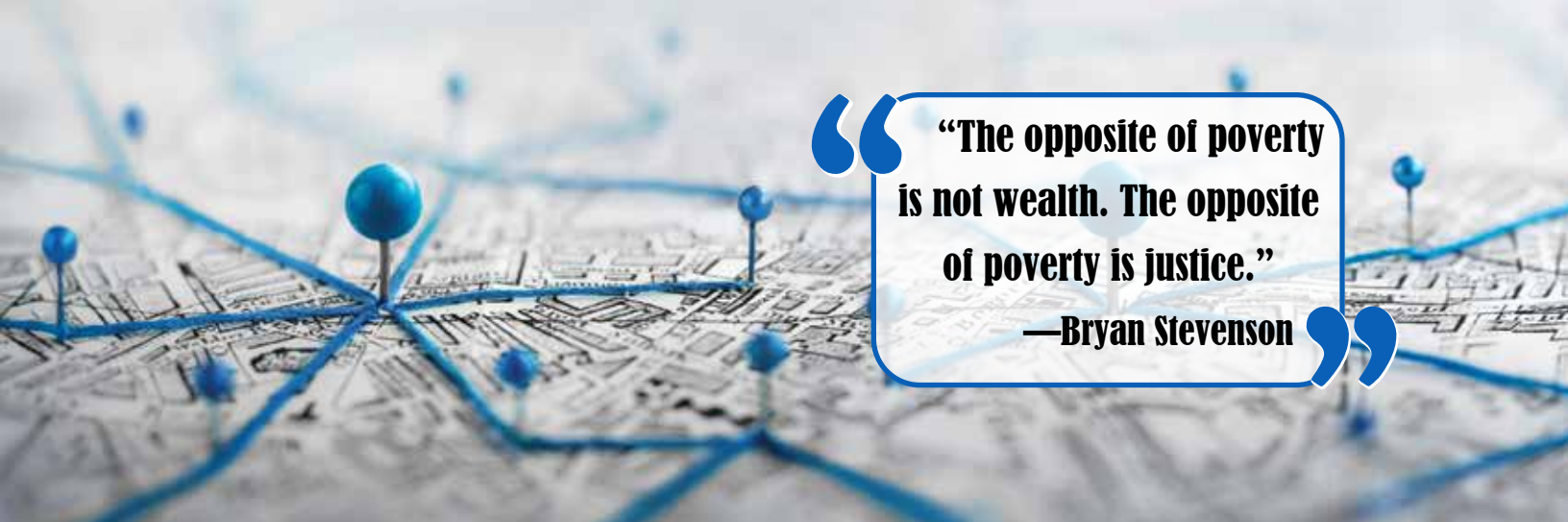


“Mapping” the Future of JUSTICE FOR ALL:

Using Geographic Information Systems

By Alainna R. Mire and Judge Lisa M. Woodruff-White

“The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much. It is whether we provide enough for those who have little.”
—Franklin D. Roosevelt”



**“The opposite of poverty
is not wealth. The opposite
of poverty is justice.”**

—Bryan Stevenson

The notion that civil equal justice is critical to the proper functioning of our democracy was the foundation for the formation of the Louisiana Access to Justice (ATJ) Commission.¹ Providing effective and economical civil legal service delivery for low- and moderate-income citizens of Louisiana can have a significant impact on individuals and our communities. Especially in times of crisis, civil legal aid stabilizes individuals, families and entire communities by improving economic security and increasing access to basic necessities like housing, healthcare, government benefits and disaster services. Applying resources to accomplish our goal of equal access to justice for all requires an understanding of the community’s needs, where resources are located, and what challenges lie ahead.

