

# Civil Right to Counsel

“If you are unable to afford a lawyer, one will be appointed for you.” This guaranteed right to counsel is fundamental to the American criminal justice system. There is, however, no analogous right in the nation’s civil justice system. As a result, members of nearly 80% of America’s low-income families face high-stakes civil procedures—including eviction and child custody proceedings—without the assistance of counsel. Without legal assistance, these people are unable to obtain a meaningful day in court. Our failure to ensure access to lawyers in these cases puts the United States at odds with the large number of countries that guarantee a right to counsel in civil cases.

The Brennan Center leads the National Coalition for a Civil Right to Counsel and provides legal and strategic support for its members in more than 31 states. We litigate cases, advance public policy campaigns, and conduct original research. We are dedicated to a long-term effort to ensure that low-income people have a right to counsel in high stakes civil matters.

One technique we have used to advance the right to counsel in civil cases is to participate in [submissions to international bodies](#) arguing that the United States' failure to provide legal representation to low-income people in certain categories of cases violates the United States' international obligations.