Public Counsel is seeking a President and Chief Executive Officer to be based in Los Angeles.

ABOUT PUBLIC COUNSEL

Founded in 1970, Public Counsel is the largest pro bono legal organization in the country. Headquartered in Los Angeles, with satellite offices in Berkeley and New York, Public Counsel’s staff of 135 professionals (including 70 lawyers) serves annually over 30,000 indigent and underrepresented adults and children. Public Counsel’s award-winning work combines direct services, policy advocacy, and impact litigation to enforce and defend the rights of our society’s most vulnerable.

Public Counsel has an annual budget of approximately $11 million that is supported in large part by private philanthropy from major law firms, corporations and foundations. Public Counsel enjoys close working relationships with nearly every major law firm and public interest legal organization in the state, as well as numerous governmental offices at every level.

Public Counsel’s practice areas include appellate law, bankruptcy, children’s rights, child care law, community development, consumer law, education, homelessness prevention, housing, immigrants’ rights, impact litigation, and veterans’ advocacy. Public Counsel has also recently launched an ambitious new project – the Opportunity Under Law Initiative – that seeks to combine impact litigation, communications, and organizing to address the lack of economic opportunity nationally.

Additional information about Public Counsel can be found at www.publiccounsel.org.

PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

The President and Chief Executive Officer of Public Counsel must provide dynamic leadership with great vision for social and legal change. The President and Chief Executive Officer is primarily responsible for: developing with the Board and implementing the strategic direction of the organization; providing management of the staff; overseeing development, together with the Vice President of Development; and supervising its programs, policy and litigation. The President and Chief Executive Officer must be dedicated to service, devoted to the improvement of society, and committed to advancing access to equal justice under the law.
The President and Chief Executive Officer will represent the organization externally, reaching law firms, public policy and private sector leaders, philanthropic stakeholders, media, and individual donors. The President and Chief Executive Officer must be a skilled manager, capable of directing, motivating and retaining a first-class professional staff, as well as expanding the work of the organization. The President and Chief Executive Officer must be a leader who possesses strong professional, interpersonal, fundraising, and organizational skills and is capable of taking Public Counsel to a new level of recognition, funding, and program excellence to serve more clients more effectively.

Responsibilities

Vision

- Provide and articulate the vision of Public Counsel as an important force for legal and social change.

Program Development and Management

- Manage the existing portfolio of programs, projects and personnel within Public Counsel dedicated to providing direct services to the indigent and underrepresented in the areas of children’s rights, homelessness prevention, consumer rights, immigration rights, veteran’s rights, and related areas.
- Manage impact litigation that seeks systemic change in the causes of poverty, homelessness, child and elder abuse, and related areas.
- Coordinate, manage and grow the pro bono services provided through Public Counsel by volunteer lawyers and law firms.
- Develop new programs as needed to address emerging issues related to the mission of Public Counsel and increase access to justice.

Development and Fundraising

- Work with the Vice President, Development, and the Board of Directors to expand law firm and corporate support, including increasing their contributions to the annual Douglas Dinner, which raises more than $2 million annually.
- Expand individual support, including planned giving and major gifts.
- Expand foundation support while ensuring existing support is aligned with the mission and objectives of the organization.
Board Relations

• In partnership with the Board, identify and cultivate dedicated and enthusiastic new Board members.

Legal Supervision

• Oversee the legal practice such that the highest quality of legal representation is provided by the organization.

General Management

• Oversee day-to-day management of staff to ensure the quality and efficiency of services to the community; hold self and staff accountable to the mission and each other.
• Assess and institute the infrastructure necessary to support and further enable the exceptional programmatic growth Public Counsel has enjoyed over the past decade.
• Seek to ensure that diversity within Public Counsel both reflects and supports the public it serves.
• Develop and implement internal controls that ensure the organization meets the highest ethical and financial management standards, and complies with applicable laws, regulations, and funding standards and/or restrictions.

Public Advocacy

• Advocate for the availability of legal services for the poor at the local, state and federal levels.
• Advocate for policy initiatives.

Community Relations

• Develop, maintain and improve existing relationships with legal and social service organizations and governmental agencies, and develop new relationships with key organizations and agencies relevant to the areas served by Public Counsel.

