

# Chicago Paralegals Take the Forefront of Proactive Change

Schihidia Daley's position at Cabrini Green Legal Aid strives to help the people who need it most.

By: Ashley Maldonado



Hard-working professionals bridge the gap and serve as mediators between the law, legal assistance, and citizens' access to it. Schihidia Daley decided to become one of these renowned professionals early in her education. Her strive for success was determined when she decided to follow a path in Criminal Justice and Psychology at Chicago State University. She felt it calling to her, a fierce passion to serve people who need the most help in the city of Chicago. One of Daley's proudest accomplishments arose from an opportunity during her beginner days at the

Cabrini Green Legal Aid as an intern. Working closely with the company's first ever senior paralegal, Daley gained expertise and guidance on managing a team of paralegals. "Three months in, she quit and she recommended me for the job. I became the senior paralegal. And I've been in the role since," she said.

Daley describes the vast amount of work her organization does, working directly with criminal records and covering civil and criminal defense cases, such as family law and housing. As a senior paralegal, Daley has been given the responsibility to not only do the work, but manage her own team of paralegals and sort out work amongst them. "My team is the face of the organization, helping clients with whatever they need. We are the first contact before anyone is accepted to these different programs." Daley follows the protocol of assigning each paralegal a work plan that changes on a bi-weekly basis. In the workplace, Daley explains that because everyone's tasks rotate, everyday is different from the last.

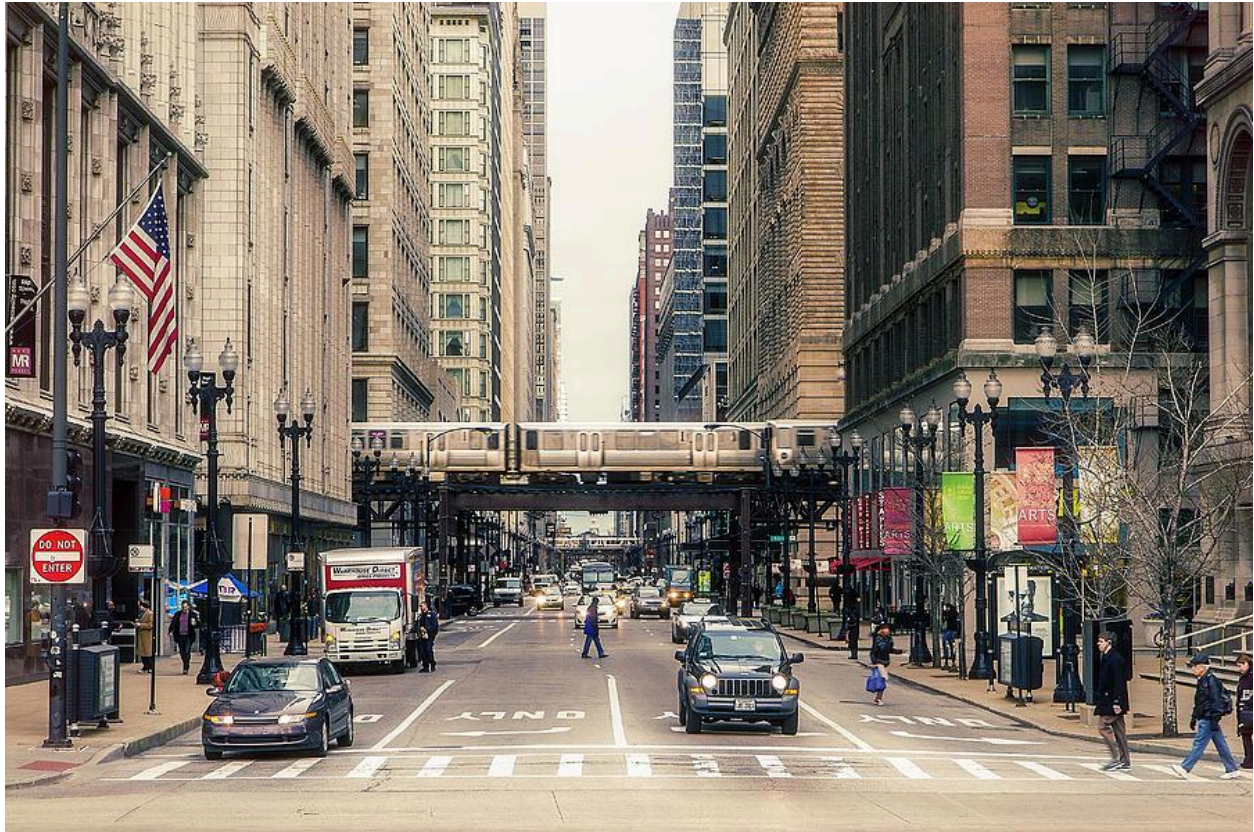
Among those tasks, paralegals can be assigned to work at the help desk at the Daley Center and aid walk-in individuals in submitting program applications, answer any and all questions, and seal and expunge criminal records. Beyond the help desk, paralegals are required to communicate with clients via voicemail, phone, and email. Another task involves handling juvenile work, qualifying case acceptance, and conducting written interviews for eligibility to their services. The interviews are written on the client's behalf and need to be transcribed for the attorneys to assess. "We act, in a sense, as advocates for the individuals," Daley says. Paralegals need to cover a lot of ground for case analyses, from background information, critical step-by-step details on their specific situations, the reasons they are applying, and all occurrences pertaining to and from court. Depending on the type of claim, the written report varies in length.



