

Justice For All

“Access to justice is a dream. We must work to make it a reality.”

John W. Cumiskey

Chair, Legal
Services Grant
Committee

In 1997, Filing Fees and IOLTA (Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts) funding provided a stable base for Michigan legal services organizations, which suffered a 27 percent cut in federal funding from the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) in 1996. These state-based resources leveraged additional local contributions. Although this allowed Michigan’s legal aid programs to handle 4 percent more cases for low-income citizens than in 1996, the total service remained below the level achieved before Congress reduced Michigan’s annual LSC revenue by \$4 million.

The need still greatly outpaces available resources. One study found that no more than 20 percent of the legal needs of the poor were being met before federal funding cuts in 1996. More than 1.5 million people in Michigan are eligible for legal aid because they live at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty guideline, \$16,050 per year for a family of four. In Michigan, there is one lawyer for every 340 residents, but there is only one civil legal aid lawyer for every 9,000 low-income people. In 1997, IOLTA and Filing Fees funds enabled an additional 20,000 low-income citizens to receive assistance with urgent legal issues such as safety from family violence, child support and custody, protection from dishonest contractors, and help with critical medical needs.

In 1997, private attorneys provided a record amount of pro bono service, handling 7,052 of the 83,284 cases processed through Michigan legal aid agencies. Although volunteer lawyers cannot fill the gap, they are assisting in more ways than ever before. A number of large firms have agreed to handle complex cases through MI-LAPP (Michigan Litigation Assistance Partnership Program). MI-LAPP was launched in 1997 by the State Bar and the Michigan Poverty Law Program (MPLP) to assist private law firms taking major cases that legal aid agencies do not have resources to accept or are no longer permitted by LSC to take.

MPLP completed its first year in 1997 with the support of IOLTA and Filing Fees funds. It is an innovative partnership of two legal services programs and the University of Michigan Law School that provides staff, students, and funding for statewide coordination, resource-sharing, and assistance such as co-counseling, training, and support for legal aid staff and pro bono advocates throughout Michigan. More information about MPLP is available at its web site, www.mplp.org.

Working Together

“The most impressive aspect of the projects under way and the planning for the future of legal services in Michigan is the total commitment to conducting these efforts in true collaboration.”

George E. Bushnell, Jr.

Past President,
American Bar
Association,
Past President,
State Bar of
Michigan

Michigan’s financial institutions also continued to support access to justice in our state. Nearly 80 percent of banks eliminate all fees on IOLTA accounts, resulting in increased sums for grants. This significant ongoing contribution is recognized in the IOLTA Honor Roll, a list of all banks charging no fees on IOLTA accounts, which is published regularly in the *Michigan Bar Journal*.

Perhaps the most remarkable hallmarks of 1997 have come from Michigan’s ongoing planning process. Since 1995, when the *Michigan Plan* for legal services was produced through the collaboration of the State Bar of Michigan, the Michigan State Bar Foundation, and the legal aid providers, these entities and others have worked to implement the *Plan’s* 57 recommendations and to continue statewide planning. The *Michigan Plan* resulted in the formation of the State Bar Access to Justice Task Force. The Task Force, through the organized bar, is taking on the challenge of improving access to the legal system for the poor and near poor. Representatives from the Foundation, the Bar, and providers serve on the Task Force. A broad range of stakeholders participate in its committees and projects.

In 1997, staff were hired at the State Bar to support the Task Force’s access to justice projects. In addition, the State Bar added professional staff to manage an access to justice fundraising campaign. The Foundation will receive contributions from the campaign and distribute the funds for legal assistance to low-income families statewide. This revenue is a much-needed supplement to existing funding, which the Task Force and others work to preserve.

Michigan’s efforts to improve access to justice received national recognition in 1998. The American Bar Association presented the State Bar with its Harrison Tweed Award for our state’s “extraordinary efforts to improve the availability of legal services to low-income persons.” The nomination narrative submitted by George E. Bushnell, Jr., former president of both the State Bar of Michigan and the American Bar Association, describes the many projects under way in 1997; it is reprinted in the August 1998 *Michigan Bar Journal* at page 774.

In accepting the Harrison Tweed Award, State Bar President Edmund M. Brady, Jr., underscored the importance of ongoing leadership from the organized Bar for access to justice and praised the providers, the Foundation, and

Working For The Future

***“Tremendous
commitment and
talent have fueled
the Michigan
planning process.”***

Candace Crowley

Chair, Integration and
Merger Committee,
The Michigan Plan

others who collaborated with the State Bar in Michigan's efforts to enhance access to justice.

Technology has been a key focus in Michigan's planning efforts. The Foundation has funded a statewide computer network to connect all advocates by electronic mail. The statewide expansion was completed in 1997, linking all state legal aid programs so they can share expertise and other resources such as briefs and pleadings. In addition, a pilot project to provide a uniform state case management system is operating in several legal services programs. Three hotline pilots were funded in 1997 to test different models of telephone intake, advice, and referral. Formal evaluation of these projects will produce information for future statewide technology decisions. Detailed descriptions of the technology projects appear on the Foundation's web site at www.msbf.org.

The work of the *Michigan Plan's* Integration and Merger Committee was finished in 1997, resulting in a report in April 1998. The report contains a wealth of information on integration of services, operations, and issues related to restructuring. Its general recommendations and detailed reports in seven areas are designed primarily to help programs with administrative efficiencies. Foundation representatives served with State Bar and legal aid program members on this important committee, which was formed in 1996 to examine whether joint projects or restructuring could enhance effectiveness of program operations. Copies of the committee's report are available from the State Bar.

Coordination and collaboration became more important than ever after the 1996 federal funding losses. The cooperative work in 1997 resulted in innovations, efficiencies, and a solid base for the future. The Foundation is pleased to work together with the legal aid programs, the State Bar, and others toward the goal of enhanced justice. We present this report with appreciation for all those who participate in this process with us and especially for those nonprofit agencies that work diligently each day to assist low-income families with legal needs. These pages contain stories of the positive impact this work has on real people and on justice in our state.