

# WYOMING CIVIL LEGAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Executive Summary

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## INTRODUCTION

Legal Aid of Wyoming (LAW) and the Equal Justice Wyoming Foundation (EJWF) commissioned this comprehensive civil legal needs assessment to determine the civil legal needs of Wyoming's economically disadvantaged residents. Equal Justice Wyoming (EJW) provided extremely important staffing and other support.

The primary purpose of this needs assessment was to estimate the number of individuals that qualify for LAW and EJW's civil legal services, their civil legal needs, and identify service gaps among economically disadvantaged individuals across Wyoming's 23 counties.

## METHODS

This needs assessment is grounded in mixed methods research and uses both qualitative and quantitative data to fully understand Wyoming's low-income population, their civil legal needs, and how their needs are distributed throughout the state's 23 counties.

### Data Collection

#### Quantitative Data

Three types of quantitative data were collected in this needs assessment. They included:

- Social Indicators
- Surveys of clients and professionals who provide services
- Case Management Data

#### Qualitative Data

Qualitative data collection included the following:

- 5 focus groups with legal and other professionals that serve the clients
- 5 interviews with legal aid clients
- 20 key informant interviews with legal and other service professionals

## RESULTS

Key results for each of the data collection method are presented in summary form with in the sections that follow. Comprehensive results are presented in the report and the Appendix includes item-level survey results from both surveys.

### Social Indicators

#### Economic Vulnerability

##### Percent of Population below Various Levels of Poverty

Table 1. Percent in Poverty by Federal Poverty Levels [add year]

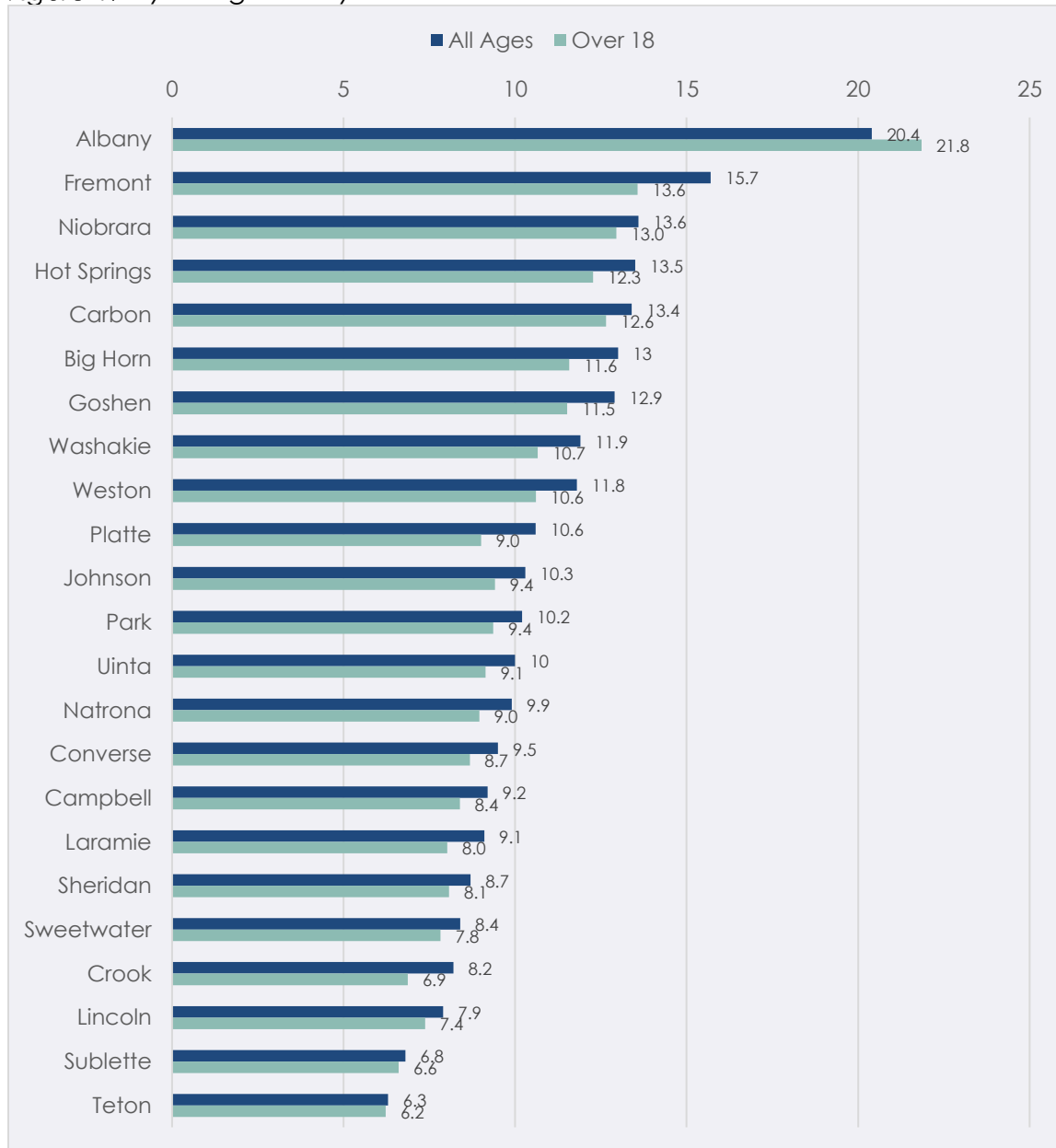
| Location | Under 100% | 100-199% | 200-399% | 400+% | Total |
|----------|------------|----------|----------|-------|-------|
| Wyoming  | 11%        | 16%      | 33%      | 40%   | 100%  |