The tone of the writing has recently shifted due to Daley's supervisor expressing concern about having paralegals serve as direct advocates. She instead wants them to provide facts of the case strictly, such as police reports and court details. This style of writing mimics that of neutral journalism, swaying away from opinion and leaning towards facts. The information that is written is then compared to the clients' stories to authorities or landlords. "In the past, it has been very biased. But currently, it is more factual and gives the attorney the privilege to decide if they want to take the case and not without us pushing for it."

This is where Daley finds herself facing the difficulties of working in the legal field and in the area she practices. She makes heartfelt connections with clients in need and sympathizes with their current situations and stories, recognizing their emotions and deciding they do need the help. However, Daley stresses that she cannot guarantee that the attorney will take their case, despite her personal feelings towards it. "It's very hard to not want to advocate for the individual. So we have to keep our emotions at a standstill during that time," she states. The nerve wracking feeling of turning people down and returning voicemails and emails with disappointing news and ineligibility is not something she looks forward to.





However, the possibilities and chances to help others makes it worthwhile for Daley and her continued pursuits in her legal career. It was her initial pedagogy and continues to be after six years with the organization. She recalls her first days working with attorneys on the criminal defense program. At the time, she was specifically assigned to a project for domestic violence survivors and another for reunification writing. She realized that the work she was a part of was distinctive from other organizations, which did not offer their services and rejected the criteria they prioritized. “A lot of organizations do not help what they will call quote unquote criminals. We’ll call them returning citizens,” Daley says. In her organization, the specific criteria states that the individual being helped will have to be incarcerated or recently released from prison to get access to their services. No citizen is left behind, which is something she cherishes and appreciates most from her organization. Their mission to assist those who feel helpless or trapped is what attracted her to being a paralegal in this company and flourishing her career there.

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Although Daley specifically majored in Criminal Justice, she states that any undergrad can suffice. The company has hired graduates with a wide range of degrees, from writing majors to political science and forensic science interests. From starting as a paralegal to becoming a senior paralegal in a mere matter of months, Daley emphasizes the importance of learning how to develop team management, writing, communication, and soft skills and continue mastering them throughout. Soft skills are one of her strengths, as well as something that gets asked about upon getting hired as a paralegal. This manner of speaking trains one to be equipped with communicating with every individual and confronting certain situations. “You are helping people with a disadvantage within the criminal justice system. You have to remind yourself to be conscious, not to talk in a technical language, and remember to be a person with these people.” Daley has become more wary of her tone in regards to interacting with others verbally and in written form. As the middle person between the legal world and the citizens requiring assistance, her role as a professional is an admirable and crucial role in society. She is not one to sit still; she plans to return to school and acquire an MFT, a license in marriage and family therapy. She has dedicated copious hours representing Cabrini Green Legal Aid; however, now she wants to expand assistance in Chicago and open her own practice after acquiring her license. Along with growing her own personal career, she is making sure the communities in our city are cared for. Daley’s mindset, diligence, and determination is what continues to fuel her goals and ongoing success.