In the fall of 2019, the National Center for State Courts awarded the Louisiana ATJ Commission a Justice for All (JFA) grant. At its core, the JFA initiative is a commitment to ensuring meaningful access to justice for all,² accomplished by “[m]aking America’s justice system more responsive to people’s everyday civil legal needs through innovation, collaboration, and support of statewide efforts.”³ During the first phase of the JFA project, the ATJ Commission

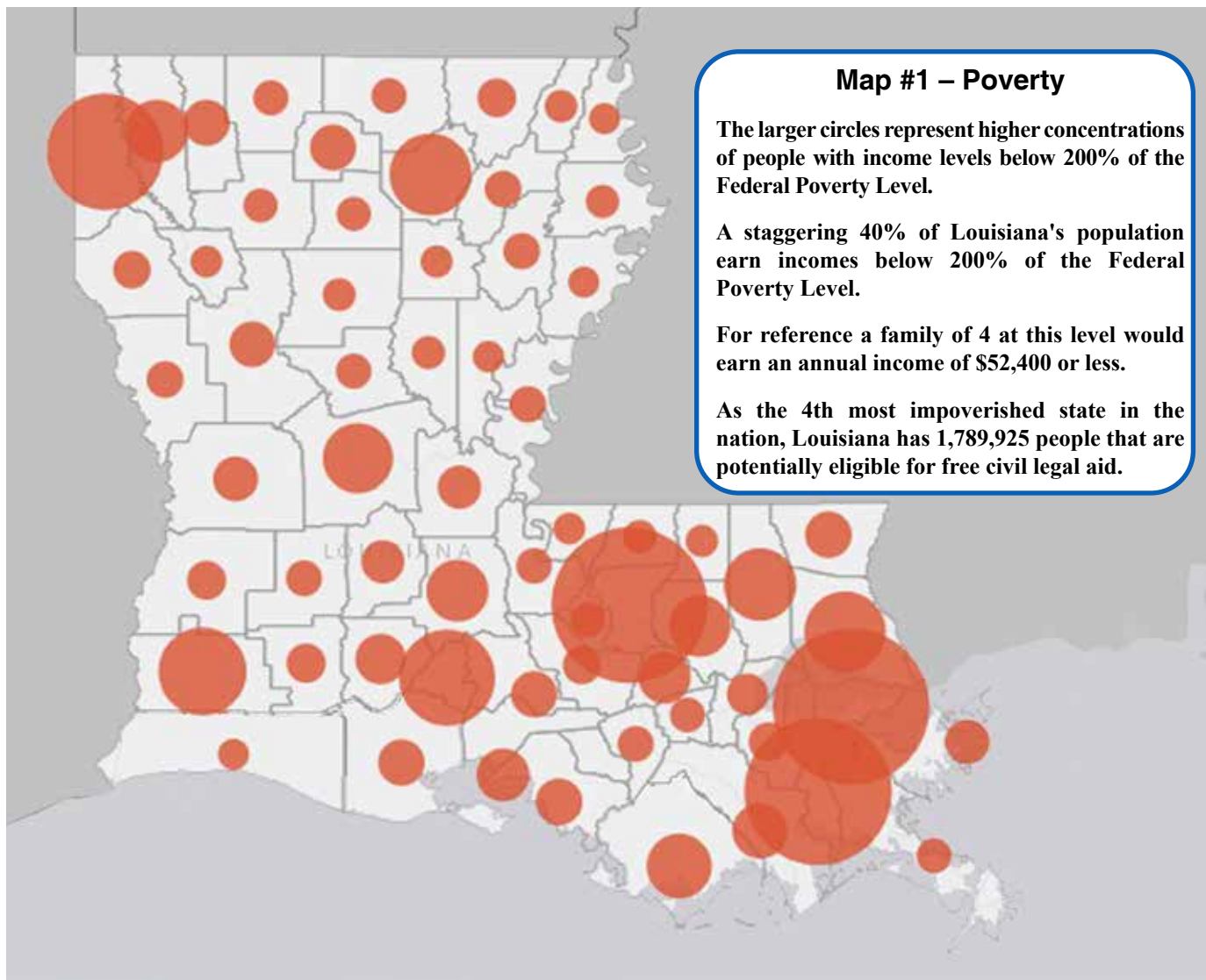
organized an in-depth study to understand the legal needs of the community. The study involved assessing current legal resources available in Louisiana, ascertaining where those resources are located, and identifying challenges to access legal help as well as opportunities for growth.

