transitions. In hindsight, I can see how my dedication to an organization that I loved could have been better served had I left earlier, with an interim in place. The board could have reflected on the needs of the organization through a “new eyes” assessment from an experienced executive, and had a more open discussion about the kind of leader needed for the “next chapter.” The staff could have had time to adjust and experience another capable leader, further opening the door to positive change.

This article provides basic information about interim executive leadership, so that executives and board leaders can consider this valuable option as they are faced with transition.

### What Is the Role of the Interim Executive Director?

The life of an organization does not stop when the permanent executive walks out the door. An interim executive assumes the role of the executive director during a period of transition, assuring the board that the organization is effectively managed, that no balls are dropped and that day-to-day problems are addressed. Typically the board chooses an interim executive to manage between permanent CEOs, as they search for

a new leader. Interim executives may also be used as organizations go through other kinds of transition such as mergers, maternity leaves, or sabbaticals. They are not candidates for the permanent job, freeing them to focus on the organizational needs of the transition.

For the most part, the interim executive does everything a permanent executive would do in terms of day-to-day operations. They make sure that fundraising is ongoing and effective, that finances are managed and audits completed, that staff receive needed supervision and support, and that the board is kept apprised of important developments. An experienced interim is prepared to act decisively when needed and at the same time hold back on decisions and initiatives that are better left for the next executive.

Sometimes the interim executive facilitates the search for a new CEO. If a search consultant is hired, an interim can help in a variety of ways, such as providing logistical support, offering ideas and strategies for an effective search, and assuring that staff are adequately informed and engaged in the process.

Finally, an interim executive brings invaluable “new eyes” insights. One of the interim’s first tasks is to do an organizational assessment and report back to the board what they have discovered, where they believe change or improvement is needed, and what they think might be accomplished during the interim period. The assessment may include fresh ideas and also may confirm opinions or concerns held by staff or board. It can provide useful guidance about the skills and qualities needed in the next executive, as well as suggest what the new CEO’s priorities might be. Timely projects needed to shore up the organization can be taken on in the interim period.

### How Does the Interim’s Role Differ from the Permanent Executive Role?

Interim CEOs are typically less active in two areas:

- *External activities.* Interim executives play a strong role in maintaining relationships with funders,

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Continued from page 11

but they are less active in other outside activities, such as media interviews and community/coalition meetings. This provides a great opportunity for other staff — as the continuing “face” of the nonprofit — to be more visible on behalf of the organization.

- *Long-term direction.* An interim executive can help the board assess the current status and report areas that need improvement. However, they are not there to set major future directions for the mission or program, or to shape the organization based on their own perspective. These deliberations await the arrival of the new permanent executive.

### What Are the Most Important Qualities or Capabilities Needed in an Interim Executive?

An interim CEO is ideally an experienced nonprofit executive director, well versed in executive level finance, fundraising, personnel and board relations. For an interim, the executive role should be like riding a bike. They have done it before, and they know the nuanced relationships required between the executive, the board and the staff. They bring well-honed management skills and knowledge of best practices.

*Our organization benefited from the leadership of a non-attorney interim executive director for nearly a year. Often her genuine curiosity surrounding our legal advocacy motivated our legal staff to share their experiences more freely in meetings. There was a ripple effect of excitement and inspiration to achieve more through creative legal strategies that may not always occur when an executive director is a lawyer. At the same time, her focus on the role of filling the functions of an executive director allowed our legal staff to operate with the confidence that all of the grants, fundraising, and other organizational requirements were being handled capably by someone who excelled in providing that leadership.*

— Frank Natale, Director of Litigation and Advocacy, Neighborhood Legal Services Program of D.C., 2016–2018

Capable interims have the ability to perform a strategic assessment of the organization — its strengths and the areas that need to be improved for optimal operations. Because an interim is not “trying out” for the job and has experience with a variety of organizations, they can offer an objective assessment and range of recommendations.

The interim needs to bring a calm, capable presence that reassures staff, board and stakeholders that the organization can make it through a critical period. They should be avid learners, able to easily receive and synthesize information and adapt to the natural rhythms of the organization.