Source: US Census Bureau's American Community Survey

## Poverty

### Poverty: Percent of Residents Living in Poverty - All Ages and Ages 18 and Over

Figure 1. Wyoming Poverty Census Data



## Housing

Historically, Wyoming has either been below or on par with the nation's housing growth rates. In the first decade of the 2000's, Wyoming experienced a growth rate of 15.4% compared to the national rate of 9.9%. Growth has continued and prices have risen as a result.

## Rental Housing Costs in Wyoming

As of the last quarter of 2019, statewide rental housing for apartments has increased by 3.9%. The greatest increase in the cost of apartment rentals was observed in the following counties:

- Converse County rentals increased by 16%
- Washakie County rentals increased by 12.8%

Decreases were minor by comparison. The largest decrease was in Johnson County.

## Survey Results

### Top Legal Issues Reported by Clients and Legal Professionals

Key findings from the client and professionals' civil legal surveys are summarized in the table below. The table documents the top legal issues clients reported experiencing in the past year and the top legal issues professionals reported addressing in the last year (See full report, pp. 31-32).

There were 99 clients and 148 legal and other service professionals surveyed.

Table 2. Most Commonly Reported Legal Issues by Clients and Legal Professionals

| Clients               | Percent | Professionals        | Percent |
|-----------------------|---------|----------------------|---------|
| Family                | 63      | Family               | 79      |
| Medical Debt          | 32      | Other Financial Debt | 70      |
| Housing               | 28      | Housing              | 68      |
| Other Financial Debt  | 29      | Police Involvement   | 44      |
| Discrimination (self) | 27      | Employment           | 43      |
| Immigration           | 12      | Medical Debt         | 43      |

*When one member of a household contacts legal aid for services, the other member of the household must find alternative resources should they also need legal help as legal aid can only serve one member in the household. This issue occurs repeatedly in households where there are family law issues. This fact should be kept in mind when reviewing the household level estimates as there are many times when there are two individuals in need of legal services.*

### How Clients Access Legal Services

The client survey also asked questions about where and what kind of legal services clients sought in the past year. Clients also identified issues or barriers they may have encountered when seeking legal assistance and whether they believe they are treated fairly in the legal system.