Communications

• Work with the Director of Communications to plan and execute a communications strategy for Public Counsel.
• Improve internal communications and systems to enable programs to easily inform, collaborate with, and facilitate each other’s work, as well as more holistically assist those served.
• Rigorously promote Public Counsel and its objectives in order to garner greater support and recognition for the causes and people it serves.

Professional Qualifications and Personal Attributes

The President and Chief Executive Officer should embody the following professional qualifications and personal attributes.

Professional Qualifications

• Active membership in good standing of a state bar association with a willingness to obtain California Bar membership within one year of assuming the position.
• Significant leadership and management experience in attracting, developing, evaluating and retaining professional staff.
• Proven success in and comfortable with raising support from institutions, foundations and individuals.
• Demonstrated ability to motivate and advocate.

Personal Attributes

• The highest standards for integrity and ethical conduct.
• An ability to gain trust, organize people into teams, and inspire team members to excellence.
• A strategic multitasker who delegates effectively.
• An ability to communicate effectively and professionally with a diverse range of people.
• An ability to listen to others and learn from their best ideas while remaining decisive and proactive as chief executive.
• An overarching dedication to serve and compassion for those in need

Public Counsel is an equal opportunity employer. The identity of applicants will be kept strictly confidential. Please submit nominations and applications to the attention of Sarah James and Becky Klein at PublicCounsel@PhillipsOppenheim.com.
### WILLIAM O. DOUGLAS AWARD

#### PAST AWARD RECIPIENTS

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As deadlines near, LA schools debate how to help foster youth

By Annie Gilbertson

When Gov. Jerry Brown announced a new boost in school funding — reversing years of cuts — he tied some strings around the money: districts would be paid more for needy kids and they’d have to come up with plans on how the money would help English-learners and students from low income families or in foster care.

It’s that last group that’s particularly hard to reach — and Los Angeles Unified school district officials are taking a hard look at their limited foster youth services.

“Unfortunately, to be honest with you, we see a lot of the poor outcomes, because they fall between the cracks, because they are so highly mobile” said Debra Duardo, director of student health and human services for L.A. Unified.

L.A. Unified is responsible for 8,278 foster children’s education, about a third of the foster students statewide. Duardo said only seven employees are assigned to help them. The best students can expect is to be folded into federally-funded services offered to other types special needs students: free meals, reading and math interventions, special education.

And the consequences of foster youths’ struggles in school reverberate.

“The only educationally, but in life,” Duardo said. “These are the kids that are not only dropping out of school, but are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system, and more likely to be unemployed.”

Foster kids are at the rock bottom of nearly every performance measure: Seven in 10 are behind in school and nearly five in 10 don’t graduate, according to a recent statewide report.

Education services for foster students is often more complicated than other high-need youth because they move homes and schools frequently, Duardo said.

As Los Angeles schools decide how to spend millions of dollars in new resources, foster youth advocates show why students who fall through the cracks need more help.

“This is the opportunity for us to kind of swoop in and get those additional resources,” said Public Counsel’s Susan McClure.

L.A. Unified has to figure out how to reverse course by July 1, when all districts are required to submit plans of action and accountability to the California Department of Education as part of the the new Local Control Funding law.

L.A. Unified is projected to get a budget increase of $332.7 million next school year, and $268.3 million for the following to help its struggling populations.

But Superintendent John Deasy and the school board have repeatedly postponed discussing the details for months, narrowing the window for public discussion.

Insecure and alone

Selvin, a high school junior, has been in foster care for six years. He’s been slid into 10 different homes with 10 unfamiliar families around Los Angeles.

He’s bounced around a lot these last couple of years, enrolling in seven high schools. Every few months, he had to start over somewhere new.

“It’s kind of awkward, because don’t know them, they just toss me in a random home with a random family,” said Selvin, whose last name is not being published to protect his privacy. “I feel embarrassed, insecure, lonely.”

It’s gotten better since he started crashing at his older sister’s house in South Gate, he said. But even that meant starting yet again in another new school mid-year, like walking into a theatre in the middle of a movie.

When Selvin showed up to English class, his new teacher handed him a test on a book he had never heard of, the Catcher in the Rye.

