

THE LEGAL NEEDS OF NONPROFITS SERVING LOW INCOME COMMUNITIES



WASHINGTON
ATTORNEYS
ASSISTING
COMMUNITY
ORGANIZATIONS

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A report identifying the transactional needs of Washington nonprofits.

92% of nonprofits surveyed need legal help. WAACO conducted this study to determine the unmet transactional legal needs of nonprofits serving low income communities and suggest ways to leverage resources to address the gap.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Jodi Nishioka
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

92% of Washington nonprofits surveyed reported needing transactional legal services. WAACO studied the transactional legal needs of nonprofits that serve low income communities statewide, and we found overwhelming need for our services in low income communities and significant barriers to providing those services.

Nonprofits are the backbone of low income communities. Nonprofits that serve low income communities are generally started by the communities themselves to serve their particular needs. For example, most nonprofits created to serve refugee, immigrant, and Native American communities were started at the grassroots level by members of those communities. Similarly, organizations that provide specific services to a particular community -- such as domestic violence or youth organizations like Forks Abuse or Jefferson Teen Center on the Olympic Peninsula -- were all started by community members who recognized a need for those services locally.

WAACO's mission is to advance community development and capacity building among community-based nonprofits in Washington through the provision of free transactional legal assistance. By providing legal support to nonprofits that serve low income communities, WAACO strengthens that backbone, building capacity within nonprofits so they can better support the low income communities they were created to serve. WAACO's capacity building work through its pro bono legal services to nonprofits is unique in the State of Washington.

WAACO has long sought to systematically determine what the transactional legal needs of nonprofits serving low income communities are in order to better fulfill our mission and meet our statewide goals. WAACO's seven years of experience in providing free business legal services to nonprofits has allowed us to understand that many, if not most, nonprofits have some business legal needs. But while WAACO has had a respectable track record of assisting nonprofits in King County, 75% of the organizations we serve have been in King County, we have not done enough to serve nonprofits outside of King County. Moreover, we are reaching only a portion of low income serving nonprofits, as low income serving nonprofits constitute approximately only 30% of WAACO's clients. Based on such statistics, WAACO realized we needed to more deeply examine the legal needs of nonprofits serving low income communities throughout the state in order to help WAACO plan for effective provision of our free legal help to such nonprofits statewide. WAACO commissioned this study to explore these issues more fully and provide recommendations for further action.

Two major findings arose from this study:

1. With 92% nonprofits reporting they need transactional legal services, there are significant, unmet legal needs of nonprofit organizations serving low income communities throughout the state.
2. There are significant barriers to low income-serving nonprofits accessing transactional legal services across the state. The two most important barriers are:
 - a) Many nonprofits serving low income communities are not able to identify legal issues and do not understand how transactional attorneys can help them; and
 - b) Many low income-serving nonprofit organizations are unaware of WAACO and our free legal resources.

The study revealed that WAACO is virtually unknown outside of King County, and known, but not well-known, in King County. In addition, the study found that there is a significant need for WAACO's services among nonprofits serving low income communities statewide. WAACO can further its mission to "promote community and economic development and organizational capacity building" by increasing its resources to better meet the significant unmet legal needs of these nonprofits. Specific recommendations are:

1. Increase WAACO's resources to enable it to have a greater statewide presence.
2. Expand outreach to inform and assist more low income serving nonprofits statewide.
3. Help nonprofit organizations identify legal issues and make trainings available statewide.
4. Develop relationships with the private bar outside King County to identify more volunteer attorneys and increase WAACO's statewide presence.
5. Develop stronger relationships with legal aid organizations and capacity building organizations.

Ultimately, if WAACO is going to fulfill its mission, it has to increase its own capacity to better reach and serve the full range of nonprofit organizations in Washington.