Interim executives do not typically have specialized knowledge or backgrounds related to the mission and work of the organization; for that, they depend on the programmatic expertise of permanent staff.

In the case of a legal organization, for example, they may rely on a legal advocacy director or lead attorneys in a given practice area. While they may not be able to weigh in on legal strategy or specific cases, they can capably coach legal staff on supervision or management issues. Additionally, a person less steeped in the programmatic work can also sometimes offer “out of the box” questions or insights that lend depth to problem solving or planning.

### What is the Difference Between an Acting Director and an Interim Executive?

Acting directors are chosen from inside the organization, usually senior staff, to lead during transition. The acting director may or may not be a candidate for the executive position. If they are and do not get the job, they usually go back to their previous role. Acting directors typically focus on “keeping the trains running.”

An interim executive director comes from outside the organization. They are typically seasoned executives and are not candidates for the permanent executive job. In addition to providing day-to-day leadership, they have the experience and skills to help the board assess the organization and take steps to build a stronger platform for the incoming executive.

### What are the Challenges of Hiring a Transition Leader from Inside the Organization?

The board’s first instinct is often to look in-house, either to their senior staff or to board members, for leadership during a transition. However, the board should be aware of the potential challenges of such a choice:

- Any senior staff person already has a demanding job. They cannot take on the role of the executive without letting go of some major part of their responsibilities or burdening another staff person with them.
- If a board member takes the position, they run the risk of damaging the fine balance needed between the board and staff. After a permanent executive director is hired, the board member often finds it difficult to “step back” from the day-to-day management of the organization.
- If the “inside” person is also a candidate for the job, they are “on trial” before they actually hold the position and full authority of a permanent executive. What they say and do may be flavored by their eagerness to attain the fulltime position.
- Even if the interim leader is not interested in the executive job, their appointment may give the impression that there is an “inside candidate”, possibly discouraging well-qualified applicants.

Most importantly, choosing internally deprives the organization of the insights of an experienced nonprofit executive who brings deep leadership and management experience, and who can share the unique insights gained by seeing an organization close up for the first time. Hiring an interim executive is an investment in a smooth transition, as well as an opportunity to build a stronger organization for the new leadership.

### How Does the Board Hire and Manage an Interim CEO?

The nonprofit interim sector has been developing over a period of time. Some geographic areas have specific initiatives and referral organizations and a cadre of experienced transition leaders, and sometimes professional interims will temporarily relocate to take a position. In searching for an interim executive, the board may also look toward local retired nonprofit executives, post the position on nonprofit-oriented job sites, or ask their search firm for references.

Interim engagements typically last three to nine months, but may range from several months to over a year, depending on the situation. Some interim executives set a specific target date for ending their assignment and some commit to the full period of the hire and transition to a new person. Although a few interims work full-time on a salary, most work part-time (usually 20-30 hours a week) at an hourly rate. The non-profit organization's board negotiates and finalizes the terms with the interim.

*Twice in the past decade an interim ED (the same individual) helped manage the Neighborhood Legal Services Program (NLSP), a D.C. nonprofit organization with which I am affiliated. Both times her performance was excellent in all respects. Like many providers of services to members of the community, NLSP always has a host of balls in the air, and during this interim ED's tenure(s), her terrific skill set facilitated a practically seamless flow of all key aspects of senior management and leadership. I am a big fan of this individual and her colleagues who provide such a critical service in helping organizations like NLSP carry on their important work while searching for and hiring a new, permanent ED.*

— Blake Biles, an attorney in private practice in Washington, D.C.

Interim executives' rates are usually higher than those of permanent executives, due both to the high level of expertise they bring and the temporary nature of the position. Because they work on a part-time basis and typically do not receive benefits, the cost can often be within range of the expense of a full-time executive salary plus benefits.

Board oversight of an interim executive is similar to that of a permanent CEO. A weekly check-in between the chair and the executive is good practice. The interim executive attends and reports at regular board meetings and interacts with other board members and committees as needed.