“I looked at the quiz, and I was lost,” he said. “I started reading the questions to see if I could know some of the answers, but I was totally lost.”
He’s struggled pull up that failing grade ever since.

Selvin’s lucky. Paige Fern, an advocate who works with foster youth took on his case over the summer after meeting him at a summer camp at UCLA called First Star.

“There is no parent stepping up for them in school,” said Fern, an attorney with an advocacy group called Alliance for Children’s Rights. “There is no one who is stable who knows what’s going on in their school history.”

Selvin said until Fern got involved, he didn’t know he was behind for graduation.

“I didn’t know what I needed to graduate,” Selvin said. “I didn’t know how many credits I had.”

Figuring it out was painstaking, Fern said. She found his grades weren’t always following him when he got to a new school.

“We tracked every single grade, every attendance record, every behavior record, every special education record that was in existence,” Fern said, eventually recouping lost credits and developing a plan to graduate.

“I will be the loudest person at high school graduation and I will have a box a tissues with me,” Fern said.

**Refocusing on foster youth**

Susan McClure, an attorney for Public Counsel, said L.A. Unified’s seven staffers aren’t enough to help kids like Selvin.

“If you have somebody who wears a lot of hats, people are kind of tugging at them in all different directions so they aren’t necessarily going to be able to develop that in depth knowledge or dedicate the attention that foster youth need,” McClure said.

The school system has long had a data system to track the outcomes of these students, and officials share information with child welfare workers at the Department of Children and Family Services every week. But that doesn’t seem to help them succeed in school.

Foster youth are twice as likely to repeat a grade and twice as likely to drop out as their peers, according to data complied by the public-interest law firm Public Counsel. And they’re three times as likely to be expelled.

Public Counsel has teamed up with the Alliance for Children’s Rights and several other advocacy groups to form the Coalition for Education Equality for Foster Youth. Together, they are recommending districts such as L.A. Unified adopt a slew of accountability and other policy reforms ahead of the Local Control Funding deadline.

“This is the opportunity for us to kind of swoop in and get those additional resources,” McClure said.
Students from seven low-performing schools across California, including two in Oakland, filed an unusual class-action lawsuit against the state and its top education officials Thursday, claiming they have received far less learning time than other, more affluent kids across the state.

While other state education lawsuits have focused on ensuring that all students have equal access to tangible resources - funding, quality teachers, safe facilities or even textbooks - this one is different.

It addresses a more fundamental part of a public education: the time it takes to learn.

The lawsuit claims that for students in the seven schools, including Fremont and Castlemont high schools in Oakland, a lot less time is spent on real learning.

The lawsuit - filed by Public Counsel, a pro bono law firm, and the ACLU Foundation of Southern California - identified several reasons for what it calls lost learning time, including a lack of teachers at the start of the school year, incomplete class schedules, the aftermath of traumatic lockdowns, overreliance on substitutes to fill long-term vacancies and “service” courses that require students to do office work or other tasks.

The lost teaching time makes a big difference in the students’ lives, said Johanna Paraiso, a veteran English teacher at Fremont High and an adviser to the lawsuit.

“That lost learning time, honestly, those few minutes were what we needed to get one more kid to walk the stage (on graduation day),” she said.

That lost time is preventable, and it’s the state’s responsibility to address the causes, plaintiffs’ attorneys said.

“The California Constitution places an affirmative obligation on the state to safeguard the indispensable right to an equal education, no matter the circumstances,” according to the suit. “Basic equality in education then must begin with the guarantee that no child be denied the time required to learn what the state itself mandates be taught.”

State officials said they hadn’t had the opportunity to review the lawsuit, but said there has been a significant and “historic” effort to shift the control over money and policies to local school districts.

Continuing that effort “rather than shifting authority to Sacramento is the best way to improve student achievement and meet the needs of our schools, and we will resist any effort to derail this important initiative through costly and unnecessary litigation,” said state Superintendent Tom Torlakson and state Board of Education President Mike Kirst in a joint statement. “We encourage the ACLU to continue to communicate with us at the state and, more importantly, to work with local school districts about the best ways to support local students and improve educational outcomes.”