Like virtually every aspect of 2020, the assessment stage of the JFA project was filled with unexpected turns and challenges. COVID-19 caused the cancellation of multiple in-person community listening sessions throughout the state, and all stakeholder meetings were moved online. The pandemic, however, provided the ATJ Commission with the opportunity to take the data collected and use a powerful new Geographic Information Systems (GIS) visual mapping tool to demonstrate the layered barriers in Louisiana.

What Are GIS Maps?

GIS maps display data in a visual format by combining a database with spatial or geographic information.⁴ By plotting this information on top of a map, a visual story comes to life and becomes a powerful tool in understanding complex patterns and relationships that exist geographically and may not be otherwise obvious.

With the help of a cartographer from the Self-Represented Litigants’ Network, Lagniappe Law Lab, and the 2020 ATJ Developing Leadership Interns, the ATJ Commission mapped comprehensive data collected during the JFA project using GIS technology. Using this framework, the ATJ Commission compiled parish-specific maps illustrating the current state of access to justice efforts and information about Louisiana’s population. These maps created a story detailing the many challenges Louisianans face when accessing civil justice throughout the state, such as poverty, long travel distances to civil legal aid resources, and lack of internet access. Although the stories vary parish-to-parish because each area is affected differently, the overall effects on the state are readily apparent.



Map #1 – Poverty

The larger circles represent higher concentrations of people with income levels below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level.

A staggering 40% of Louisiana's population earn incomes below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level.

For reference a family of 4 at this level would earn an annual income of \$52,400 or less.

As the 4th most impoverished state in the nation, Louisiana has 1,789,925 people that are potentially eligible for free civil legal aid.

Map #1 — Poverty

The first map depicts the stark realities of poverty in Louisiana — a staggering 40% of Louisiana's population earns below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) and are potentially eligible for civil legal aid. Generally, to be eligible for civil legal aid, a person must be within 125% of the federal poverty guidelines. In some circumstances, however, families may earn up to 200% of the FPL. An annual income for a family of four would be \$52,400 at this level. The larger circles in this map represent higher concentrations of people with income levels below 200% FPL.

With one of the highest poverty rates in the country, Louisiana's citizens face monumental challenges in accessing the civil justice system. From hiring an attorney to paying significant filing fees, those living in poverty struggle to address their civil legal issues.

“If indigent people can't effectively access the courts, they lose the ability to protect their vital interests such as housing, employment, health insurance and parental rights.”