### Type of Legal Help Sought by Clients

Figure 2. Where Clients Tried to Access Legal Help in the Past 12 Months

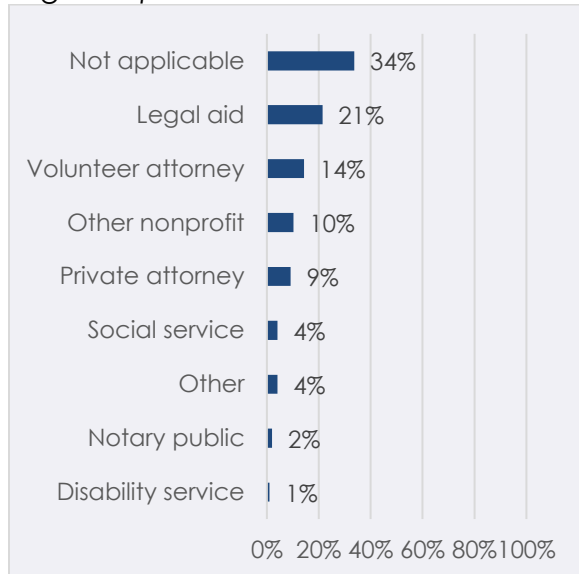
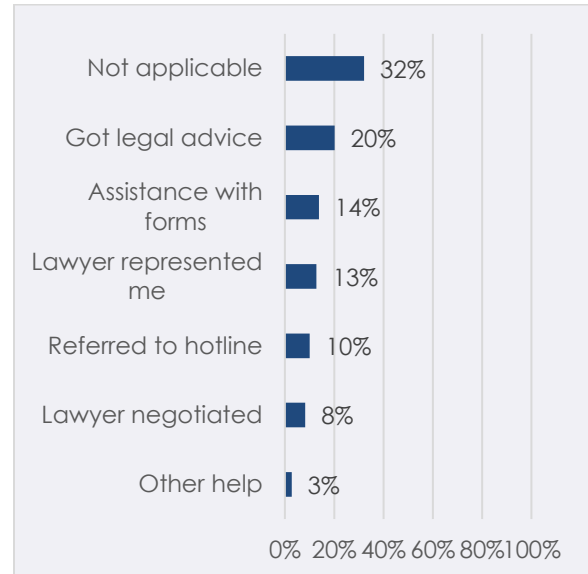


