

Diana Rendler

I am working with the Moderate Means Program this summer. The Moderate Means Program serves people between 200 and 400% of the federal poverty line. I conduct client intake interviews and do initial legal analysis before referring the client's case to an attorney in the program. The attorneys agree to reduce their regular rates a certain amount based on the client's income, aiming to make legal services more affordable.

This is my first position in the legal field and my second volunteer position in the legal aid network in Washington. I am still learning how all the legal aid organizations in Washington coordinate services to help as many people as possible. Unfortunately, the need outweighs the resources available.

Early in my internship, I realized that the client's current legal problem is often connected to several other legal issues or other hardships in their life. Particularly in housing law, legal issues tend to have a domino effect. For example, several of my clients had their wages garnished. In Washington, creditors can obtain a court order and start garnishing an individual's bank accounts or wages without warning to the debtor. After their bank accounts are frozen or their wages are garnished— the garnishment is between 0 and 50% of wages depending on the type of debt owed— clients might have trouble paying rent, buying food or covering other expenses, resulting in a housing or food insecurity issue. While there does need to be a system to repay creditors, this system of garnishment can be a shock and hardship to some people.

Additionally, I have noticed that the system of legal aid in Washington does a thorough job informing people of their rights and helping them start the legal process for various issues. For example, Washington Law Help and legal clinics organized by the county bar associations help people file the petition for dissolution or bankruptcy. These systems enable people to start the process but often people need more help as their cases progress. This an opportunity for the Moderate Means Program to help. Clients occasionally come to us after their case takes an unexpected legal turn or they need to appeal the judgement in their case.

On the other hand, people might come to us before they file a petition or other paperwork in court. In these instances, I tell people about the resources available to them, explain statutes or rules in broad strokes or reassure the client. I have found some clients do not know they can represent themselves in court. They believe they are not allowed in court without a lawyer and I can help them understand how to represent themselves. Additionally, some clients are capable of handling the legal issue on their own but they are concerned that they will not take the correct steps or confused about the meaning of the statute. In certain cases, listening and offering resources that explain their rights is enough to help the client. In other cases, I am able to connect them with an attorney before they file the petition; having an attorney from the beginning can reduce their stress.

One of the challenges I faced in trying to help some clients is deadlines. Clients might come to the program when they have a court date within a week or two weeks and we cannot find an attorney fast enough to take their case. It can be difficult when we are unable to provide the help the client most needs. However, overall, the Moderate Means Program offers clients access to legal professionals they would not have been able to afford otherwise and I am grateful to have the opportunity to assist as many as people as I can.