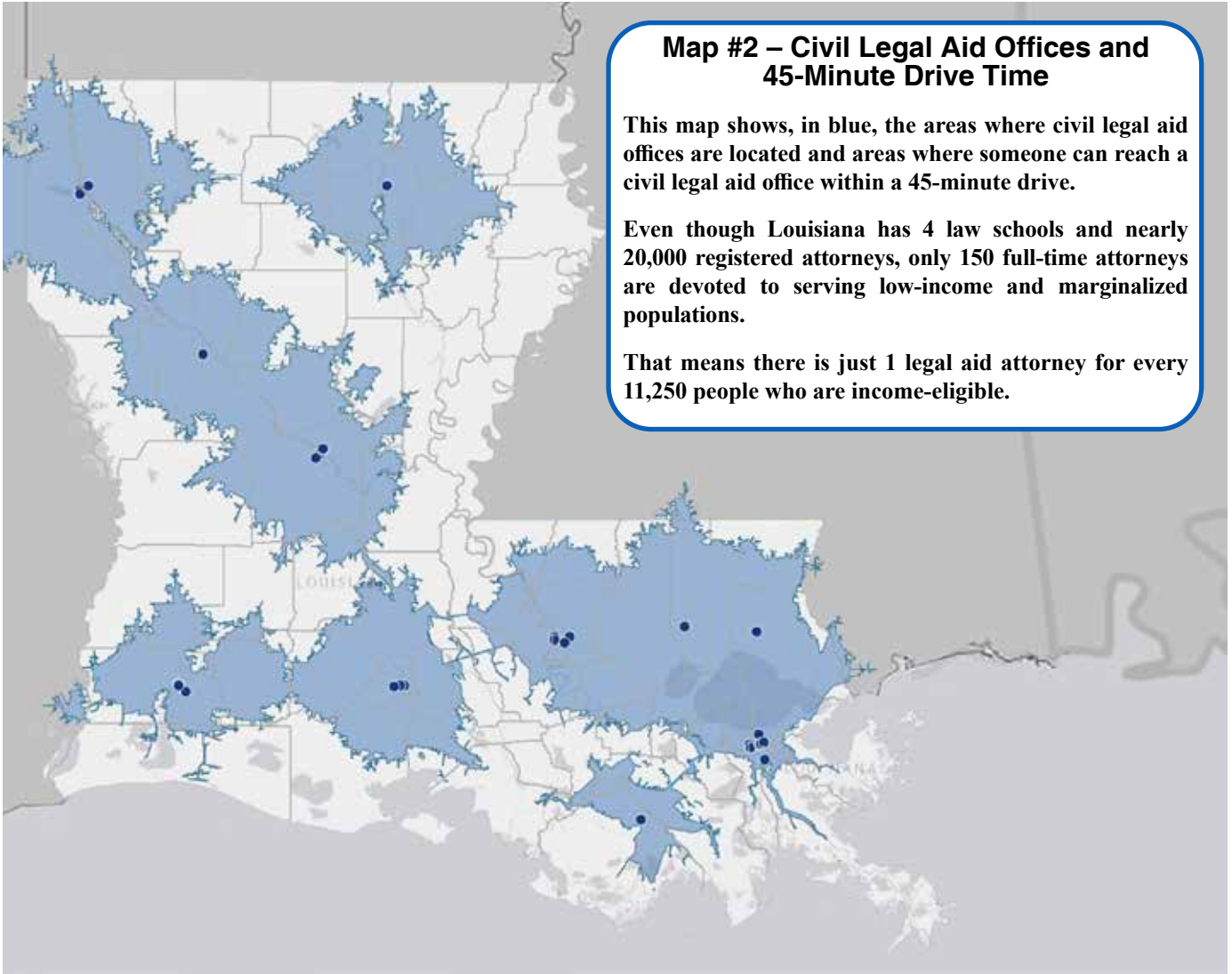
—Jim Sandman, former president of the Legal Service Corp., a national nonprofit that provides funding for civil legal aid.

Map #2 – Civil Legal Aid Offices and 45-Minute Drive Time

This map shows, in blue, the areas where civil legal aid offices are located and areas where someone can reach a civil legal aid office within a 45-minute drive.

Even though Louisiana has 4 law schools and nearly 20,000 registered attorneys, only 150 full-time attorneys are devoted to serving low-income and marginalized populations.

That means there is just 1 legal aid attorney for every 11,250 people who are income-eligible.



Map #2 — Distances to Civil Legal Aid Offices

Louisiana has a network of civil legal service providers that cover every parish in the state. Civil legal aid specifically refers to legal assistance provided by one of the Legal Service Corp. programs, pro bono or nonprofit programs providing legal services to low-income people. Unlike criminal cases, in civil matters, a person generally does not have a right to an attorney. They must either hire an attorney, get help from a legal aid organization, represent themselves, or not access the legal system altogether. Resolving civil legal problems helps families access basic necessities, such as housing, healthcare, government benefits, employment and disaster services. The impact of civil legal aid is great. For every \$1 invested in civil legal aid, these programs deliver \$9.18 in immediate and long-term consequential financial benefit, resulting in a net economic impact value of \$64,823,000 during the 2019-20 fiscal year.⁵