The board collaborates with the interim on setting priorities. They may have determined some priorities before the interim CEO comes on board; an initial assessment from the interim around four to six weeks provides more information to shape the job. If major grants are due, fundraising events upcoming, financial audits on the calendar, or other priorities timely, the focus needs to go there first. But the interim usually has time to take on at least a few projects which put the organization in better shape for the next permanent executive. Interim CEOs, for example, can oversee activities to: revise and assure timely performance reviews, update internal policies, fill critical staff positions, work with the Board on governance issues or make substantial improvements to the financial accounting system.

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Continued from page 13

### Spread the Word

I am part of an interim executive network in Washington, D.C. One of the things we struggle with most is finding ways to get the attention of organizations that are not at the precipice of a transition. The nonprofits we have worked for understand the benefits of interim executives, and an increasing number of organizations have succession plans that include an interim executive option. However, many other nonprofits are not even aware of the possibility. When a permanent executive announces their departure or loses the confidence of the board, the organization often launches quickly into the transition process. Unless the strategy of using an interim CEO is known by a board member or has been discussed previously, it can be easily overlooked.

I remember from my own experience as a retiring executive how hard it was to let go, and how the concept of someone taking my place on a temporary basis was so unfamiliar. As far as I know, none of the board members knew anything about interim leadership and in the intensity of the moment, they might have been reluctant to consider that option. Now I know that organizations can benefit from a space “in between” and from the fresh insights of an experienced leader.

Executives, please share this article with your board chair to help them think through what is an inevitable part of institutional life — the departure of the executive director — and make this option part of your discussion and planning around succession.

### Additional Resources:

The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2005). *Interim Executive Directors: Power in the Middle*. Baltimore, MD: Tim Wolfred. Retrieved from <http://www.aecf.org/resources/interim-executive-directors/>

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Duncan, Jeanie. (2012). Why and How to Hire an Interim Executive Director. *Common Ground*: Winter 2012, Vol XXI, No.1. North Carolina Center for Nonprofits. <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/sites/default/files/documents/Why%20and%20How%20to%20Hire%20an%20Interim%20Executive%20Director.pdf>

CompassPoint (San Francisco):  
<https://www.compasspoint.org/tools-and-resources#ExecutiveTransitions>

Support Center (New York):  
<http://supportcenteronline.org/executive-search/interim-executive-directors/>

Third Sector New England:  
<http://tsne.org/executive-transitions/interim-executive-placement>

501Commons (Washington State):  
<https://www.501commons.org/resources/tools-and-best-practices/management-leadership/interim-executive-directors>

Interim Executive Network (D.C. Metro Area),  
[interimexecnetwork@gmail.com](mailto:interimexecnetwork@gmail.com)

Interim Executive Solutions (Boston),  
<http://www.interimexecutive.solutions/>

- 1 Barbara Laur has worked in the nonprofit sector for over 30 years. Her leadership positions with a mix of local and national organizations has built her expertise in a variety of areas critical to nonprofit excellence. Barbara started her career as a program director and later assistant director at the Lincoln, Nebraska YWCA. She later served on the senior staff of the National Toxics Campaign Fund, and as Executive Director of the Des Moines, Iowa Young Women's Resource Center and Florence Crittenton Services of Greater Washington located in Silver Spring. In 2004, she embarked on a career as an interim executive. Barbara may be reached at [laurandlux@earthlink.net](mailto:laurandlux@earthlink.net).



## THE LATEST MESSAGING RESEARCH BY VOICES FOR CIVIL JUSTICE

By Elizabeth Arledge, Deputy Director<sup>1</sup>  
Voices for Civil Justice

Starting in 2013, Voices for Civil Justice has commissioned several rounds of public opinion research on civil legal aid and the civil justice system. All of the research was made possible with the generous support of the Public Welfare Foundation. This article focuses on highlights of the report of Voices' 2017 messaging research, *Building a Civil Justice System that Delivers Justice for All*.<sup>2</sup>

When the team at Voices for Civil Justice decided to commission its latest round of public opinion/messaging research, we knew a few things already.