The case was filed Thursday morning in Alameda Superior Court.

Eric Flood, a Fremont senior and one of the plaintiffs, said he joined the lawsuit to draw attention to the large amount of time he spent not learning in his four years of high school.

Earlier this year, he said, his government teacher went on maternity leave, and the class was taught by a weekly series of teachers who did little more than hand out packets of work for the students to complete.

“People just stopped coming to class because we weren’t doing anything anyway,” said Eric, 17.

By the end of the first semester, three to four students would show up on any given day, down from 15 or more.

Frequent fights were another distraction, with classroom teachers responsible for breaking up the hallway melees, he said.
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In addition, scheduling issues resulted in a lack of classes, which meant Eric was assigned to three service classes during the day, time he often spent filing or doing nothing, while taking credit-recovery classes online after school.

And inexperienced teachers, common given the annual staff turnover, have trouble controlling classroom behavior, which means little teaching occurs, Eric said.

"I want to be a part of (the lawsuit) so I can help future generations," he said. "I want to make sure they have the resources I didn't have in high school."

The class-action lawsuit represents all the students at the seven schools, which also include Compton High School and Whaley Middle School in Compton; John C. Fremont High and Florence Griffith Joyner Elementary in Los Angeles; and Nystrom Elementary in west Contra Costa County.

The lawsuit claims students are deprived of their state constitutional right to an equal education and calls on the state to establish a system that monitors the number of days and minutes of instruction delivered to students rather than relying on annually set academic calendars.

The suit also claims that lost time can be remedied with more counselors, increasing support and training for teachers and more resources for accurate class scheduling.

"Students at these schools have been losing hours, days and even months of their education since the day they started kindergarten," said Kathryn Eidmann, staff attorney at Public Counsel. "The state can't turn back the clock for these students, but it can give students the educational opportunities they deserve starting now."
The Immigrant Kids Suing America

By Caitlin Dickson

Henry was 16 when he first arrived in the United States. He’d never intended to come here. But when he left his village in Guatemala to look for work to help feed his younger siblings, Henry was kidnapped and handed over to Los Zetas, one of Mexico’s most violent and powerful cartels. For one traumatic month, Henry, who at the time only spoke the Mayan dialect Mam, struggled to explain to his Mexican captors that he had no family in the U.S. whom they could extort.

Eventually, the gangsters, who were also involved in smuggling migrants, dropped Henry at the U.S.-Mexico border, where he was apprehended by Border Patrol agents. Like the tens of thousands of unaccompanied minors who’ve crossed the border in recent months, Henry was placed in Health and Human Services custody and housed in an HHS Office of Refugee Resettlement facility in Orange County, California. During the two and a half months Henry was at the facility, he says he had to go to court two or three times as his immigration proceedings began.

Without the assistance of an attorney or even an interpreter who could translate what the judge or U.S. government prosecutor were saying, Henry understood absolutely nothing about his case. He was completely alone, far from home, and confused.

Finally, someone at ORR managed to get in touch with one of Henry’s relatives in Guatemala who found a cousin in Los Angeles willing to sponsor Henry. His cousin, a U.S. citizen, insisted on finding Henry an attorney. It was actually in the parking lot of L.A.’s Public Counsel that Henry’s cousin met directing attorney Judy London and persuaded her to take on his case. London says it took two months of working with the traumatized teen through a Mam interpreter before she was able to plead his case. But in the end, London helped Henry get a green card through Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, a program for foreign children who’ve been abused, neglected, or abandoned.

Henry’s story is harrowing, but the most unusual part of it is the fact that he was able to find a lawyer to help him navigate the immigration court system. Most kids in the same situation aren’t so lucky. In fact, more than half of all minors who go through immigration court proceedings in the U.S. do so without the guidance of an attorney. That’s why the American Immigration Council, along with the American Civil Liberties Union, Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, Public Counsel, and K&L Gates LLP, have filed a class-action lawsuit against the United States, arguing that the government should be required to provide legal representation to children during immigration court proceedings.

The suit’s plaintiffs range in age from 10 to 17, are all native citizens of either El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, or Honduras, and are scheduled to appear in immigration court without representation. One of the plaintiffs, a 15-year-old Mexican native, has lived in the United States since he was 1 year old. Another, now 16, came to the U.S. from Honduras at age 8.