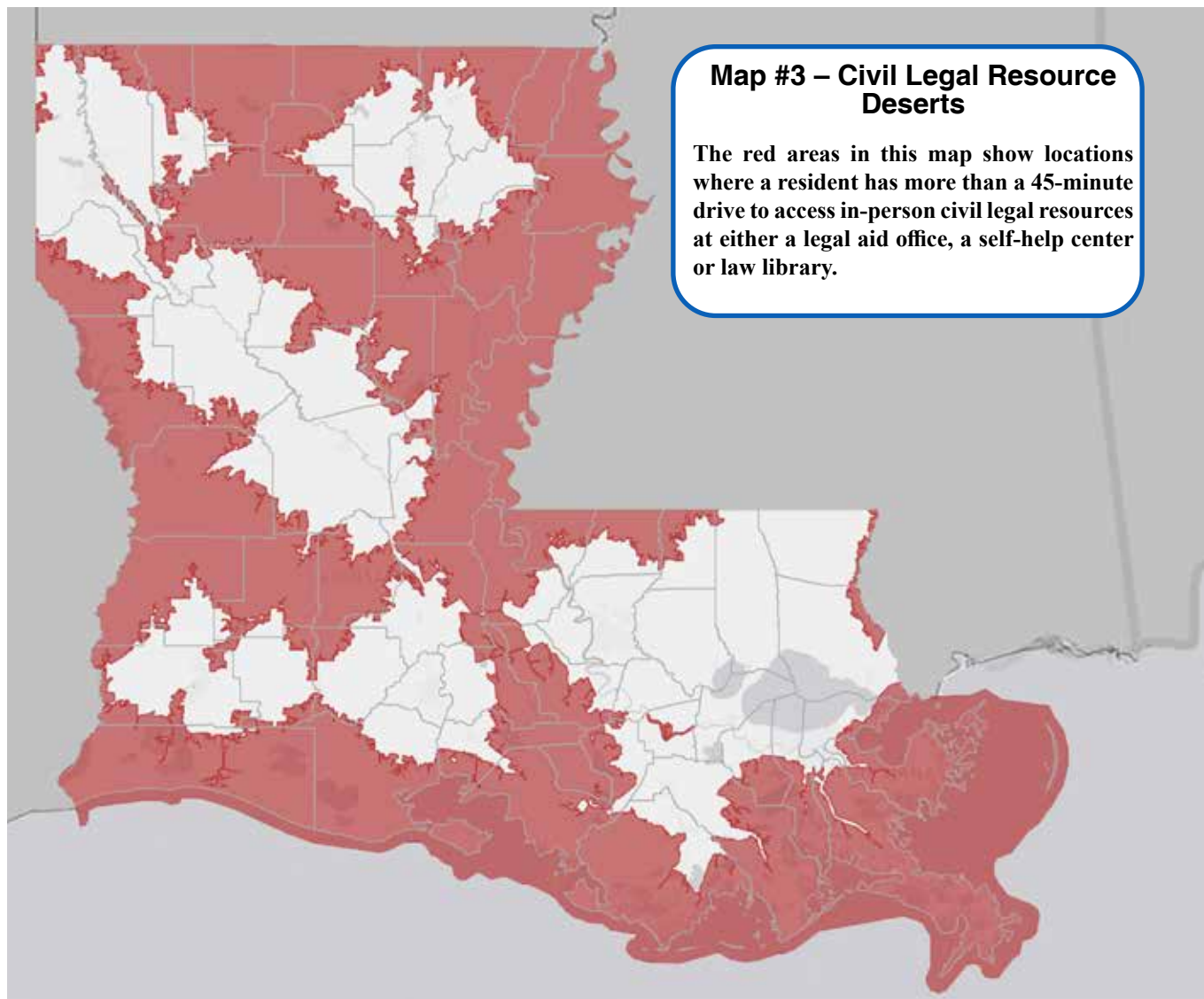
In Louisiana, Acadiana Legal Service Corp. (ALSC) and Southeast Louisiana Legal Services (SLLS) are the state's two

