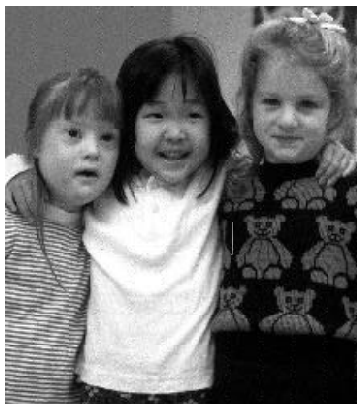


Justice For All

*Justice for some
is no justice at all.*

State Bar of Michigan
Access to Justice
Development Campaign



In the current booming economy, stories on the evening news often mention record-setting low unemployment and declining public assistance. Indeed, many Michigan residents have benefited from this time of economic prosperity, but some are left behind. Nearly 1.5 million of Michigan's 9.6 million people live at or near the federal poverty level. These families face legal problems such as domestic violence, unsafe dwellings, unscrupulous sales schemes, custody disputes, problems with accessing health care and other needs. Anyone, whether poor or not, could have these kinds of legal challenges, but for the disadvantaged, they are compounded by the effects of poverty. Lack of access to health care or shelter or safety or other basic needs can potentially be life-threatening to those without a way to pay for legal assistance. Fortunately, the 16 nonprofit civil legal aid programs profiled in this report provide critical legal services throughout Michigan every day to help our state's most vulnerable citizens.

While the effects of poverty have not changed, the face of poverty has. Now, many people who are eligible for free legal services have one, and sometimes more than one, job. They often work in retail or service-sector jobs that pay lower wages and are temporary or part-time or without the fringe benefits that many take for granted. These workers can have trouble keeping or advancing in their jobs because of difficulties with transportation, child care, lack of health insurance, housing, and job training. Although employed, these low-income wage earners are still poor, especially those who have children in their households. In the last 20 years, the percentage of working families that met the definition of "poor" in Michigan rose by 106 percent. Child poverty has persisted in the 1990s despite society's overall prosperity. In fact, one in five Michigan children is poor, and nearly one in 10 lives in extreme poverty (under 50 percent of the poverty income level).

Another group at special risk is senior citizens. Older persons can encounter situations such as unscrupulous contractors who defraud them for unnecessary home repairs or dishonest family members who establish guardianships over them in order to steal their property. The demographics of this population are also significant; as our entire population ages, communities have a greater number of elderly poor. Michigan's legal aid programs are often the key to safety and security for seniors. Some programs work in conjunction with local law enforcement and community organizations on special "elder abuse" projects. The Foundation provided funding toward adding an elder law component for the Michigan Poverty Law Program, the state support program that helps to train advocates in the legal aid programs throughout the state. Several legal services agencies are also partnering with the statewide elder law hotline to ensure that services are coordinated as seamlessly as possible for seniors who call needing help.

In short, the good economy does not eliminate the need for vital legal services for thousands in our state who cannot afford to hire a lawyer. The need remains very high. In 1999, Michigan's legal aid programs assisted nearly 60,000 individuals and families.

Justice For All

Child poverty persisted through the 1990s; one in five Michigan children still lives in poverty.

Kids Count in Michigan

Although the vast majority of legal services cases are resolved through advice, negotiation, or a brief service such as writing a letter on the client's behalf (only 7 percent of cases went to court in 1999), Michigan's 255 legal aid lawyers are highly skilled professionals who represent clients zealously with assistance ranging from brief advice to representation in the state's highest court.

The work of staff attorneys in nonprofit legal aid agencies is complemented by the efforts of Michigan's private bar. In 1999, volunteer attorneys donated over 32,000 hours of their time to handle more than 4,000 cases in conjunction with the programs profiled in this report. In addition, many law firms participate in the Michigan Litigation Assistance Partnership Project, a statewide program to match law firms with complex cases that local providers cannot handle due to lack of resources or restrictions on program funding.

Because legal aid organizations are the primary link to the justice system for poor people, they stretch their limited resources to reach out to as many clients as possible and respond to changes in clients' lives. To accommodate clients who have moved into the work force, some legal aid agencies have established evening hours and expanded the types of cases they accept to address issues related to keeping clients employed. Several agencies are using advanced telephone and computer technology to provide advice and brief service to many clients by telephone, reducing the need for clients to travel to their office and wait for an appointment. The programs schedule regular outreach visits at community and state agencies as well as senior citizen centers. Given the high demand for service, a number of programs are also expanding the assistance they provide to people who can represent themselves in court; one has partnered with a local bar association and will staff a Legal Assistance Center in the county courthouse.

The funds helping to make these services possible include IOLTA (Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts) and state court Filing Fee funds, which make up more than a third of revenues for Michigan's legal services agencies. These grants are administered by the Foundation and are distributed to cover services in all of Michigan's 83 counties. IOLTA and Filing Fee grants have been the mainstay for keeping the level of services as high as possible in light of severe federal funding cuts to legal service agencies in recent years. They also help these programs attract and maintain other local and private funds including increased financial contributions from lawyers and others to support legal aid during the last year. Michigan's banks made significant annual contributions, with 85 percent waiving all fees on IOLTA accounts. This results in more funds for IOLTA grants, and the generosity of these banks is acknowledged in the "IOLTA Honor Roll," published regularly in the *Michigan Bar Journal*.

Justice For All

***If we are to keep
our democracy,
there must be one
commandment:
Thou shalt not
ration justice.***

Judge Learned Hand

An important new effort to increase resources is the Access to Justice Campaign, spearheaded by the State Bar of Michigan, to raise substantial funds for operations and a long-term endowment for indigent civil legal services in Michigan. The Foundation receives donations from the Campaign to be used for civil legal services to low-income families. To date, the campaign has raised more than \$1 million in pledges and gifts. Anyone wishing to contribute may request a pledge form from the State Bar's Development Director, Candace Crowley, at (800) 968-1442.

The Foundation also has continued as a partner with Michigan's legal aid programs and the State Bar in ongoing planning for the future of legal services delivery. Recently, these partners released the *Michigan Plan 2000: A State-Based Plan for the Delivery of Civil Legal Services to the Poor*. This report is the culmination of many months of study, involving legal aid employees, judges, private attorneys, and other human services providers, examining how best to structure and provide legal services. The overarching theme of the *Michigan Plan 2000* is building interconnections among legal aid providers, courts, and community organizations. The *Michigan Plan 2000* discusses ways in which, by working together, the sum can be greater than the total of its parts to promote a comprehensive, integrated service delivery network.

Collaborative technology efforts also continued in 1999. The state Legal Services Computer Committee finished its user evaluation of computer case management pilot projects and implemented a statewide case management system. In addition, the committee worked to ensure Internet e-mail and access for all advocates. Both of these projects are supported with Foundation funds.

The Foundation continued its peer review site visits of legal aid grant recipients. Using the assistance of experienced poverty law professionals, site visits were conducted to learn about each program's operations firsthand. The visits resulted in reports assessing strengths and opportunities in areas such as client service, vision, quality assurance, community outreach, staffing, and administration. Legal aid providers have expressed appreciation for the peer evaluation visits and the input they offer for enhancing quality.

Important work was done in the last year, but ongoing efforts are needed to meet the challenges and changes of a new era. *The Michigan Plan 2000* calls on the legal services community to enhance service to those in need by further reaching out to community organizations, courts and other justice forums. Indeed, as the plan notes, we must all move forward into the new century with continued resolve to find even more ways to work together toward the goal of equal justice in our state.