If successful, the lawsuit would help far more kids than the eight named in the complaint. The current flow of undocumented minors, many from Central America, over the Mexican border into Texas—about 90,000 are expected to arrive this year in all—will eventually flood the already clogged immigration courts. Immigration proceedings are considered a civil matter, rather than a criminal one under U.S. law and as a result, defendants—regardless of age—are not required by law to be provided with counsel if they cannot afford a lawyer on their own. The groups suing the government want to make sure that all of these kids will have access to legal representation when their day in immigration court comes.

“A fair hearing means having an opportunity to be heard and they can’t have a meaningful hearing without a legal representative,” said Beth Werlin, the American Immigration Council’s deputy legal director.

This week, President Obama requested $3.7 billion from Congress to deal with the surge of undocumented minors migrating to the U.S., mostly from Central America. An unspecified portion of those requested funds would be reserved to expand legal assistance to both adults and children. On a press call outlining the details of the president’s request, White House officials also discussed plans to work with Congress on changing the rules regard-
ing children from countries that do not directly border the United States. Now, Border Patrol agents can only send directly home apprehended unaccompanied minors from Mexico or Canada that they’ve determined (through an interview at the border) aren’t in danger of being trafficked or persecuted at home. Changing the law to allow Border Patrol agents to make the same assessments for kids from other Central American countries could significantly speed up the deportation process.

It would also deprive a lot of kids like Henry of the opportunity to present their asylum claims.

“It’s a very scary proposition to think that kids who’ve just arrived and been through a very traumatic situation would have to articulate their claim within 24 hours of arriving without the opportunity to consult with family, friends, or an attorney,” said Werlin.

Now 21, Henry has learned how to speak Spanish and English. He takes adult classes at Fairfax High School in Los Angeles and works at a furniture store. He sends money to his siblings who are still in Guatemala and he knows that if it weren’t for Judy London, he’d probably be back there, too.

“There’s no way kids can understand what’s happening in immigration court,” Henry told The Daily Beast. “Without the help of a lawyer, you cannot win.”
LOS ANGELES — After years of arresting students for on-campus fights and damaging school property, Los Angeles school officials are adopting new policies to reduce the number of students who are disciplined in the juvenile court system.

Under new policies expected to be introduced Tuesday, students who deface school property, participate in an on-campus fights or are caught with tobacco will no longer be given citations by officers from the Los Angeles School Police Department. Instead, they will be dealt with by school officials.

The Los Angeles Unified School District is the second-largest school system in the country, behind New York City, but has the largest school police force, with more than 350 armed officers.

A report last year by the Labor/Community Strategy Center, a civil rights group, found that students at Los Angeles schools were far more likely to receive a criminal citation than students in Chicago, Philadelphia or New York.

Several studies, including one released last year by the federal Education Department’s Office of Civil Rights, have found that black and Latino students are far more likely to face harsh disciplinary procedures. A department study released this year found that black students faced more severe discipline as early as preschool: Nearly half of all preschool children suspended were African-American.

Michael Nash, the presiding judge of the Los Angeles Juvenile Courts, who was involved in creating the new policies, said that the juvenile justice system was overtaxed, and that the changes would ensure that the courts were dealing only with youngsters who “really pose the greatest risk to the community.”

“‘There are enough studies that show bringing them into the justice system is really more of a slippery slope that leads to negative outcomes and poor futures,’” Judge Nash said. “‘The people who are in these schools need to deal with these issues, not use the courts as an outlet. We have to change our attitude and realize that the punitive approach clearly hasn’t worked.’”

Judge Nash cited examples of students who were sent to court for using profanity while arguing with a teacher.

“What is the court going to do? The kid is going to lose a day of school, and the family is going to get a fine they aren’t going to be able to afford,” he said. “What’s the point of that?”

Both Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. and Education Secretary Arne Duncan have decried the negative impact of “zero tolerance” policies. National studies have also shown that students are more likely to drop out if they are arrested, and many advocates have long criticized harsh discipline as part of what they call the “school to prison pipeline.”

School systems in Northern California and Georgia have also made similar changes in recent years.