largest civil legal aid providers offering no-cost legal assistance to Louisiana's most vulnerable. These two civil legal aid organizations provide services in every parish of the state. Although ALSC and SLLS cover every parish in the state, they do not have physical offices in each parish. In fact, of the legal aid offices that exist, there is approximately one legal aid attorney for every 11,250 income-eligible people. In contrast, there is one Louisiana licensed attorney for every 200 residents.

Civil Legal Aid Success Stories

Unemployed due to COVID and unable to pay his bills, Mr. S and his young son lived in their home without electricity for nearly a year. After numerous failed attempts to work out a payment plan with the electric company, Mr. S spoke with an Acadiana Legal Service attorney who was able to negotiate a payment plan with the company, after which their electricity was restored.

- From Acadiana Legal Service Corporation



Map #3 – Civil Legal Resource Deserts

The red areas in this map show locations where a resident has more than a 45-minute drive to access in-person civil legal resources at either a legal aid office, a self-help center or law library.

Map #3 — Civil Legal Resource Deserts

Deserts in Louisiana? When one thinks of deserts, Louisiana is not the first place that comes to mind. Deserts are arid and harsh regions far different from Louisiana's wetlands. The GIS maps have changed this perspective, identifying much of the state as a civil legal resource desert (CLRD).

CLRDs are locations outside a 45-minute drive from an in-person civil legal resource. In addition to civil legal aid offices, these in-person legal resources include law libraries and self-help centers.

