Insight into the Legal Needs of California's Seniors
Results of Survey of Area Agencies on Aging, Summer 2010

The California Department on Aging (CDA), Legal Aid Association of California (LAAC), and Senior Legal Hotline (SLH), as part of a "Model Approaches[1]" grant, sent an online survey to all 33 California Planning and Service Areas (PSAs) in Summer 2010. The survey asked for input from Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) managing staff on California's current senior legal services system. The Model Approaches grant partners received 19 responses.

When asked what issues, legal or not, are the **most serious challenges** to the safety and well-being of seniors, AAAs identified these as top concerns:

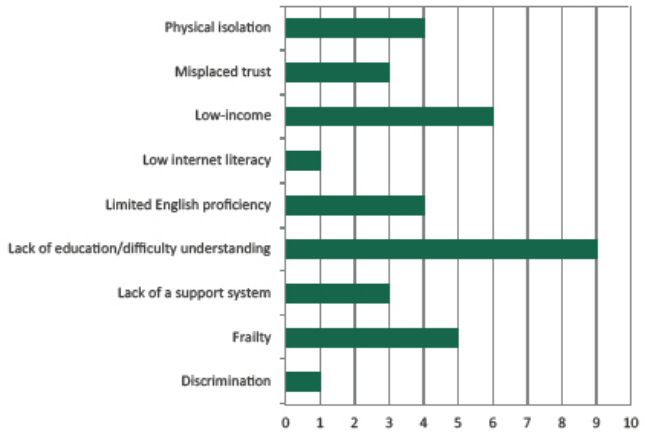
- Transportation
- Elder abuse (including consumer fraud targeting seniors)
- Housing issues (including discrimination, home repair, affordable housing)
- Bankruptcy/debt

100% of respondents said that the economic downturn had affected their work. Here are some of the reasons:

- "[Seniors are] more vulnerable and easier to victimize."
- "There is more fraud and financial abuse."
- "Due to limited income, seniors cannot afford to hire an attorney to represent them in court."
- "SSI cuts put the very poor in even greater danger of malnutrition, poor health care, vulnerability to scams and unreasonable loans, lack of reliable transportation."
- "Seniors are more vulnerable to financial and physical abuse, as family members are 'living off of' their aging relative."
- "[There are] fewer dollars to provide any transportation and long-term care services."

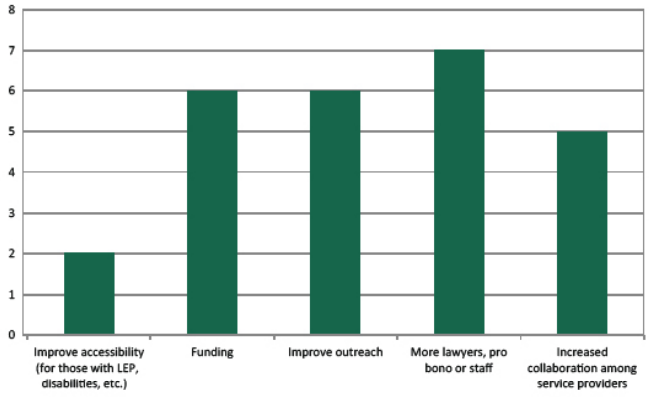
1 "Model Approaches" is the name given to a federal source of funding through the Administration on Aging. It is meant to help states find their "model approach" to providing high-quality, easily accessible, well-coordinated legal services to seniors. The AoA began this program in 2006, and grants have been awarded to 31 states to date. Each state must apply and be selected to receive the funding. The California Senior Legal Hotline, the California Department of Aging, and the Legal Aid Association of California applied for and secured California's Model Approaches grant. Additionally, OneJustice (formerly PIC, the Public Interest Clearinghouse) has taken on many roles related to the coordination of pro bono services. The grant runs from September 2009 through August 2012.