Figure 3. Type of Legal Help Clients Tried to Access in the Past 12 Months



### Barriers to Service and Fair Treatment Accessing Services

Figure 4. Barriers to Accessing Services in the Past 12 Months

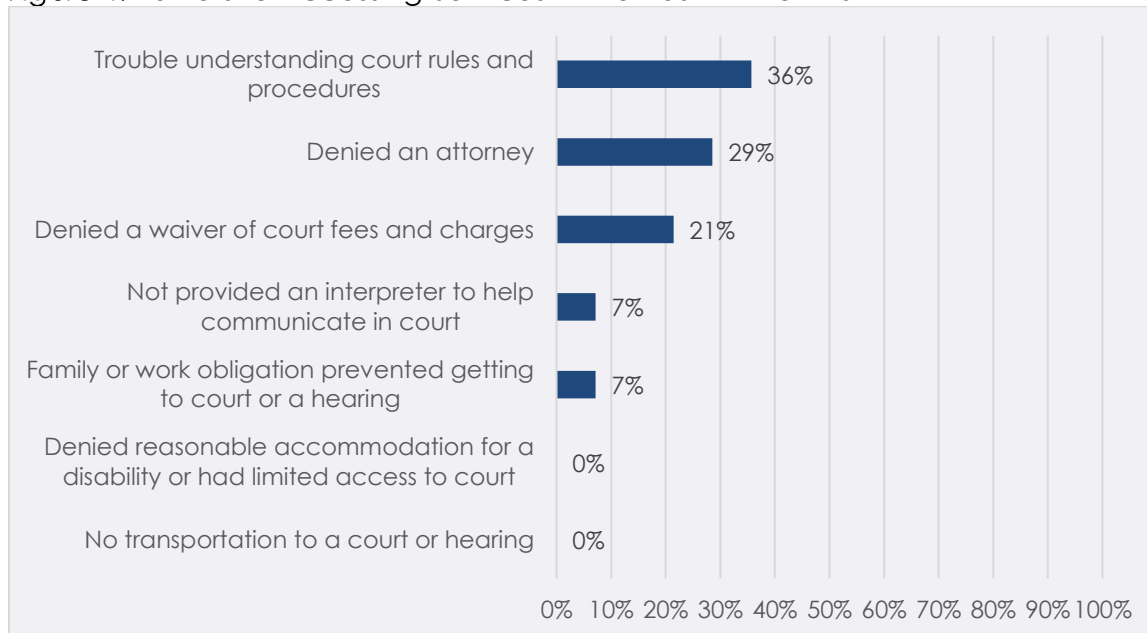


Figure 5. Professionals' Survey Reported Employment Affiliation



- Schools and parental and guardian rights
- Human trafficking
- Immigration and the need for training in immigration law
- Substance abuse and mental health issues among clients

Figure 6. Are there any “emerging issues” or types of clients you see, or are beginning to see, that we didn’t ask about?



*Several librarians completed the professionals' survey and reported in focus groups that they assist a large number of civil legal aid clients.*

*Many legal professionals also reported that they believe librarians are a much-needed alternative resource whose capacity to serve clients could be significantly enhanced.*

## Case Management Trend Analysis

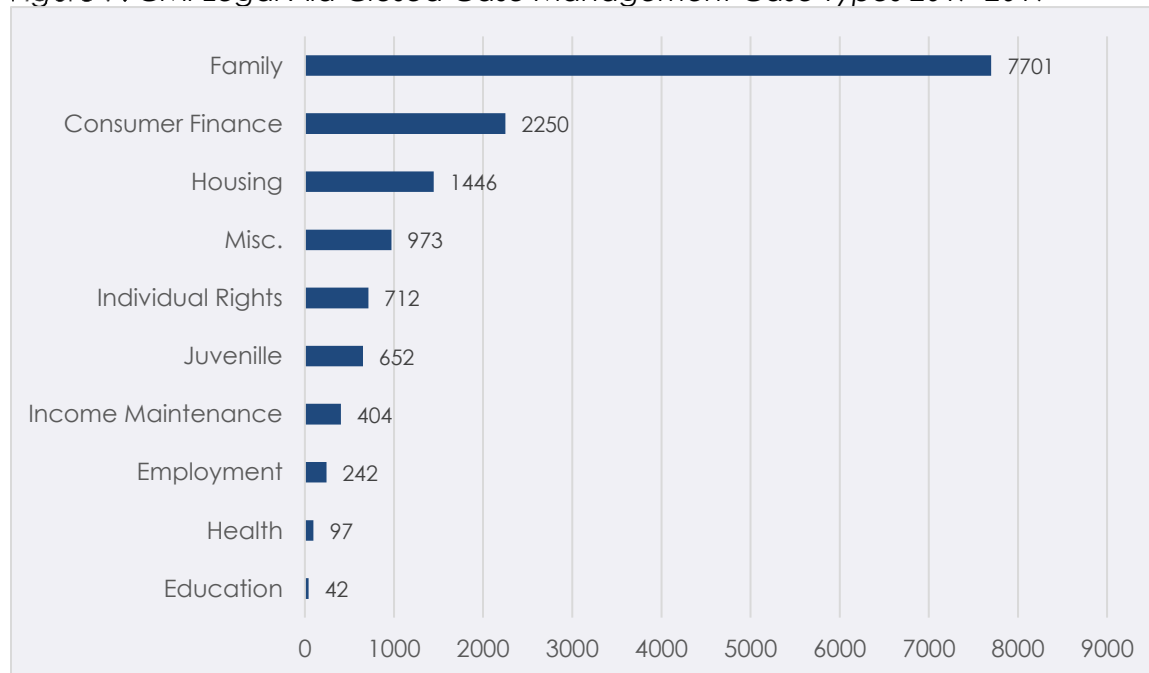
### Types of Services Provided: 2017 - 2019

We examined closed cases in the case management data for service trends across the years 2017-2019.