From our initial research in 2013, we knew that civil legal aid is largely unknown among American voters,<sup>3</sup> yet, when they understand what civil legal aid is they are highly supportive (on par with motherhood and apple pie). We also knew that voters embrace a broad definition of civil legal aid,

ranging from individual representation to self-help tools.

In 2017, it was time to check in on those and other findings, to build on them, and to learn what messaging strategies would work best today.

We were also eager to gauge the voting public's appetite for civil justice reform.

The results are very good news for civil legal aid advocates. But — as always — *this new knowledge will work only if we use it*.

Like our earlier research, the latest study was led by Lake Research Partners<sup>4</sup> — this time with the involvement of a cognitive linguist, Anat Shenker Osorio.<sup>5</sup> The addition of language analysis informed our choices about what messages to test, and gave an added layer of understanding to the findings.

The results are from an online survey of 800 likely 2018 voters, plus a sample of civil justice “activists.” The likely voters fell into three categories. Here's a very broad overview of what we learned about them:

### Base (40 percent of sample)

- Strongly support increasing state funding to build a civil justice system that allows all people who need it effective assistance for their civil legal problems.
- Disagree with the idea that more funding for civil legal aid will contribute to more frivolous law suits.
- Extremely strong support for the concepts of “equal justice under law” and “justice for all” as a right for all Americans.
- Tend to identify as Democrats.

### Opposition (24 percent of sample)

- Largely opposed to or undecided about whether their state should increase funding for a more accessible civil justice system.
- Agree that it is becoming more common for Americans to threaten legal action when things go wrong, and that free legal help will only contribute to this problem.
- Believe that states would be better off investing resources in other areas (e.g., infrastructure) than increasing funding for civil legal aid.
- Tend to identify as Republican, and to be white and college educated.

### Persuadables (36 percent of sample)

- Support increasing state funding to build a more accessible civil justice system, though with much less intensity than the base.
- Also agree with the opposition argument that funds for civil legal aid might be spent better elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>
- Tend to be younger, slightly less white, more southern, and more college educated.

We also surveyed 278 *activists* who, not surprisingly:

- Strongly support increasing state funding to build a more accessible civil justice system.
- Disagree with all arguments pushed by the opposition.

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Continued from page 21

- Overwhelmingly white, female, college-educated and identify as Democrats.  
(Why spend precious resources surveying “the choir”? Because even the best messages are only helpful if activists like them well enough to use them.)

### Drilling a Little Deeper — Key Findings

The findings are very encouraging:

- 84 percent of voters believe it is important for our democracy to ensure everyone has access to the civil justice system — an enormous level of support, indicating this is a core value on which to build support for civil justice reform and civil legal aid.
- 82 percent of voters agree that “*equal justice under the law is a right, not a privilege.*” Again, this level of support signifies a core value and an opportunity.
- Voters believe low-income individuals — especially those living in rural areas — and people struggling to make ends meet, face the most difficulty in obtaining legal help.
- Voters strongly favor reform of the civil justice system, with half saying it needs to be rebuilt completely or fundamentally changed.
- Strong majorities of voters support increasing state funding to build a more accessible civil justice system, and surprisingly *that support remains robust even when tied to the notion of raising taxes to do so.*
- Voters overwhelmingly support the most traditional and familiar form of service to ensure access to the civil justice system — namely, having a lawyer. They also strongly support a wide range of

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services that comprise a holistic approach to ensuring justice for all.

The key research findings, combined with guidance from cognitive linguist Shenker-Osorio, point us to messages that emphasize shared values, are rooted in lived experience, provide tangible solutions, and end with a clear call to action.