“We want schools to be a place where kids are pre-med or pre-jobs, not pre-prison,” said Manuel Criollo, the director of organizing at the Labor/Community Strategy Center, which has pushed for the changes in the district for years. “Students really have been profiled inside the school setting, instead of getting the help they need from school counselors.”

Students 14 years old and under received more than 45 percent of the district’s 1,360 citations in 2013, according to the Strategy Center. African-American students, who account for about 10 percent of the total population, received 39 percent of “disturbing the peace” citations, typically given for fights.

A citation is referred to the county Probation Department, which can then prevent teenagers from receiving a driver’s license. An arrest usually leads to a mandatory appearance in Juvenile Court for the student and his or her parents, and often a fine. Cases of arrested students are passed to the district attorney, who decides whether or not to pursue charges.

“We’re talking about schoolyard fights that a couple of decades ago nobody would have ever thought would lead to arrest,” said Public Counsel’s Ruth Cusick.
Ruth Cusick, an education rights lawyer for Public Counsel, a nonprofit group that helped draft the new policies. “The criminalizing of this behavior only goes on in low-income communities.”

In 2012, Los Angeles school officials stopped citing students who arrived late for class. That has reduced the number of citations for absent students by more than 90 percent, while attendance rates have largely stayed steady or improved, Judge Nash said.
Los Angeles Times
August 24, 2014

Homeowner duped into giving away his Eagle Rock house, lawsuit says

By Kim Christensen

David Lupica had owned the three-bedroom Eagle Rock home since 2000, when his parents deeded it to him as a gift. In September, public records show, he gave the house to someone else.

Except that he didn’t, Lupica says.

“I have not given, transferred or intended to give or transfer my home to any person at any time as a gift or otherwise,” he contends in a lawsuit in Los Angeles County Superior Court.

Lupica, 62, is a single father, unemployed and living on public assistance. He also could become homeless, according to his lawsuit, which contends that he was duped into signing over his house to Tovmas Grigoryan, a Los Angeles payroll services company owner who disappeared in December — as did at least $3 million of his clients’ money.

Before Grigoryan dropped from sight, the lawsuit alleges, he forged papers granting him the title to Lupica’s 1,652-square-foot house on Lockhaven Avenue. Grigoryan then sold it for $500,000 to a man who is seeking to evict Lupica and his teenage daughter.

Grigoryan could not be reached for comment. This year, his relatives told The Times that he’d left the country for Armenia or Russia right after Christmas. Left behind were about 150 of his LA Payroll clients — among them doctors, restaurateurs and small-business owners — all still on the hook for state and federal taxes he’d collected from them but never paid.

Related L.A. County supervisor’s alternate bullet-train route gaining traction

The now-defunct payroll company’s insurer has agreed to cover $3 million of losses, but former clients say their claims are bogged down in legal proceedings. The FBI opened an investigation, according to a letter from a Los Angeles police detective to one of the business owners, but federal officials won’t confirm it.

Lupica’s troubles appear to be unrelated to LA Payroll.

According to his lawsuit, they began last year when he sought a loan to pay bills. Because he was unemployed and couldn’t borrow from a bank, a friend suggested he turn to a private lender. He was put in touch with a man he knew as “Mihran,” who arranged a $10,000 loan, payable over 25 years at $53 a month.

“I simply do not have the financial resources to post a lump sum bond in any amount greater than $20 without it impacting my ability to survive.” - David Lupica

“Mihran” gave Lupica $7,500 of the loan proceeds, the complaint alleges, and kept $2,500 to pay property taxes, but didn’t.

Lupica’s attorneys say they do not know if “Mihran” was actually Grigoryan, or someone working with him. Whoever it was presented Lupica with blank or incomplete documents, which he signed in September and November, thinking they were related to the loan, the lawsuit states.

Instead, Lupica’s signature wound up on forged papers that deeded his house to Grigoryan — for free. The home has an assessed value of about $650,000; according to Lupica’s lawsuit it is worth at least $700,000.

On Dec. 26, public records show, Grigoryan sold the house to Hambartsum Arthur Akopyan of North Hollywood for $500,000.