In accordance with the survey data, family law cases were most common. During the three-year period 7,701 family law cases that closed. This was followed by 2,250 consumer finance cases, and 1,446 housing cases. The aggregate category that contained the next most common types of cases was a "miscellaneous" category of which there were 793 cases. This category included cases such as wills and estates, tribal law, advance directives and power of attorney, among others. Coming in 5th were cases that concern individual rights. There were 712 individual rights cases over the three-year period.

### Case Frequency as Reported in Legal Providers' Case Management Databases

Figure 7. Civil Legal Aid Closed Case Management Case Types 2017-2019

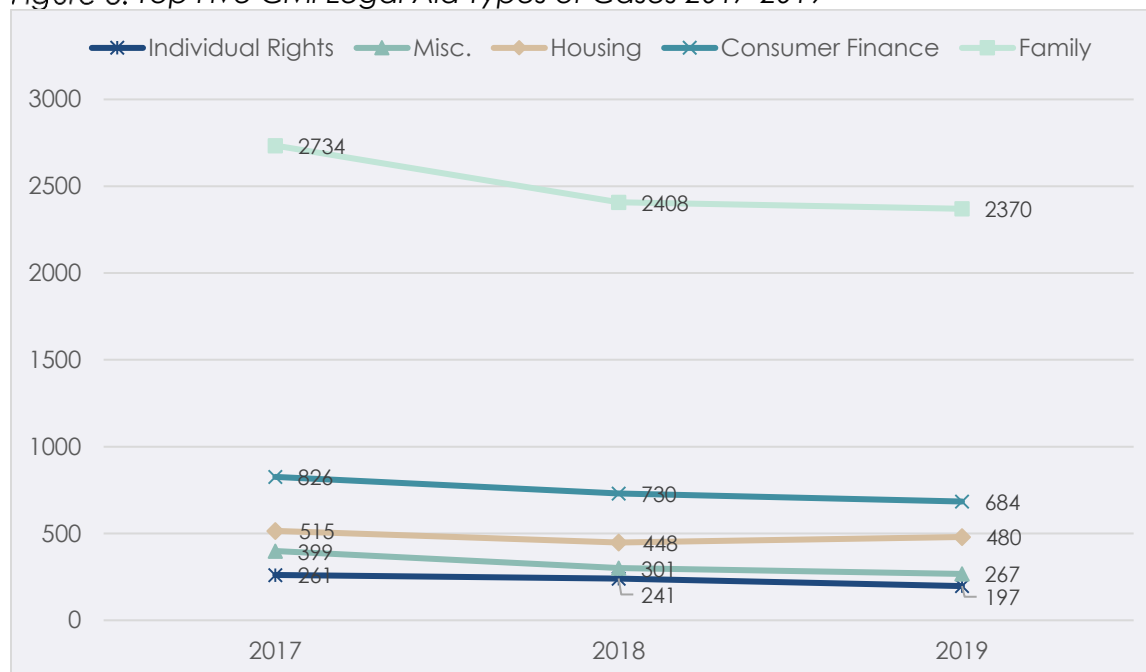


### Types of Case Management Cases by Year 2017 – 2019

Aggregate case management data was examined across years to discern trends. The top five case categories appear in the figure below. Other types of cases showed similar patterns. That is, the numbers were stable across years and did not show any wide levels of variation.