Here are a few messaging tips based on the research:

- **The value of equal justice under the law is widely held.** Voters strongly support enhancing access to the civil justice system, whether it is framed as “legal representation” or “legal help.” Note that “assistance” does not test as strongly as “representation” or “help.”
- **Language rooted in real-life experiences your audience can relate to is more engaging and persuasive.** Examples: “A veteran denied hard-earned benefits.” “A family facing the loss of a home due to job layoff or medical catastrophe.” When you use “a” to bring the experience down to the level of an individual, your audience is likely to see in their mind’s eye a specific person; this makes it harder for them to revert to negative stereotypes. Also, describing a person or a family as “struggling to make ends meet” is more effective than “low-income.”
- **Focus on solutions.** Your audiences have plenty of things to worry about already, so they don’t want to hear about more problems. Emphasizing solutions is more persuasive than just a litany of what is wrong. Our research found that the base and persuadables strongly support an array of services in a system that enables everyone to get access to the information and effective assistance they need when they need it and in a form they can use. Among the most popular: simplifying court processes, allowing trained non-lawyers to provide some forms of legal help, offering online tools and

other self-help services, and providing screening to guide people to the type of help they need.

### The Role of Cognitive Linguistics in This Research

In preparation for this latest round of research, we asked Shenker-Osorio to conduct a language analysis of how our issues — civil legal aid and civil justice reform — are currently talked about. She examined more than 600 unique expressions in public communications, including legal aid program websites and materials, the courts, the media, the opposition's arguments, and in popular culture. Her analysis revealed a few frames we can use to describe the problem we want to solve, and the story we tell about its origins.<sup>7</sup>

*Here are her three key findings and recommendations:*

#### 1. Frame Problems as Legal

Shenker-Osorio reminds us that frames and metaphors matter. They influence not just how we speak, but the ways we unconsciously decide what ought to be done about an issue. Research has shown, for example, that groups primed with a metaphor of crime as “disease” (*plaguing* our communities) favor preventative solutions such as after school programs and preschool for all. Those presented with a metaphor of crime as “opponent” (*fight* crime, *get tough on* crime) thought harsher punishments were the way to go.

One of the most consistent findings in each phase of Voices' opinion research is that Americans have little understanding about the kinds of cases the civil justice system addresses. This is consistent with research from Rebecca Sandefur that suggests a key barrier to Americans getting legal help for their civil legal problems is their failure to perceive their problems as legal in nature.<sup>8</sup>

To address this challenge, Shenker-Osorio recommends that we bring the courtroom into the frame. Courtrooms have a prominent place on television, but our advocacy for legal aid often pushes them to the background. By using terms like “legal aid lawyer” and phrases like “having your day in court” and “appearing before a judge,” we can activate this familiar frame and help our audience recognize, for example, that a dispute with a landlord or getting hounded by a bill collector is actually a legal problem with a potential legal solution.

#### 2. Put the Actors into Our Story

When we don't make clear that problems are created when *people* do things, what we suggest instead

is that harms are mysteriously visited upon people, and solutions similarly fall from the sky. The reality is that harms are the result of deliberate decisions by people, and it takes deliberate actions by people to correct them. Unless we convince our audiences that people making intentional — and at times nefarious — decisions are behind the outcomes we seek to change, we can't make a strong case that other outcomes are possible. In her analysis, Shenker-Osorio found that we tend to shield from view the actors who create the harms we target, and we fail to give our audiences the clarity they need to “get” the origin of the problems we describe.

Shenker-Osorio concludes that by “passivizing” problems, we are falling prey to the common tendency of implying that bad things “just happen.” Her memo enumerates many examples of this that you'll readily recognize — and can easily fix.<sup>9</sup>

#### 3. Avoid “Gap” Language

We know this will be a tough change for the legal aid sector, but there is more harm than good in using the term “justice gap.” The “gap” metaphor, while popular right now, fails in every domain where it has been tested, including health care access, educational achievement, income, and now justice. The primary problem is that the word “gap” says there is a difference but conveys no origin story about how or why it came to be, nor does it offer a clue about what needs to be changed in order to fix it. In contrast, using the word “barrier” suggests something that is person-created, and therefore can be person-removed.

Shenker-Osorio's advice to avoid the “gap” metaphor is somewhat complicated by our desire to cite and publicize data in an important Legal Services Corporation (LSC) report about unmet legal needs, titled *The Justice Gap: Measuring the Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-income Americans*. While we should certainly utilize the contents of the report, we are well advised to minimize and eventually eliminate the use of the “justice gap” metaphor as a way of explaining the problem we're trying to fix.

