

The Westside Justice Center is a community-centered organization that promotes a holistic approach to justice by: 1) Facilitating legal literacy to reduce recidivism; 2) Providing legal and quasi-legal assistance to individuals; and 3) Establishing and nurturing community trust through participatory deliberations and restorative justice practices to collaboratively mitigate the consequences of incarceration on criminalized communities. Our Before the Law legal clinic serves clients on the Westside of Chicago who have historically fallen through the cracks of traditional legal aid.

Most of our clients experience intergenerational trauma, racism, and poverty and are among the hardest hit by the COVID-19 crisis. Our legal clinic has seen a marked increase in calls relating to unemployment insurance and other public benefits since Governor Pritzker issued the shelter-in-place order, and we anticipate a deluge of eviction clients as soon as the moratorium on evictions is lifted. Our community already faces barriers to accessing the patchwork of social safety net programs in existence. The clear feedback we have been receiving is that there are simply not enough accessible resources currently in existence for our clients to maintain their health and housing through the COVID-19 crisis. Before the pandemic hit, our clients were already struggling to pay their bills; after the pandemic, they have lost work, their health, or a family member and face insurmountable rent, mortgage, and healthcare costs.

HB5574 would provide desperately-needed relief to many in our community and allow them to maintain their health and housing during and after the pandemic. We urge our state legislators to act now to stop the needless deaths which will undoubtedly result as more Illinoisians are evicted to homelessness. Please vote in favor of the bill to protect the lives and livelihood of our most vulnerable community members.