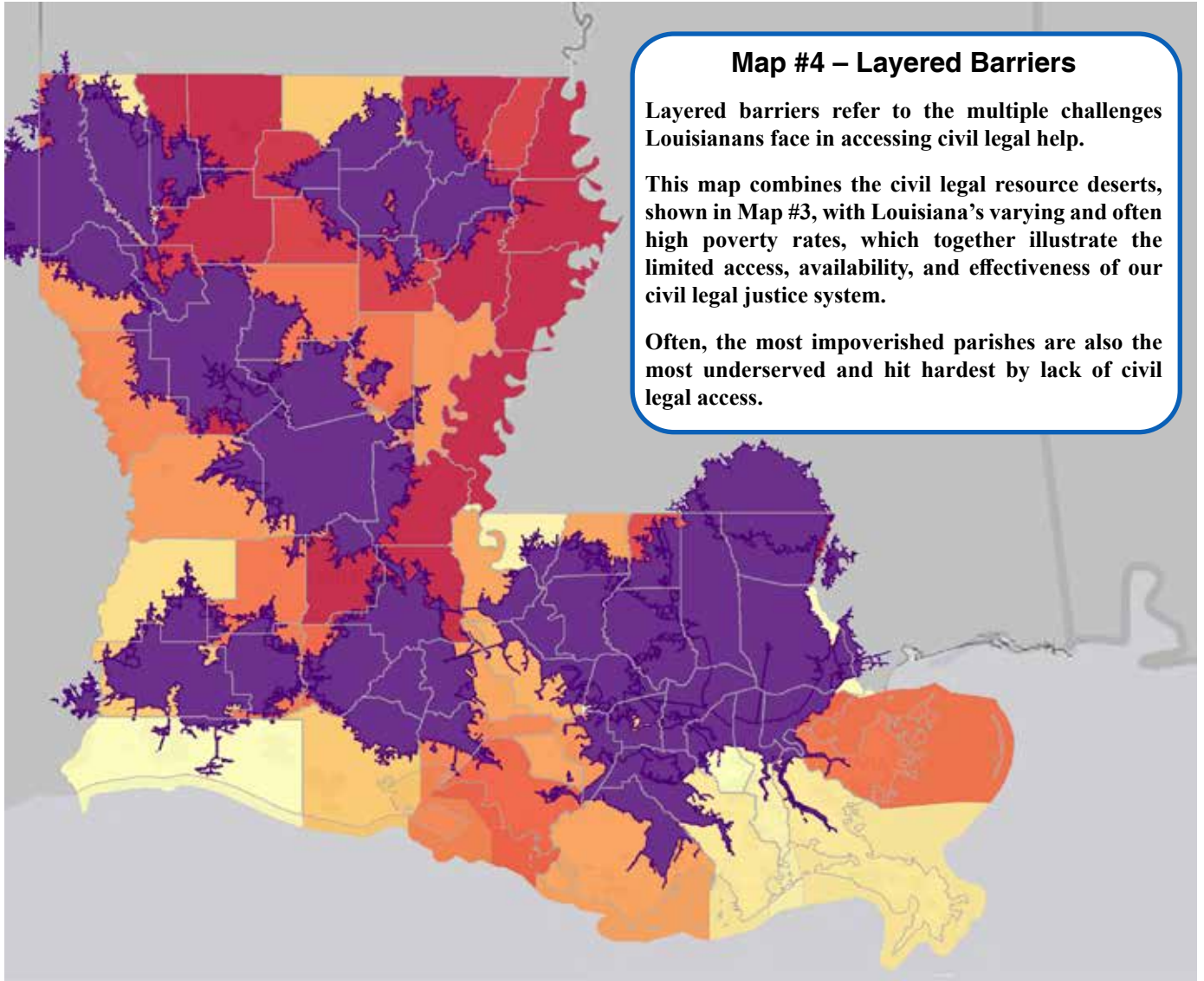
Civil legal resource deserts, shown above in red, account for 60% of the state's land area and 34% of the population earning below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). In other words, more than 600,000 people who are potentially eligible for civil legal aid are living in these deserts where in-person resources essentially do not exist. Some entire parishes are civil legal resources deserts, including in the northeast part of Louisiana. In addition to the lack of legal resource access,

Civil Legal Aid Success Stories

Ms. T, a 65-year-old grandmother living in a rural parish, was frantic after her 13-year-old great niece disclosed the abuse she was suffering from her father. Ms. T took in her young great niece, but hit a roadblock when she couldn't enroll the child in school. Southeast Louisiana Legal Services secured emergency custody and then a permanent protective order in favor of child, establishing custody with Ms. T and allowing for the child to be enrolled in school.

- From Southeast Louisiana Legal Services

more than a third of households in many of these parishes report not having internet access in their home.



Map #4 – Layered Barriers

Layered barriers refer to the multiple challenges Louisianans face in accessing civil legal help.

This map combines the civil legal resource deserts, shown in Map #3, with Louisiana's varying and often high poverty rates, which together illustrate the limited access, availability, and effectiveness of our civil legal justice system.

Often, the most impoverished parishes are also the most underserved and hit hardest by lack of civil legal access.

Map # 4 — Layered Barriers

What makes these GIS maps so impactful is that they paint a more detailed picture of all the reasons someone in need might not be able to access the civil legal system in Louisiana. They show in alarming detail the layered barriers to access the civil justice system. But it is not just the lack of resources that makes justice for all so difficult. In addition to limited internet access, those living in civil legal resource deserts are often the most impoverished. The findings reveal that one in three people income-eligible for civil legal aid are living in a civil legal resource desert. Many of the issues these communities struggle with — employment, housing and benefits — have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

In this map, the darker red areas show parishes with more than 50% of the residents earning below 200% of the FPL, whereas the orange and yellow areas represent lower concentrations of poverty. The people living outside the purple areas in the map experience greater than a 45-minute drive to access

Online Resource

Review all the information collected by the GIS mapping project: www.bit.ly/JFAStoryMap

- View maps in detail
- Parish-specific data
- View unique challenges for each region

in-person civil legal resources. Some entire parishes are facing these extremely high poverty rates and are civil legal resource deserts.