## Most Common Civil Legal Cases Served

Figure 8. Top Five Civil Legal Aid Types of Cases 2017-2019



## Key Informant and Focus Group Interviews

Overall, there was consensus among clients and professionals that the legal system is extremely difficult to understand and navigate for people who are not familiar with the system. These problems are magnified for individuals who are unable to access free legal services due to conflicts of interest, or who are unable to afford attorney fees. Many clients indicated they found it difficult to describe their problems, and had even more difficulty researching what to do about their problems using the internet.

*The clients being served by the legal professionals in Wyoming seem to be consumed in their effort to address life's basic needs. Many clients have multiple, complex problems that include lack of safe and secure housing, being cost-burdened when they do have housing, not having enough food to eat, and not having reliable transportation, among numerous other problems.*

## Civil Legal Services: Capacity, Eligibility, Need and Demand

### Capacity: Civil Legal Services Provided Statewide 2017 - 2019

The Wyoming legal aid system has six primary legal service providers in addition to two programs that allow individuals get answers to questions and help navigating the court system. The table below shows the number of closed cases between 2019 and 2019. The table also shows the capacity provided two newer programs, Wyoming Free Legal Answers and the Volunteer Reference Attorney programs that Equal Justice Wyoming programs.



Table 3. Statewide Civil Legal Service Capacity Summary 2017-2019

| Service Provided   | 2017         | 2018         | 2019         |
|--|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Legal Aid of Wyoming   | 4,795        | 4,139        | 3,957        |
| Equal Justice Wyoming  | 278          | 186*         | 146*         |
| Medical Legal Partnership                                    | 90           | 132          | 53           |
| Teton County Access to Justice Center                        | 42           | 83           | 63           |
| Wyoming Coalition Against Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault | Missing      | 45           | 125          |
| Children's Law Center  | 70           | 46           | 147          |
| Wyoming Free Legal Answers                                   | 162          | 236          | 236          |
| Volunteer Reference Attorney                                 | 533          | 762          | 747          |
| University Law Clinic  | 134          | 142          | 90           |
| <b>Total Numbers Served</b>                                  | <b>6,104</b> | <b>5,771</b> | <b>5,564</b> |

Note: In order for a case to be counted in this table the service provider must have had the closed year in their case management data file.

The figure below is the poverty map with the number and location of legal aid service providers over-laid on it.

