

Justice For All

“Equal justice is a vital part of the bright constellation that guides our political fates and our national life.”

Thomas Jefferson
Third President
of the United States



During 2000, low-income citizens in Michigan faced civil legal problems affecting their families, homes, income, and health. Thanks to Michigan’s network of legal aid agencies, thousands of indigent people got help with critical needs such as stopping family abuse, resolving custody and child support disputes, obtaining medical care, accessing disability or other benefits, ensuring repairs to unsafe dwellings, getting relief from unscrupulous sales schemes, and solving other serious problems. This report describes services provided by Michigan’s legal aid programs, which handled more than 55,000 cases in 2000.

As many clients as the case numbers reflect, they do not tell the whole story. Although a case can range from advice or brief service to complex extended investigation, negotiation, or litigation, the number of cases does not show the full extent of help that legal aid provides, nor does it demonstrate the scope of needs left unmet. Some 1.5 million people in Michigan are eligible for civil legal aid because they live at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty guideline, \$17,650 annually for a family of four. Studies have estimated that no more than 20 percent of the legal needs of the poor are met each year, and a recent Economic Policy Institute report found that nearly a third of poor and working class families with children under age 12 faced at least one critical hardship annually, such as missing meals, being evicted from homes or doubling up on housing, having their utilities disconnected, or not having access to medical care. The problems associated with poverty often require a lawyer to navigate the system and find a solution.

According to the Center for Law and Social Policy, many more clients are working today than in the past, mostly at low-paying jobs; seventy-eight percent of families under the poverty line have one or more adults in the workforce. These low-wage earners have changed the way that legal aid programs serve clients, from a simple adjustment such as adding evening hours to accommodate more working people to revising program priorities to focus on the barriers to employment such as transportation or adding expertise that employed clients increasingly need, such as consumer and employment law.

In addition to assisting individual clients, legal services organizations reach more people with educational materials about legal rights and responsibilities, often helping to prevent problems that require future legal intervention. The agencies also provide information through telephone hotlines or clinics in which people attempting to handle their own cases are taught about selected areas of representing themselves in court. Importantly, legal aid programs also refer people to other community resources, such as directing a family without housing to a shelter or advising an elderly couple about the availability of a low-interest loan for repairs to preserve their home’s habitability.

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“It is a profound failing in our system of justice when we don’t provide legal services for all, but we continue to maintain we are all equal before the law.”

William Jefferson Clinton
Forty-Second President
of the United States
*In Remarks Delivered at
the State Bar of Michigan
2000 Annual Meeting*



Harder yet to quantify is the effect of the broad community connections that legal aid agencies forge in their cities and towns. Legal aid advocates in every part of the state serve on boards of directors or have direct involvement with local human services organizations. These liaisons help to leverage services for poor clients in many ways. Several legal aid programs participate in regional elder abuse coalitions with law enforcement, health, and human services agencies. Many programs train community agency personnel to identify legal issues their clients encounter, ensuring that people at risk are referred to legal aid before problems become worse.

Sometimes, legal aid programs counsel nonprofit groups whose clients face poverty, enabling the community to provide assistance on its own. One such group said after they were helped to secure zoning permission for a facility offering transitional employment activities and other support: “The members of (our organization) can hold their heads high...There are a lot more people who are now aware that persons with mental illness are real people who have rights like the rest of society.” In other instances, legal aid programs help community groups with transactional and corporate work; one example is the effort of several community partners to develop low-income housing in Pontiac where the legal aid program’s role is to obtain clear title and set up a land trust to receive property. Pro bono lawyers affiliated with legal aid also assist; one volunteer attorney advised a homeless shelter that opened a free on-site health clinic about issues involving insurance, liability, and supervision of medical personnel.

Another example of the community, organized bar, legal aid and courts working together to enhance equal justice is the Grand Rapids Legal Assistance Center (LAC), which will be housed in the new Kent County courthouse. It will provide computers for people who need legal information or who desire forms for representing themselves in court. Legal aid staff will work on-site; lawyer referral assistance will be available for non-indigent clients. LAC will also manage a system of referrals to dozens of human service organizations. Other communities in Michigan are working on similar projects.

Enhancing these community connections among legal aid providers, courts, and community organizations was a major theme of the most recent state legal services plan completed in 2000. Although hundreds of stakeholders and dozens of committees worked on the *Michigan Plan 2000*, the effort had collaborative leadership from legal aid providers, the State Bar of Michigan, and the Michigan State Bar Foundation. The 2000 Plan built on the achievements of the 1995 Plan, which was instrumental in implementing technology

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"If it would not have been for Oakland Livingston Legal Aid and the help I received, I believe I would have lost everything. I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Battered woman from Pontiac, Michigan



advancements in legal services, increasing leadership of the State Bar in access to justice, creating a private fundraising campaign, and enhancing for accountability through peer review evaluations of legal aid programs. Many of these accomplishments continue to benefit programs. For example, the Foundation has now completed peer review visits of each legal aid program it funds, providing input from outside evaluators who are experts in poverty law and legal aid management.

Since 1995, state planning has also examined ways to make the client service network more efficient. The many technology projects implemented since 1995 linked programs together to share expertise, produced a brief bank or other information on the state support program's web site, and provided Internet access to advocates. In 2000, nearly all programs in the state were using the same computerized case management system and benefiting from centralized design of file management protocols and reports. Another important advance was the expanded use of hotline services for providing advice and brief service over the telephone to clients. Various programs continued to increase telephone hotline services, and two programs merged their hotline system into a joint program with capacity for more brief services, allowing other advocates in both programs to provide more in-depth services when needed.

To provide additional resources for civil legal services, the State Bar of Michigan Access to Justice Campaign raises money through private donations of individuals and corporations. The Foundation receives these donations, which will be used for additional grants to support civil legal aid to the poor. Pledges and donations have exceeded \$1.5 million, much of that designated to build an endowment to provide more stable funding for legal aid in the future. The organized bar also helps by providing thousands of hours of free volunteer help to indigent clients. In 2000, pro bono lawyers handled more than 3,600 cases and gave more than 28,000 hours.

Michigan's banks are also important partners in the effort to support civil legal aid through waiving fees on IOLTA (Interest on Lawyer Trust Account) program accounts. More than 85 percent of Michigan banks eliminate all service charges so that additional dollars are generated for Foundation grants for legal aid. These banks are listed in the "IOLTA Honor Roll" published regularly in the *Michigan Bar Journal*.

The ongoing effort to ensure access to justice will continue to require all these partnerships, all these community connections, and all Michigan lawyers. We are fortunate to have the deep commitment of public interest lawyers, private attorneys, and others in this endeavor, and the Foundation is pleased to present this report about their important work, which does so much to enhance equal justice.