

Justice For All

***“Charity begins at home,
and justice begins next
door.”***

Charles Dickens
1812-1870



In the decade since the first *Justice for All* report was published, our State’s civil legal aid programs have reported closing more than 500,000 cases for low-income individuals and families. Within this *Justice For All* report, as in the ten annual reports that have preceded it, are the stories of those in need who have been helped by Michigan’s civil legal aid providers. There are many stories to be told, each as compelling as the last, but only a few can be highlighted in these pages. They tell of keeping families safe in their homes, protecting the elderly from unscrupulous contractors, accessing medical care for the disabled, obtaining support for children and assisting with other critical civil legal needs.

During the past decade, many changes have occurred, but much has also stayed the same. There remain more than 1.3 million persons in Michigan who qualify for help from our State’s civil legal aid programs because their annual income is less than 125% of the federal poverty guideline or approximately \$19,500 in 2004 for a family of three. Then and now, there are many more legal needs than can be addressed by available funding. A federal Legal Services Corporation (LSC) study of 2004 data mirrored the results of an earlier American Bar Association report that no more than 20% of the civil legal needs of the poor are yet being met. The LSC study also showed that for every person served by legal aid, at least one person who seeks help is turned away because of insufficient resources.

Legal aid providers also faced funding challenges during the last decade, including the loss of about \$2 million in annual federal grants after the 2000 U.S. Census required redistribution of LSC funding. In addition, historically-low interest rates reduced IOLTA program revenue, despite the support of more than 80% of Michigan banks that waived all IOLTA account fees to make more grant funds available (see IOLTA Honor Roll of Banks at www.msbf.org). Other local and government grants for legal aid programs also vacillated, underscoring the importance of the filing fees and IOLTA funding that supports the programs described in this report.

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“True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.
1929-1968

With dedication and creativity, Michigan’s legal aid providers worked to address these challenges. Often joining with the organized bar and funders, they began many ongoing innovations and collaborations in the last decade to leverage available resources and search for additional dollars. They designed technology advancements to help programs share information and tools and formed a new state support entity to train legal aid advocates and enhance the capacity of programs. They participated in peer review evaluations which brought in experts and legal aid leaders from around the country to assist in improving program quality. They worked with the State Bar and the Foundation to establish the Access to Justice Fund to raise private donations to support civil legal aid services through the Access to Justice Campaign. They engaged in planning processes that produced two state-based plans for effective delivery of civil legal aid for the poor and helped establish a state-based litigation assistance partnership program to link large law firm pro bono services with complex cases which legal aid lacks resources to handle. They expanded telephone hotline services to increase access for advice and brief services to solve a problem or quickly prevent it from getting worse. They partnered with local bars or courts to help create several local legal assistance centers that give citizens access to legal information and provide pro se help. And they served on many community, regional and state level committees working to enhance the justice system and assist the poor.



Legal aid programs also recruit, train and support volunteer private lawyers who provide pro bono services, expanding the amount of assistance available for indigent clients. In 2004, pro bono lawyers working with the programs noted in this report gave nearly 35,000 hours of free legal help to low-income persons. Overall, legal aid providers closed nearly 49,000 cases in Michigan in 2004 in the areas of family, housing, consumer, income and other challenges faced by clients.

Some 31,582 (65%) clients benefited from legal advice and counsel for problems that can be solved by informing clients of their legal rights and responsibilities. This often assists people in making good choices as employees, tenants, parents or citizens and it can prevent the legal problem from growing more serious.

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“Access to justice is a dream; we must make it a reality.”

John W. Cumiskey
1917-2002

Another 7,779 (16%) were helped with brief legal services such as filling out forms, calling a landlord or reviewing documents, again often solving disputes without the need for going to court. An additional 5,220 clients received representation through litigation (5%), negotiated settlements (4%) or an administrative agency decisions (2%), helping with problems affecting basic needs such as food, shelter, employment and access to health care.

Also, 4,241 (8%) individuals were referred to other sources after assessing the nature of the problem and determining which human service providers could assist, or they received other services. Legal aid programs work closely with community agencies on referrals and to find solutions for repeat problems.

In addition, a significant and growing number of non-case “matters” were handled by legal aid programs to help clients prevent legal problems or seek community solutions. This includes activities such as referrals for human services help, legal education forums and brochures, information about services and legal problems on program web sites and self-help assistance. Also, increased collaboration with other human service agencies has resulted in educating other nonprofit organizations to spot legal issues and obtain help for clients before the problem becomes more serious.



The Foundation has been very pleased to present the *Justice for All* report each year to share stories of real people for whom civil legal aid programs make a difference every day. Without these agencies, and the funding that supports them, many of our most vulnerable citizens would have no where else to turn. One way readers of this report can assist now is to donate to the Access to Justice Fund at www.atjfund.org. As the next decade unfolds, continuing support from all of us will remain essential as we work together to turn the dream of access to justice for all into a reality.