

# Atkins on CLASI: ‘Our staff is our most valuable asset’

By Marty Farmer

Community Legal Aid Society, Inc. (CLASI) has helped people and positively impacted lives for 77 years. Founded in 1946, CLASI ([www.de-clasi.org](http://www.de-clasi.org)) is Delaware’s oldest and largest civil legal aid organization. It is also one of the oldest civil legal aid programs in the United States. The non-profit law firm’s mission is “to combat injustice through creative and persistent civil legal advocacy on behalf of vulnerable and underserved Delawareans.”

A client named Marilyn’s disability benefits were restored by CLASI advocates and attorneys after many years of hard work.

“I absolutely could not have done this without Legal Aid’s help,” she said. “In this country, the legal system really doesn’t work for you if you can’t afford a lawyer. I lucked out because I found good legal help at CLASI, but it should be the same for everyone who needs help.”

The firm offers an outstanding workplace culture and environment, as well. Its employees certainly believe that, based on positive feedback they submitted via an Energage survey that earned CLASI a 2023 Top Workplace in Delaware award.

“There is no way we could do the work we do for our clients and have our level of success without our staff feeling truly valued and supported,” Daniel Atkins, CLASI’s executive director, said. “I’m very grateful that this award is a recognition that we’ve been able to do that. Our staff is our most valuable asset. We know that the work that we do is vitally important to our community, so to know that the people doing it day in and day out feel supported and nurtured is so meaningful.”

As a statewide non-profit with 70 staff members working in offices located in Wilmington, Dover, and Georgetown, CLASI manages an impressive caseload. The legal aid firm handled 6,303 cases in 2022 and assisted 11,289 people and their family members across the state.



CLASI staff members enjoy a scenic bike ride in Lewes, Delaware, after the firm’s statewide meeting in September 2022. Courtesy of CLASI

Compared to 2021, that’s a 24% increase in the number of cases for CLASI; the number of employees nearly doubled over the past seven years.

Deputy Director Laura Graham, Supervising Attorney Meghan Mahle, Attorney Laura Waterland, and Advocacy Director John Whitelaw were all recognized with prestigious awards for their service to Delawareans in need.

“We are very proud of our passionate, dedicated staff members who have recently been recognized with awards for their service,” Atkins said. “These staff [members] truly exemplify commitment to CLASI’s mission of combatting injustice and our ethos of kindness and collegiality.”

CLASI has a range of vibrant programs and units designed to assist low-income and marginalized clients. The firm serves people with disabilities; those aged 60 and over; low-income individuals; survivors of domestic abuse and violence; and victims of housing discrimination under HUD’s Fair Housing Initiative Program.

Free civil legal programs available for

work every day,” an employee said in the survey conducted by Energage.

“I love my job because [I work] with dedicated people towards a common goal of social justice,” another employee said.

The firm hosts three statewide staff meetings annually – one meeting in each county where CLASI has an office. Highlights of these gatherings include beach parties, bike rides, going to the movies, and spending time together in nature.

“It provides our staff an opportunity to connect, learn from each other, and emerge with a renewed sense of mission and purpose,” Atkins said about the team-building meetings. “Equally importantly, it’s also an opportunity for our entire staff to socialize and have fun together.”

The firm supports new attorneys by providing them with 10 paid weeks of time off to study and prepare for the Delaware bar exam. The bar review course is paid in full by CLASI, as well.

“We provide a mentoring program where each new attorney is connected with a current CLASI staff member to provide advice and support,” Atkins said. “We run simulated practice tests for them, share notes and outlines, and have regular meetings during the summer to create a sense of supportive community during often a stressful, isolating time. This creates an instant sense of community and collegiality for our incoming staff.”

Reflective of the nature of its altruistic work, CLASI is deeply entrenched in its communities. The firm is involved in community outreach events and training on a weekly basis across the state and at community and senior centers, churches, community fairs, and festivals.

“Community involvement is woven into the fabric of everything we do at CLASI,” Atkins said. “Through our community outreach, we are committed [to] ensuring that the most vulnerable and marginalized among us know their legal rights and how to access our services.”

CLASI’s clients include the Disabilities Law Program, Medical-Legal Partnership Program, Elder Law Program, Fair Housing Program, Domestic Violence Unit, Housing Unit, Immigration Unit, and Public Benefits Unit.

“We are committed to expanding our ability to serve the rising number of Delawareans in need,” Atkins said. “For example, we are working to address the increased rates of domestic violence, eviction, and homelessness we’ve been seeing as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.”

CLASI also puts a premium on maintaining a fulfilled workforce. Team members enjoy an array of benefits, such as health, dental, and vision insurance; life and short-term disability insurance (at no cost); paid holidays/personal days; a 403(b) retirement plan; hybrid work options; free parking; a law school loan assistance payment plan; and reimbursement for any work-related travel. And don’t forget the intrinsically rewarding benefits of such noble work.

“I get to help the people who need help the most and engage in meaningful