



NEWS

EQUAL JUSTICE ILLINOIS CAMPAIGN

ILLINOIS EQUAL JUSTICE FOUNDATION TO PROVIDE FUNDING FOR SIX NEW SELF-HELP CENTERS THROUGHOUT ILLINOIS

Self-represented Illinoisans have a place to turn when navigating the legal system in civil court cases

Macon County presiding Judge John Greanias knew something needed to be done to alleviate the administrative problems facing his court due to the number of people he was seeing without representation.

"It's a frustrating problem for everyone involved. The court is limited in the number of cases it can handle due to pro se litigants being unfamiliar with the process, and the pro se litigants are upset because it is taking them 2 or 3 trips to court to handle their legal issues," said Judge Greanias.

Judge Greanias set in motion the process of setting up a legal self-help center for those representing themselves in civil court cases in Macon County. Soon, residents in Macon County and throughout the state of Illinois will have places to go for assistance in maneuvering through the legal system.

The Illinois Equal Justice Foundation has approved funding to establish self-help centers in six Illinois counties in 2007. The six counties establishing self-help centers are: Winnebago, Kankakee and McLean, in the Prairie State Legal Services area, and Madison, Macon and Jefferson in the Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation area.

The Illinois Coalition for Equal Justice and Illinois Legal Aid Online met with the local legal services provider, chief or presiding judge, circuit clerk and local lawyers in each of the six counties to discuss setting up self-help centers.

"Everyone we spoke with is in agreement about the importance of these centers in helping lower income Illinoisans handle their legal problems when they don't have the assistance of a lawyer," said Joseph Dailing, executive director of the Illinois Coalition for Equal Justice.

The court system is often too complicated for those forced to represent themselves. At the same time, the number of people in civil court without representation increases every year. This is why self-help centers are such a crucial tool for pro se litigants.



Terry Kaiser (left) assists a pro se litigant with using Illinois Legal Aid Online at the Clerk of the Circuit Court of Winnebago County self-help center. Illinois Legal Aid Online helps streamline the delivery of free and pro bono legal services to the poor, and provides easy to understand legal information and pro se assistance to the public.

Self-help centers provide resources and assistance in the form of procedural information, forms and instructions, access to computers and legal research materials. However, most self-help centers cannot offer legal advice or representation, and they cannot prepare forms for those seeking legal assistance.

The self-help centers will all be internet-based using Illinois Legal Aid Online (www.illinoislegalaid.org) materials. Self-represented people can use the computers at the center to search Illinois Legal Aid Online for the legal information that they need for their particular case. Illinois Legal Aid Online also allows users to fill out some court forms with the assistance of a guided computer interview. The interview asks the user simple questions, as opposed to complicated legal terminology, and populates the court form with the answers given. The user can print out the form and then file it with the Clerk, allowing the user to present his or her case in a clear, correct manner.

Each center will have staff available called "navigators," because their role is to help individuals navigate Illinois Legal Aid Online to find the information they need. **[continued inside left]**

LOW-INCOME ILLINOISANS TO BENEFIT FROM INCREASED ACCESS TO LEGAL ASSISTANCE THANKS TO \$3.3 M IN STATE GRANTS

Providing a safety net for families and communities around the state, the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation (IEJF) recently awarded \$3.3 million in grants to 26 not-for-profit organizations that help lower-income Illinois residents gain access to legal assistance, information and advice. The grants ranged in scope from funding for a program helping families victimized by mortgage rescue fraud to a downstate program helping elderly people facing abuse, health and consumer matters, to a statewide online legal self-help center.

"With these grants, legal aid organizations are able to directly help some of our most vulnerable residents, including children, people with disabilities, the elderly and working families, protect their legal rights," said Victor Henderson, president of the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation and partner at Holland and Knight.

"People in Illinois should not have to try and resolve serious legal problems without the knowledge, resources or help they need to obtain a fair resolution for themselves and their family," said Attorney General Lisa Madigan. "The right kind of legal assistance really can make a difference in people's lives." The IEJF is funded through the Office of the Attorney General.

Last year, the General Assembly increased the appropriation for the IEJF to \$3.5 million, from the previous level of \$2 million. As a result, the Foundation was able to award funds this year to seven new organizations, including Casa Aztlan, Catholic Charities, Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, DePaul College of Law Asylum & Immigration Clinic, The Immigration Project, National Immigrant Justice Center and the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law.

In addition, almost 60 percent of the IEJF's grants went to organizations serving either downstate communities or the entire state. In recent years, downstate legal aid organizations have been hit particularly hard by federal funding cuts, and must also deal with the lack of a large local fundraising base. For example, Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation, the main provider of legal aid to downstate residents, has lost close to half a million dollars in federal funding over the last three years, forcing them to close service offices.

To view a complete list of 2007 IEJF grant recipients, please visit http://www.equaljusticeillinois.org/docs/grants_07.pdf