Akopyan, a would-be house flipper who works in the banking sector, also is a defendant in Lupica’s lawsuit. He referred questions to his attorney, Mary Der-Parseghian, who called him the “bona fide purchaser” of the home and said he is being deprived of his property rights.

“He is paying a mortgage and paying interest on a property that he is not getting rental income from or has access to,” she says.

Der-Parseghian says her client got the home at a reduced price because it was dilapidated — and that Akopyan was told Lupica was a former owner who was renting from Grigoryan, with whom her client has had no other connection.

Lupica, who declined to be interviewed, did not know either Grigoryan or Akopyan, according to Vassiliki Iliadis, an attorney who is representing him pro bono. Lupica learned of the home’s change of ownership in April, Iliadis says, when Akopyan served
him with a 60-day notice to move.

“That obviously came as quite a shock to him,” Iliadis says, adding that the prospect of losing his home “definitely has turned his life upside down.”

Lupica’s lawsuit seeks to nullify the transfer of title to Grigoryan and the subsequent sale to Akopyan. The next court date is in early January, so the eviction action is on hold.

In the meantime, Der-Parseghian says, she will ask the court to order Lupica to post a bond or make rent payments into an account from which her client would be paid if he prevails.

Any substantial payments would be a hardship, Lupica has said in court papers. The former car-service driver says he cannot work because of ill health and that he has no bank account, credit cards or investments. He says he and his daughter live on food stamps and $545 a month in welfare assistance.

“I simply do not have the financial resources to post a lump sum bond in any amount greater than $20 without it impacting my ability to survive,” he said in a sworn statement.
Henry Kornman’s window looks like one at a ticket office, with a metal grille to speak through and an opening for papers to be passed. People jot down their names with a pencil affixed to a plastic spoon and patiently wait to be summoned.

Clutching stacks of papers curled at the corners, they have come here to this window at the end of a fluorescent-lighted hallway in the federal courthouse—the soon-to-be foreclosed, the small-time copyright infringers, the mom-and-pop shop operators.

In a courthouse where six-figure cases are made, gang bosses are tried and senators are indicted, the cases that bring people to this free legal clinic for people representing themselves have decidedly more modest stakes. Yet they are fighting for a home, a Social Security check, a small business that’s everything they’ve worked for.

To spend a day at the courthouse clinic is to get a glimpse of the daunting U.S. justice system through the eyes of an everyman: the do-it-yourself lawyer.

At 9:30 a.m., the clinic opens for business, and Kornman, its bespectacled paralegal-slash-gatekeeper, greets those waiting at his window.

“First time to our clinic? Welcome,” he says warmly. “Get comfortable, and I’ll call you in a second.”

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The number of non-incarcerated people representing themselves pro se, Latin “for himself,” has more than doubled since the economic downturn in the Central District of California. Many can’t afford lawyers, and most of their grievances don’t come with price tags that attract attorneys in the first place.

So they choose to go it alone, for better or worse. Some get a hand from the free Federal Pro Se Clinic, in downtown Los Angeles. Operated by the nonprofit Public Counsel and funded by a private law firm and fees paid by new lawyers, it is one of the first of its kind in the nation and one of the largest.

Unlike in criminal cases, indigent people suing or being sued in civil lawsuits aren’t provided lawyers. But no one tells the Average Joe litigant who shows up at the courthouse of the hoops he’ll have to jump through before he’ll get the chance to tell his side of the story before an arbiter, if that day ever comes.

In one 1997 analysis of 227 Northern California cases involving pro se parties, more than half were thrown out by a judge at an initial stage for various technical reasons. Only one case went to trial.

“They don’t get the Judge Judy, what they think of as the judicial process,” says Janet Lewis, a public interest lawyer who’s headed the clinic since it opened in 2009. “You can get through your entire case without walking into a courtroom and explaining your case in front of people, face to face.”

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First in line on this Wednesday is Mohammed Ahsan, of Ahsan vs. the United States of America.

He has come with a large black umbrella and a well-worn, overstuffed briefcase. Most of the federal court system’s files may
be digitized, but the clinic’s clientele skews decidedly analog — they come with hand- or typewritten legal motions, and more often than not, like Ahsan, they don’t have e-mail accounts.

