

President's Message

Join the Fight for Justice: Louisiana Campaign to Preserve Civil Legal Aid

By President Hon. C. Wendell Manning

"Equal Justice under the law is not merely a caption on the façade of the Supreme Court building; it is perhaps the most inspiring ideal of our society. It is one of the ends for which our entire legal system exists... it is fundamental that justice should be the same, in substance and availability, without regard to economic status."

—U.S. Supreme Court Justice
Lewis Powell, Jr.

Imagine facing having your home taken away, your children taken away or being a victim of domestic violence, and you have no advocate in court. This is the reality facing thousands of low-income citizens in Louisiana who can't afford an attorney. The constitutional guarantee of a lawyer does not apply to people fighting civil injustices — essential matters of personal safety, economic security and family support that can threaten basic survival.

Civil legal aid helps people solve critical, life-changing problems. It provides free legal assistance to those who would otherwise go unrepresented. The help provided by civil legal aid programs supports the American core value of equal access to justice. Organized measures to protect the poor in civil legal matters originated in 1903 with the Legal Aid Society of New York. As recently as September 2014, Justice Antonin Scalia noted, "Equal access to justice is a fundamental ideal." Today, those measures to protect the poor are provided by civil legal aid programs. Because of challenging economic times and Louisiana's high poverty rates, civil legal aid programs are struggling to provide these essential services — barely meeting a third of the poverty population's needs.

There are more than 847,000 Louisiana citizens — 161,000 households — in poverty, according to the 2012 American Community Survey/U.S. Census Report. The American Bar Association determined that low-income households face an average of 1.1 legal problems annually. To fully serve

all Louisiana households in poverty, the "Louisiana Campaign to Preserve Civil Legal Aid" calls for funding a network of local and community-based service components that include:

- ▶ significantly increasing full-time staff attorney positions at civil legal aid offices;
- ▶ hosting attorney fellowship positions at civil legal aid offices to collaborate with the four law schools, leveraging law student participation in the delivery of civil legal aid through clinics;
- ▶ placing *pro bono* young lawyers within each Louisiana judicial district courthouse to assist with direct client advice, referral and case placement services;
- ▶ establishing community self-help centers and kiosks employing young lawyers and/or legal coordinators within each parish to provide court-approved forms, guidance and legal aid services information; and
- ▶ developing the statewide hotline call center to utilize attorneys, law students and client intake positions to provide information, referral and handling of brief service matters.

In addition to being an essential element of the justice system, civil legal aid provides substantial economic benefits. The Louisiana State Bar Association's Economic Impact Study estimates that the Louisiana legal



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services programs provide an economic impact of between \$70 million to \$107 million annually in total economic transactions to the state. It also found that for every dollar spent, the state is getting back \$2.40. In addition, Louisiana's legal services programs support between 850 and 1,300 jobs. The study ensures that all dollars allocated to the legal services programs deliver unmistakable economic returns to the state as a whole.

Civil legal aid saves taxpayer dollars by keeping families together; reducing domestic violence; helping children leave foster care more quickly; reducing evictions; increasing access to benefits; helping communities devastated by natural disasters; and offering indigent citizens a way out of poverty.

Investing in civil legal aid is a powerful way to help people solve critical problems and prevent events that are harmful and expensive for society. Civil legal aid opens doors to the justice system and provides reinvestment in the community. Funding for civil legal aid will have a ripple effect, impacting not only the families served, but the community at large. Schools, businesses, government agencies and the state as a whole benefit from resolving civil legal problems.

Find out how you can "Join the Fight for Justice." Contact Louisiana Bar Foundation Development Director Laura Sewell for more information on the Louisiana Campaign to Preserve Civil Legal Aid at (504)561-1046 or email laura@raisingthebar.org. Or visit the website: www.raisingthebar.org/campaign.

LBF Annual Fellows Membership Meeting is May 1

The Louisiana Bar Foundation's (LBF) Annual Fellows Membership Meeting will be held at noon on Friday, May 1, at the Hyatt Regency New Orleans, 601 Loyola Ave. This luncheon meeting is an opportunity for Fellows to be updated on LBF activities and elect new board members. The President's Award will be presented and recognition

will be given to the 2014 Distinguished Honorees and the Calogero Justice Award recipient.

All LBF Fellows in good standing will receive an official meeting notice with the board slate and a committee selection form in early March. For more information, contact Laura Sewell at (504)561-1046 or email laura@raisingthebar.org.