

Mission Moments

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Meet PLAID

In 2016, six disability service providers across the State of Indiana, including Tangram, joined forces with Indiana Legal Services and gave birth to an innovative service model that is gaining attention and praise for its unique approach to increasing access to justice for people with disabilities.

PLAID, which stands for Providing Legal Assistance to Individuals with Disabilities, is perhaps the first model of its kind in the nation and is making waves—good ones.

Modeled after Medical Legal Partnerships, which began in Indiana in 2009, PLAID takes the concept of collaboration between health networks and legal services and applies it to disabilities. This means that individuals with disabilities who receive services from a disability service provider may receive a referral to Indiana Legal Services for pro-bono help with certain types of civil cases, such as benefit appeals, decision-making supports, expungement of conviction records, housing, and consumer cases.



Pictured above: Indiana Legal Services attorney, Nick Parker

If there was ever any doubt that a program like this was necessary, all someone would need to do is look at the number of referrals and applications for assistance. Nick Parker, the attorney at Indiana Legal Services who oversees the PLAID program explained, "We have had a total of 400 applications since the beginning of the program, with 200 applications just this year. It hovers between 40 and 60 active cases at any given point."

The acceptance rate for referrals is about 85%. The most common reasons for rejecting a case are either that the case isn't eligible under one of the five categories mentioned above, or the client doesn't respond. But Parker always tries to help in some way. "We will always strive to give advice if we can't take their case."

Parker says that Tangram is one of his most active accounts, referring numerous clients each year. "Shout out to Tangram! The quality of the organization is outstanding and they are incredibly willing to make the partnership work," he stated.

"Our clients are very fortunate to have access to free legal services through the PLAID program. We have been able to link many clients with this program who previously didn't have access to legal aid. Tangram is grateful for our partnership with Indiana Legal Services and I hope we have many

more years of working together!” said Stephanie Buttler, Director of Behavioral Health for Tangram.

Parker says that the biggest barriers preventing individuals with disabilities from accessing legal services are that often people don’t recognize that they are dealing with a legal problem, which could be solved with help from an attorney.

The type of impact that access to legal services can have on someone’s life is overwhelmingly positive. Parker recalls one case in which a client had submitted an expungement request. The person had been arrested for assaulting someone, but in actuality he was just trying to get someone’s attention because he was deaf. “The arrest record was negatively affecting his ability to get a job and he didn’t realize that anyone could advocate for him,” explained Parker.



Peter Zubler and Nick Parker (right and second from right) participate in a panel discussion in the Indiana Supreme Court Chambers at a Legal Services Corporation Forum.

Recently, Parker and a representative from Tangram, Peter Zubler, were invited to join a panel discussion on holistic approaches to serving legal aid clients as part of the Forum on Access to Justice, sponsored by the Legal Services Corporation, a non-profit established by Congress to provide funding to non-profit legal aid programs in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. Territories.

The discussion was a great success and allowed PLAID to gain some exposure as a tried-and-true approach. [A video of the discussion can be found on Legal Services Corporation’s Facebook page. \(Look for “LSC Panel: Holistic Approaches to Serving Legal Aid Clients”\)](#)

The future of PLAID is bright. Parker feels energized by the success of the program and looks forward to expanding it so that more people can gain access to the legal services they need. For now, all referrals to this program must come from disability service providers.

“I feel like I am having a direct impact on people’s lives. This is exactly why I went to law school. I couldn’t see myself doing anything else—the work is so rewarding.”

[Learn more about Indiana Legal Services](#)

You can support the PLAID program with a donation to Tangram! Tangram and other disability service providers currently pay to participate in the program—allowing our clients to access pro-bono legal aid when they need it. [Donate today!](#)