Ahsan has lost count of the number of trips he had made from his home in Hawthorne to downtown Los Angeles, looking for someone who would listen to just how unfair it was that the IRS had put a lien on his humble home of twice its value.

It’s an uphill battle for a laid-off immigrant machinist trying to sue the U.S. government. The debt comes from a year he dabbled in stocks. He says he made some, lost some and came out in the red. But his broker, by his account, sent only the forms showing his earnings, and not his losses, to the IRS, which in turn slapped him with more than $600,000 in taxes.

Now, at 79 — possibly older, because his age was approximated by a teacher in his native India — and divorced, he is facing the loss of his last possession, his home.

“There’s still time to figure this out,” Andy Ferguson, a bright-eyed patent lawyer and a regular volunteer at the clinic, tells Ahsan. He explains that the notice Ahsan got from the court says he hadn’t properly served the defendant with his lawsuit — one of the most common mistakes made by the self-represented. Ferguson scans Ahsan’s typewritten complaint and is optimistic. It’s well written for a pro se complaint, he thinks, and it just might have a shot.

A few windows down, Kornman is entertaining a different sort of complaint against the government from a clean-cut man, patiently jotting down notes.

“And the NSA surveilled you?”

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Late morning is peak time for the clinic, and the cases stream in.

Connie Salcedo was pulled into the justice system when someone knocked on her door shortly before Christmas and served her with a lawsuit. The restaurant space she and her husband had rented out on Cesar Chavez Avenue was being sued for an Americans With Disabilities Act violation — a latch on the back screen door had broken, and the lessee operating the burrito and taco joint had propped it open with a cinder block for a few days.

A man in a wheelchair sued for not having been able to access the business because of the block. The same man had sued 17 other businesses in less than a year.

Now, Salcedo, 65, is getting a crash course in terms such as discovery, indemnification and summary judgment, and faces a potential penalty of $4,000. Lewis walks her through the process of requesting evidence from the other side to structure her argument in a motion to dismiss the case, proving she was not involved in the day-to-day operation of the restaurant but simply leased out the space.

“Whatever happens happens, I just want to speak my piece,” she says. “They’re helping me a great deal, thank God.”

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Fire Wilson walks in shortly before lunch. The night before, she had sent the clinic’s resident social worker 10 angry e-mails. She had lost her case against a trust employee whom she accused of mishandling her late mother’s estate in Florida and seemed to be looking for someone to blame.

The clinic’s staff attorney, Frances Azizi, meets with her. A one-time tax litigator, Azizi has come to learn that the job can often be, as she puts it, “Oprah-esque.” She recalled an Army civil engineer who received a $180,000 settlement in an employment discrimination suit but wanted to keep fighting for a simple apology or some type of mea culpa.

“People just want us to say, ‘Sorry this happened to you,’” she says.

Azizi asks Wilson what she wants to do now that the judge had ruled against her. She points out that even if Wilson isn’t happy with the outcome, the judge had thoroughly considered the case and explained her reasoning in her decision.

“Whatever I can … I want to cost them as much money as I can,” Wilson responds, holding a stack of legal papers with notes scribbled throughout.

“Thinking practically, is it worth your time?” Azizi asks. “I want you to be emotionally prepared for it not to work at the appellate level. Anger isn’t healthy.”

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The afternoon brings Carl Jackson, a tall, mustachioed gentleman in a leather jacket who has six questions about his Fair Debt Collection Practices Act lawsuit, alleging that a debt collector had improperly harassed him, meticulously written up in a legal pad.

First on his list — the official court record was missing page 9 of his complaint, and he wasn’t sure how to fix the simple problem.

“I sure appreciate you guys being here, because I don’t know what I would be doing otherwise,” he says, going down his list of questions.

In all, 15 people bring their stories to the clinic on this day, five of them first-timers. Not all of them will be successful — Ahsan’s lawsuit and Wilson’s motion for reconsideration will later be dismissed, and Salcedo will be able to reach a settlement out of court — but they will have gotten at least one willing ear to hear their tale.

“When they get somebody who’s actually willing to listen to them, they pour it out,” says Ferguson, the volunteer. “They’re so lonely in the process.”