Interested in more on the application of cognitive linguistics to messaging for civil justice? You can read Anat Shenker-Osorio's full memo here.<sup>10</sup>

### What Language Should We Be Using?

The guidelines provided here, and in the full report, are just that — guidelines. But they do provide useful information on what language works, and what kinds of stories and examples are most persuasive. The national poll included dial testing of several

messages. In dial testing, survey participants listen to audio recordings of messages while continually adjusting a dial to reflect how they react to specific words and phrases. The report includes detailed analysis of the three most effective messages tested. In this audio recording of her July 2017 presentation, Celinda Lake also discusses the dial test results.<sup>11</sup> We recommend viewing the report while you listen to the recording.

Here is an example of language that Voices crafted based on what we have learned from all of the Voices' research. It opens with a strong shared value, uses specific examples rooted in lived experience, is clear about the causes of the problems we want to solve, offers concrete solutions, and includes an action step. Not every message can include all of these, but we offer it as an example of how the research can be applied:

*Equal justice is an American ideal. Civil legal aid helps ordinary Americans escape an abusive partner, stop a wrongful foreclosure, and defend against a fraudulent debt collector. But too often, ordinary people who seek to protect their families, their homes and their livelihoods must face court without legal help. Finding yourself in court alone can be terrifying, but that is exactly what's happening today in three out of four civil court cases. As certain politicians threaten deeper cuts to civil legal aid funding, some states are stepping up to respond. They provide self-help services and court navigators; access to information through online forms and referrals to social services; offer reforms that reduce paperwork, and train judges to use plain and understandable language. This help provides access to the legal information and help people need, when they need it, and in a form they can use. By expanding legal help, these approaches produce significantly faster and better results — and at a cost savings. All states should follow this lead, ensuring that equal justice is a right for all Americans, not a privilege.*

### What Next?

This is a strong foundation on which to continue building and intensifying support for civil justice reform and civil legal aid. But the messages will only work if we proactively use them — every day,

integrated as much as possible into our way of communicating. Voices offers tools, training (including a National Communications and Media training in conjunction with MIE), its JusticeVoices network, and other resources to help you. We encourage you to visit our website, [www.voicesforciviljustice.org](http://www.voicesforciviljustice.org), and reach out to us at [team@voicesforciviljustice.org](mailto:team@voicesforciviljustice.org).

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- 2 <https://voicesforciviljustice.org/wp-content/uploads/Voices-2017-Messaging-Research-Findings-LRP-ASO-Report-July-2017-Slides.pdf>
- 3 <https://voicesforciviljustice.org/for-advocates/messaging/civil-legal-aid-messaging/>
- 4 <http://lakeresearch.com/>
- 5 <http://asocommunications.com/>
- 6 Celinda Lake notes that Americans have no problem holding two contradictory beliefs at the same time, but deeply resent having it pointed out to them.
- 7 A frame, in linguistics, acknowledges that words exist within and thus evoke pre-set packages of meaning, determined by our common knowledge, assumptions and beliefs. In short, words occur in contexts. As such, usage of even a single word brings with it a whole host of associated meanings, actors, and objects that come into play whether or not the speaker desires.
- 8 [https://voicesforciviljustice.org/wp-content/uploads/access\\_across\\_america\\_first\\_report\\_of\\_the\\_civil\\_justice\\_infrastructure\\_mapping\\_project-2011.pdf](https://voicesforciviljustice.org/wp-content/uploads/access_across_america_first_report_of_the_civil_justice_infrastructure_mapping_project-2011.pdf)
- 9 [https://voicesforciviljustice.org/wp-content/uploads/Voices-for-Civil-Justice-Language-Analysis\\_aso.pdf](https://voicesforciviljustice.org/wp-content/uploads/Voices-for-Civil-Justice-Language-Analysis_aso.pdf)
- 10 [https://voicesforciviljustice.org/wp-content/uploads/Voices-for-Civil-Justice-Language-Analysis\\_aso.pdf](https://voicesforciviljustice.org/wp-content/uploads/Voices-for-Civil-Justice-Language-Analysis_aso.pdf)
- 11 <http://bit.ly/voices2017research>