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**State Funding for Legal Aid Receives Critical Increase;
Funds Will Help Tens of Thousands of Illinoisans in Need**
FY 2007 Budget Includes \$3.5 M for Illinois Equal Justice Foundation

(Chicago)..... The Equal Justice Illinois Campaign announced today that the FY 2007 state budget increases the appropriation for the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation (IEJF) to \$3.5 million, from the previous level of \$2 million. The IEJF distributes state funding for civil legal aid to not-for-profit organizations throughout the state. This additional funding will enable those organizations to help tens of thousands additional families in crisis, victims of domestic violence and the elderly.

“This critical increase in legal aid funding will help ensure that Illinois is not divided into citizens who have access to the judicial system and citizens who do not,” Attorney General Lisa Madigan said. “While the General Assembly has wisely increased the funds available for legal aid, we must continue to increase those funds so that we do not have a system of haves and have-nots when it comes to access to justice.” Funding for the IEJF is provided through the Office of the Attorney General.

“We’re extremely pleased the General Assembly recognizes the importance of a strong legal aid system. Without adequate funding for legal aid, we end up with a two-tiered system of justice, with those who cannot afford representation entirely shut out of the process,” said Phil Rock, former Illinois Senate President and co-chair of the Equal Justice Illinois Campaign. “Legal aid is often the last piece of the social safety net that keeps people from slipping into poverty and dependence.”

Despite the major boost in funding, Illinois still lags behind the rest of the nation. Among the ten most populous states, the average appropriation for legal aid is \$7.1 million.

“We are heartened by the state’s efforts over the past two years to increase funding of legal aid. However, there’s still more to do to ensure that Illinois adequately provides a safety net for working families, the elderly and victims of abuse,” said former Illinois Governor Jim Thompson, co-chair of the Equal Justice Illinois Campaign. “Legal aid strengthens families and communities, leading to a stronger workforce and a more desirable place to do business.”

The increase in funding for legal aid will enable IEJF to award organizations with funds to help more people in need than ever before. Earlier this year, the IEJF awarded \$1.9M in 42 grants to 20 not-for-profit organizations across the state that help lower-income Illinois residents gain access to legal assistance, information and advice. *(Please see attachment for list of 2006 grant awards)*

The IEJF awarded grants to organizations throughout the state, with 56% of the funds going to serve residents in central and southern Illinois. Among the many grants, funds will provide critical financial support for plans to develop a mediation center in Carbondale, a self-help center in Madison County and a web-based self-help center featuring American Sign Language to assist deaf and hard-of-hearing people in legal need.

The additional funds will also provide critical relief to Illinois' legal aid network, which is operating in crisis mode. According to a study released last year by the legal community in our state, there are only 280 legal aid lawyers to help the more than 1.5 million Illinoisans who live in poverty.

The situation in downstate Illinois is even bleaker. A total of 84 legal aid attorneys must provide legal assistance to nearly 400,000 low-income residents in 101 counties. To exacerbate the problem, federal funding from the Legal Services Corporation, which is the largest source of support for legal aid, has dropped by 38% over the past fifteen years, when adjusted for inflation.

State funding for civil legal aid is appropriated through the Illinois Equal Justice Act. The Act, approved by the General Assembly and signed into law in 1999, recognizes the State's responsibility to ensure equal access to the legal system. It sets forth a wide range of innovative, cost-effective initiatives to help low-income people understand the legal system and resolve their routine legal problems more effectively.

For more information about the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation and the Equal Justice Illinois Campaign, log onto www.equaljusticeillinois.org.

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