Figure 9. Poverty and Legal Aid Service Map

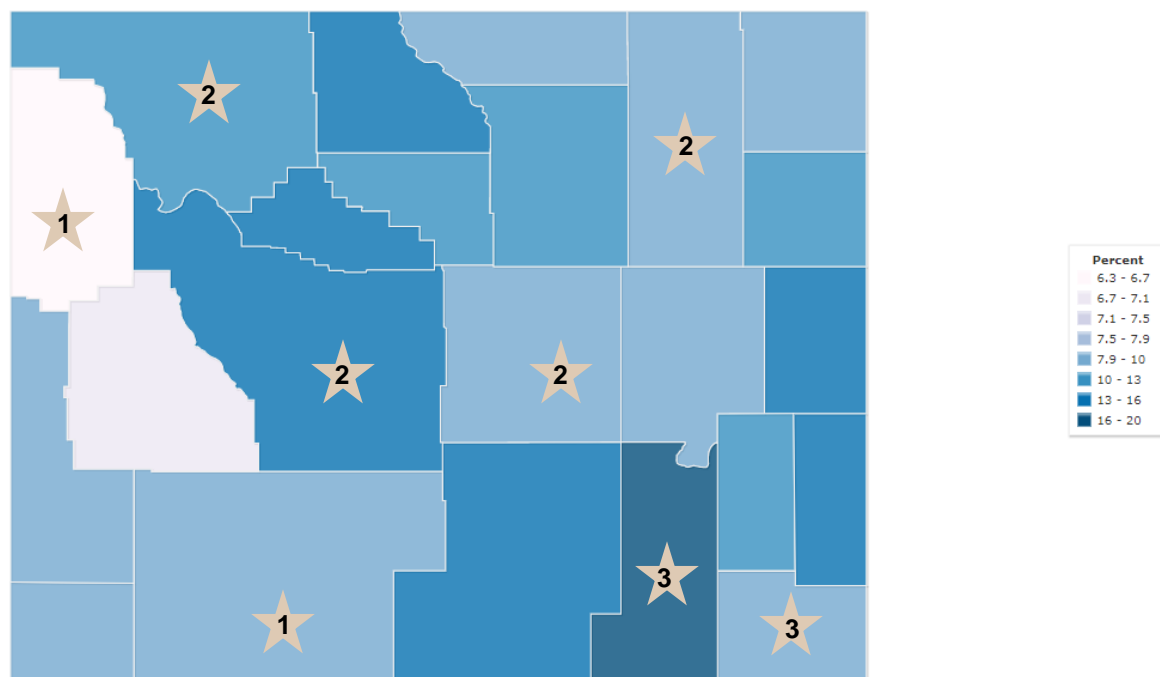


Table 4. Legal Aid Services by County Details

| County     | Services                                       |
|------------|--|
| Albany     | UW Clinic, Children's Law Center, DV Coalition |
| Campbell   | LAW, DV, Coalition                             |
| Fremont    | LAW, DV Coalition                              |
| Laramie    | LAW, Medical Legal Partnership, EJW            |
| Natrona    | LAW, DV Coalition,                             |
| Park       | LAW, DV Coalition                              |
| Sweetwater | LAW  |
| Teton      | Teton Access to Justice                        |

## **Synthetic Estimate of Civil Legal Service Need and Demand**

One of the goals of the needs assessment was to determine need for civil legal services among Wyoming's eligible resident population. Synthetic estimates to determine need and demand for services were created using US Census state and county-level population estimates and the Legal Services Corporation Justice Gap Report. Estimates were created for both individuals and households.

Table 13. Individual and Household Eligibility, Need, and Demand for Civil Legal Services among Wyoming Counties

| Geographic Location | Eligible Individuals                            | Demand for Services by Eligible Households and Household Size |  |  |   |   |  |  |
|---------------------|---|---|--|--|---|---|--|--|
| Location            | # Eligible for Services at 200% Poverty & below | Households Below Poverty Level (125%)                         | Eligible Households 1 Civil Legal Problem (125%) | Demand: Households 1 Civil Legal Problem | Eligible Households 2 Civil Legal Problems (125%) | Demand: Households 2 Civil Legal Problems | Eligible Households 6+ Civil Legal Problems (125%) | Demand: Households 6+ Civil Legal Problems |
| <b>Wyoming</b>      | <b>150,523</b>                                  | <b>25,047</b>   | <b>17,783</b>                                    | <b>3,557</b>                             | <b>13,525</b>                                     | <b>2,705</b>                              | <b>6,011</b>                                       | <b>1,202</b>                               |
| Albany              | 9,992   | 3,929   | 2,790  | 558                                      | 2,122   | 424                                       | 943  | 189  |
| Big Horn            | 3,089   | 493   | 350  | 70                                       | 266   | 53  | 118  | 24   |
| Campbell            | 12,025  | 1,860   | 1,321  | 264                                      | 1,004   | 201                                       | 446  | 89   |
| Carbon              | 3,963   | 855   | 607  | 121                                      | 462   | 92  | 205  | 41   |
| Converse            | 3,573   | 394   | 280  | 56                                       | 213   | 43  | 95   | 19   |
| Crook               | 1,930   | 267   | 190  | 38                                       | 144   | 29  | 64   | 13   |
| Fremont             | 10,357  | 1,752   | 1,244  | 249                                      | 946   | 189                                       | 420  | 84   |
| Goshen              | 3,485   | 131   | 93   | 19                                       | 71  | 14  | 31   | 6  |
| Hot Springs         | 1,218   | 292   | 207  | 41                                       | 158   | 32  | 70   | 14   |
| Johnson             | 2,195   | 535   | 380  | 76                                       | 289   | 58  | 128  | 26   |
| Laramie             | 25,600  | 3,797   | 2,696  | 539                                      | 2,050   | 410                                       | 911  | 182  |
| Lincoln             | 5,007   | 694   | 493  | 99                                       | 375   | 75  | 167  | 33   |
| Natrona             | 20,685  | 3,273   | 2,324  | 465                                      | 1,767   | 353                                       | 786  | 157  |
| Niobrara            | 623   | 202   | 143  | 29                                       | 109   | 22  | 48   | 10   |
| Park                | 7,589   | 1,010   | 717  | 143                                      | 545   | 109                                       | 242  | 48   |
| Platte              | 2,226   | 427   | 303  | 61                                       | 231   | 46  | 102  | 20   |
| Sheridan            | 7,834   | 895   | 635  | 127                                      | 483   | 97  | 215  | 43   |
| Sublette            | 2,537   | 143   | 102  | 20                                       | 77  | 15  | 34   | 7  |
| Sweetwater          | 11,322  | 1,978   | 1,404  | 281                                      | 1,068   | 214                                       | 475  | 95   |
| Teton               | 6,048   | 443   | 315  | 63                                       | 239   | 48  | 106  | 21   |
| Uinta               | 5,319   | 898   | 638  | 128                                      | 485   | 97  | 216  | 43   |
| Washakie            | 2,089   | 358   | 254  | 51                                       | 193   | 39  | 86   | 17   |
| Weston              | 1,816   | 421   | 299  | 60                                       | 227   | 45  | 101  | 20   |