ILLINOIS EQUAL JUSTICE FOUNDATION 2007 GRANT RECIPIENTS

Cabrini Green Legal Aid Clinic (CHICAGO)	Lawyers for Better Housing (CHICAGO)
Casa Aztlan (CHICAGO)	Legal Aid Bureau of Metropolitan Family Services (CHICAGO)
Catholic Charities (CHICAGO)	Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago (CHICAGO)
Center for Conflict Resolution (CHICAGO)	Life Span Center for Legal Services (CHICAGO)
Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CHICAGO)	Midwest Center for Law and the Deaf (STATEWIDE)
Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, Inc. (CHICAGO)	National Immigrant Justice Center (CHICAGO, BERWYN, WAUKEGAN)
Chicago Legal Clinic (CHICAGO)	Prairie State Legal Services (CAROL STREAM, WAUKEGAN, GALESBURG, PEORIA, OTTAWA, BATAVIA AND ST. CHARLES)
Chicago Volunteer Legal Services (CHICAGO)	Pro Bono Center for Disability and Elder Law (CHICAGO)
Coordinated Advice & Referral Program for Legal Services (CHICAGO)	Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law (STATEWIDE)
DePaul College of Law Asylum & Immigration Clinic (CHICAGO)	Southern Illinois University School of Law Foundation (CARBONDALE)
Equip for Equality (CHICAGO, ROCK ISLAND, CARBONDALE AND SPRINGFIELD)	Will County Legal Assistance Program (JOLIET)
Illinois Legal Aid Online (STATEWIDE)	
Immigration Project (GRANITE CITY)	
Kankakee Center for Conflict Resolution of the Victims Assistance Center (KANKAKEE)	
Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation (ALTON, CHAMPAIGN, EAST ST. LOUIS, CARBONDALE AND SPRINGFIELD)	

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Navigators will also help self-represented persons figure out what forms they need to file, where they need to file them and other information about the courthouse and operations of the court. They are not able to give legal advice as to whether the person has a basis on which to file his or her lawsuit, whether they should file it or what the outcome might be.

"SELF-HELP CENTERS ARE AS MUCH FOR THE PEOPLE AS THEY ARE FOR THE COURTS"

— JUDGE JOHN GREANIAS

For those who are unable to use the online system, either due to a disability, mental health issues or other causes, a referral will be made to either the local legal services program or a pro bono program for individualized assistance.

Self-help centers will be available to all self-represented litigants in civil court cases but most who turn to self-help centers are lower income people who might not be able to afford representation.

"Some of those who benefit from self-help centers are income eligible for legal services, but legal aid programs can't represent everyone who comes to them because of their own limited budgets," said Dailing. "Also, some pro se litigants are lower income individuals and families who just don't have the extra money to hire an attorney. The centers are targeted to these kinds of litigants."

In addition to the six new self-help centers to be established in 2007, there are several centers already in operation throughout Illinois. The Illinois Equal Justice Foundation provided funding for a center in Lake County, which has been operating for approximately four years, as well as a center in Kane County, which provides assistance for small claims court cases. Both the Lake and Kane County centers are accessible online for those that wish to use them at www.19thcircuitcourt.state.il.us/self-help/ and <http://kane.illinoislegalaid.org>. The Illinois Equal Justice Foundation is continuing funding for a modified self-help/legal advice center in Champaign County as well.

In Cook County, there are several legal advice desks in the Daley Center and other locations which are staffed by legal aid programs in some divisions of the circuit court. These differ from the traditional self-help centers in that they will help people fill out forms and offer some limited advice to self-represented litigants.

Self-help centers are key resources for low-income Illinoisans with legal issues as legal aid programs are still stretched too thin and cannot help every person in need of representation. The Illinois Equal Justice Foundation is providing the start-up funding for these centers to ensure that the critical needs of low-income Illinoisans are being met.

"Self-help centers are as much for the people as they are for the courts," said Judge Greanias.



FAST FACT:

IN DOWNSTATE ILLINOIS, THERE ARE ONLY
84 LEGAL AID ATTORNEYS
TO PROVIDE LEGAL ASSISTANCE TO NEARLY
400,000 LOW-INCOME RESIDENTS
IN **101 COUNTIES.**

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Victor Henderson, *President*
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Joseph Dailing, *Executive Director*
Illinois Coalition for Equal Justice

BOARD OF DIRECTORS SPOTLIGHT

Q&A with The Honorable
Karen Hasara, Secretary
of the Illinois Equal Justice
Foundation Board and
former Mayor of Springfield,
Illinois State Representative
& State Senator



1 What motivated you to serve on the Board of the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation?

Through my experience in the legislature and as mayor, I saw firsthand the tremendous need out there for legal aid services. There are so many times I wanted to assist constituents with access to legal assistance that was unavailable.

When the opportunity to serve on the IEJF Board arose, I was delighted to have an chance to do something about this problem.

2 It has been reported that the legal aid system is operating in crisis mode around the state, with downstate communities among the hardest hit. Describe the situation downstate.

The distance between communities makes it very difficult for people in rural areas to access legal aid resources. The nearest legal aid office may be hundreds of miles away. Plus, there are only 84 attorneys to serve 101 downstate counties. It's impossible for these attorneys to spread their time around to get to all of the people who need help.

What ends up happening is that our most vulnerable populations – the elderly, children, the disabled – are left without legal help.

This makes the courthouse based self-help centers the IEJF helps fund all the more important. There, people can get legal information, materials and forms and have access to computers so they can represent themselves in some legal matters.

3 When you talk to legislators and other officials about the need for increased funding of legal aid, what's your 30-second elevator speech?

I usually start by talking about how far behind Illinois is compared to other populous states. (Currently, Illinois spends \$3.5 M annually for legal aid compared to the average of \$7.1M for the ten most populous states.)

Also, I try to point out to legislators that there are people in their districts whose well-being and safety depends on accessing legal services and in most cases, they just aren't able to get the help they need.



EQUAL JUSTICE ILLINOIS CAMPAIGN
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Building Better Lives: *Profiles in Justice*



Edith dreamed of a better life. Life with her abusive husband had grown unbearable. But with five kids and limited resources, Edith knew she couldn't afford legal representation. With the help of a civil legal aid attorney, Edith divorced her husband and secured custody of her five children. Now as a volunteer domestic violence counselor, Edith helps victims of domestic violence who share her vision of a better life.

EQUAL JUSTICE ILLINOIS CAMPAIGN

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