Factors That Make Seniors Vulnerable to Legal Problems



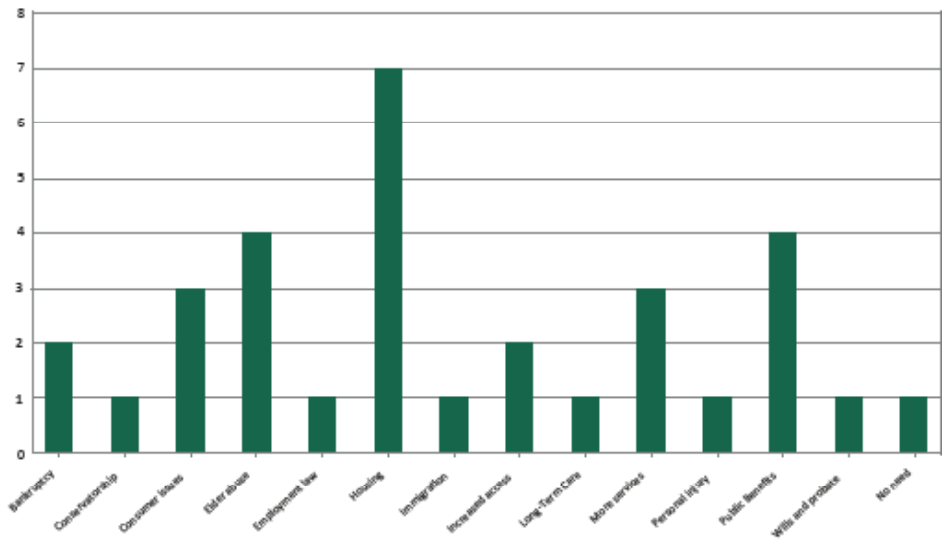
Numbers indicate respondents

Most Important Steps to Improve Legal Help for Seniors



Numbers indicate respondents

Currently Underserved Legal Needs of Seniors



Numbers indicate respondents
Elder abuse includes financial abuse
Housing includes foreclosure and landlord/tenant
Increased access for LEP, disabilities, and rural

AAAs identified the following as **factors that make seniors particularly vulnerable**:

- Limited English proficiency
- Poor health/disability
- Low income
- Isolation (geographic, social, cultural)

AAAs identified these legal issues as **problems not currently addressed adequately** by their senior legal service provider:

- Elder abuse, especially financial abuse
- Consumer problems and fraud
- Housing issues, including mortgages and landlord-tenant disputes
- Bankruptcy/income issues, especially those related to public benefits

However, a large proportion of respondents indicated that gaps in service exist across all areas. Several noted that this problem is most visible in communication with clients, from the lack of face time with a lawyer, to a deficit in resources for older Californians with limited English proficiency.

When asked what a highly effective **California Senior Legal Hotline** might look like, of those who answered:

- 18.5% said: It mostly conducts intake by phone, gives brief advice and then connects callers with local advocates, knowing what types of cases each local program is able to accept.
- 37.5% said: It does intake and referral but also provides more direct advice and additional service in areas of law that the local program in the caller's area does not handle.
- 44% said: It takes calls on any subject and offers help that can be provided effectively by phone and other electronic means of communication, referring cases that need more intensive, on-the-spot attention, such as representation, to local programs.

Common themes

AAA staff have noticed significant deficits in service for seniors with limited English skills and victims of financial forms of elder abuse (including scams and consumer fraud).

The majority of respondents wanted more coordination among senior legal service providers (including the Hotline) to provide services. Several respondents said they are largely unaware of how senior legal services are provided in their area.

All AAA survey respondents noted that inadequate funding prevented both senior legal service providers and local AAAs from addressing many basic needs. They also noted that funding decreases since the economic downturn had crippled both providers and local AAAs in a time of increased need.

The California Model Approaches partners, the Senior Legal Hotline, California Department of Aging, Legal Aid Association of California, and OneJustice (formerly PIC, the Public Interest Clearinghouse) thank the AAA directors and planners who responded. Without their input as to the needs of their community, the grant partners would not get an accurate picture of the statewide needs.