## KEY FINDINGS

- Family law issues are the most common civil legal problems. In the professionals' survey, divorce, legal separation, and custody cases are among the most frequent. The next most frequent cases involve domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking. These were the top two issues in the client survey. However, they appeared in reverse order. That is, domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking were reported more frequently by clients than divorce, legal separation and custody issues as having occurred in the last year.
  - Librarians are an excellent resource. Several librarians participated in the needs assessment. They reported they see numerous individuals trying to solve civil legal issues. One of the most common issues involved clients who need help with both finding and completing legal forms. They reported that most of the clients find the forms cumbersome and difficult to understand, as did attorneys, judges, and other legal professionals. There was general consensus that librarians could probably do more to help.
- Clients find the legal forms cumbersome (which forms in this packet do I really need to fill out?), and difficult to understand (How do I fill these out without a lawyer?).*
- Legal professionals who were interviewed reported they could use more training in immigration issues and with disability claims and appeals. Immigration is an emerging area, and there are an extremely limited number of attorneys with legal expertise in immigration. While disability claims is not an emerging issue, there are only two lawyers in Wyoming with expertise in this area.
  - Several attorneys reported concerns regarding elderly and disadvantaged individuals, especially as it concerns housing and housing quality. Clients reported having to endure living in homes where the housing quality is poor and that they are afraid to complain about the quality. Several clients were unable to move because landlords threatened to withhold security deposits, which they need in order to afford the next rental unit.
  - Client problems are many and complex with few resources to solve them. In addition to what is shown in the social indicator data, several professionals reported their clients problems seem to present with more complex problems than in the past. Clients who were interviewed described having difficulties articulating their legal problems. Moreover, they have even more difficulty separating their legal issues from their interpersonal issues. This is even more pronounced for clients with mental health issues and was confirmed during the interviews with legal professionals.
  - Organizational data provided for the needs assessment was diverse and inconsistent resulting in numerous data quality challenges that were time-consuming to address. The forthcoming case management system will ensure higher quality data are collected and will be more conducive to tracking and updating services.
  - The COVID pandemic broke out during this needs assessment. With the exception of food insecurity and employment most data sources do not yet reflect the impact it's having on the client population. Legal Aid received an increase in the number of landlord/tenant questions, assistance with Wills and Power of Attorneys, and a slight increase in the number of domestic restraining orders.