As these maps illustrate, limited resources mean legal aid providers can only address a fraction of the total civil legal needs. When poverty increases, so does our communities' civil legal needs. The best way to ensure justice for all is to work together to help those most impoverished.

Continued next page

Call to Action! How to Help

Ultimately, the story map reveals that there is no “one size fits all” approach to address the needs of each parish in Louisiana. With this information collected, the ATJ Commission is working to address these challenges faced by community members in civil legal resource deserts. The plan involves working closely with judges, courthouses, members of the bar and community leaders to provide tools that can increase access and sustainably serve people in areas where legal help is difficult to obtain. The ATJ Commission plans to begin working with up to three parishes to create replicable pilot projects and access points for people with the greatest challenges to accessing legal help. The goal is to ensure that everyone has *meaningful* access to solve their justice problems.

To review all information collected from the GIS mapping project, go to: www.bit.ly/JFAStoryMap. There, you will be able to view all the maps that detail the layered barriers to accessing civil justice. You will also be able to see parish-specific data across the state and the unique challenges of each region.

But, how can you help now? There are numerous ways.

Spread the word about civil legal aid and the current resources that exist. Share this story map and the Louisiana State Bar Association’s “Find Legal Help” Portal (accessible at: www.lsba.org/public/findlegalhelp/), which provides a spectrum of legal services available to the public.

Members of the Bar and judiciary

can also **Get Involved**. Get connected to the Louisiana Access to Justice Commission by working with the Self-Represented Litigants or Technology Committees, which are developing strategic plans to address the obstacles identified through the GIS project.

Volunteer your time and experience with a pro bono or legal aid organization. To find volunteer opportunities and resources go to www.probono.net/la. Remote volunteer options are also available through LA.FreeLegalAnswers.org. If you are interested in helping expand the Justice for All efforts in the parishes most affected, take this survey to share your thoughts: www.surveymonkey.com/r/JusticeForAll. Not interested in volunteering? Make a tax-deductible donation to the Louisiana Bar Foundation or any of the legal aid organizations listed.

By working together to address access to justice issues, we will help family members, friends and neighbors — our communities — who are unable to get the legal help they need. Together, we can ensure that everyone has meaningful access to resources that assist with solving their justice problems.

FOOTNOTES

1. See the Louisiana Supreme Court Press Release announcing the Order establishing the Louisiana Access to Justice Commission, available at: www.lasc.org/PressRoom/2015.

2. See Resolution 5, the Conference of Chief Justices and Conference of State Court Administrators, available at: www.ncsc.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0022/26392/5-meaningful-access-to-justice-for-all_final.pdf.

3. About Justice For All, National Center for State Courts, available at: www.ncsc.org/jfa/about.

4. “Basics of GIS Mapping,” Legal Services Corporation: America’s Partner for Equal Justice, available at: www.lsc.gov/grants-grantee-resources/resources-topic-type/basics-gis-mapping.

5. See “Civil Legal Aid is a Good Investment,” Louisiana Bar Foundation, available at: <https://raisingthebar.org/about-us/newsroom/80-lbf-news/591-civil-legal-aid-is-a-good-investment>. This reflects Louisiana’s civil legal activities during the 2019-20 fiscal year. According to the Foundation’s 2018 study, which is cited in the JFA Story Map, civil legal aid had a social return on investment of \$9.13, and, in 2018, the network of legal service partners provided over \$95 million in social economic benefits. See also “Funding Civil Legal Aid has a Ripple Effect,” Louisiana Bar Foundation, available at: www.raisingthebar.org/about-us/newsroom/80-lbf-news/458-2018-civil-legal-aid-social-impact-return-on-investment-is-914.

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