

State legal-aid help shameful

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"A person who does not have meaningful access to our legal system does not enjoy the full benefits of citizenship."

The Legal Aid Safety Net

A Report on the Legal Needs of Low-income Illinoisans

Almost everyone complains that lawyers and their clients manipulate the system for easy money.

And when you read about people filing crazy lawsuits to win multimillion-dollar settlements, you wonder how low people will go to strike it rich. Lawyers only encourage them. For a percentage of the jackpot.

Court dockets are overflowing. Judges are juggling hundreds of cases. Prosecutors and defenders are swamped. Legal bills drain bank accounts.

But the United States is a nation of laws.

Criminals must be punished. Courts are the last resort for wrongs to be righted, to level the playing field for David-versus-Goliath cases, for disputes to be settled.

One of the founding principles of the United States was Americans' right to justice. The Constitution set the standards.

But if you are poor, and your rights are being violated - by your landlord, a Medicaid bureaucrat, your spouse, an insurance company - you probably cannot find a lawyer to defend you.

That's what a highly regarded new study of legal aid for the poor in Illinois concludes. Help is available in McHenry County, but the need is so much greater than what can be provided.

The primary source of legal advice for people with low incomes in McHenry County is the nonprofit Prairie State Legal Services, a social-service agency with offices across northern Illinois.

Its Woodstock office is staffed by two lawyers and a part-time paralegal who makes referrals for pro bono work. About 600 cases were processed last year, either making it through the courts or receiving legal advice to solve the problem.

Its lawyers are idealists whose calling is to serve the poor; they take a pass on high-paying legal careers. They give lawyers a good name, as they toil in anonymity.

Prairie State Legal Services' \$814,000 budget is raised through grants. It has a second lawyer this year, thanks to a \$68,000 grant from the new McHenry County Senior Service Grant Commission. The lawyer will work solely on cases for low-income senior citizens.

But state government ought to be ashamed; it spends a little more than half that amount for all of Illinois. The Legal Safety Net study recommends that the state spend at least \$5 million to nonprofit groups that serve low-income people. The study was commissioned by Chicago and state bar associations (www.ltf.org/legalneeds.htm).

The study offers a host of recommendations. It includes everything from simplified court forms to minimum pro bono work to networking among social-service agencies.

As much as people complain about lawyers and lawsuits, more often than not, the need is real. And people with low incomes are among the most vulnerable in society. They might need legal intervention the most.

But affordable or free legal services are sorely lacking in Illinois.

They were 15 years ago when the first statewide study was done. And it hasn't gotten any better.

That is a miscarriage of justice.