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**Low-Income Illinoisans to Benefit from Increased Access to Legal Assistance Thanks to \$3.3 M in State Grants**  
***IL Equal Justice Foundation Awards Civil Legal Aid Grants to 26 Organizations around the State***

(Chicago)..... Providing a safety net for families and communities around the state, the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation (IEJF) announced today that it has 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. "Our mission is to support innovative and cost-effective programs that empower people to resolve their legal issues and regain control of their lives."

"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. We have a responsibility to make sure the justice system is accessible to everyone who needs it." 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. A special focus was given to organizations serving the legal needs of immigrant communities, as areas around the state continue to see an influx of immigrants.

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.

Despite the breadth of the Foundation's grants and the increase in state funding, the legal aid system in Illinois continues to operate in crisis mode. Illinois still lags behind the rest of the

nation when it comes to state funding of legal aid. Among the ten most populous states, the average appropriation for legal aid is \$7.1 million. Federal funding from the Legal Services Corporation, which is the largest source of support for legal aid, has dropped by 38 percent over the past 15 years, when adjusted for inflation. The end result is that civil legal aid agencies in Illinois are forced to turn away four out of every five individuals and families in need of legal help.

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. The Act also created the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation to distribute the State's appropriation for civil legal aid to not-for-profit organizations throughout the state.

The organizations and their projects receiving the grants are listed below:

### **Illinois Equal Justice Foundation 2007 Grant Recipients**

#### **Cabrini Green Legal Aid Clinic (*Chicago*)**

- To assist hundreds of low-income people with their family law problems (\$30,000);
- To assist individuals wishing to expunge arrest records and/or seal non-violent, misdemeanor convictions in order to obtain employment and economic self-sufficiency (\$30,000).

**Casa Aztlan (*Chicago*)** - To establish the Aztlan Legal Information Center to serve the civil legal information needs of the low-income Latino community in Pilsen (\$20,000).

**Catholic Charities (*Chicago*)** – To expand the Legal Assistance and Resource Center's telephone legal advice and referral service for low-income people with civil legal issues (\$10,000).

#### **Center for Conflict Resolution (*Chicago*)**

- To assist thousands of people throughout Cook County in resolving a wide array of disputes through mediation (\$135,000);
- To plan, in partnership with the Center for Analysis of Alternative Dispute Resolution Systems, a statewide initiative for the development of mediation programs outside of Cook County that serve the needs of low-income residents (\$7,500).

**Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (*Chicago*)** – To provide outreach and legal information on education rights to homeless parents, youth and children (\$15,000).

**Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, Inc. (*Chicago*)** - To support pro se guidance in employment discrimination settlement conferences via the Settlement Appointment Program in federal court (\$20,000).

#### **Chicago Legal Clinic (*Chicago*)**

- To provide education, resources and referrals for Cook County residents faced with foreclosure proceedings at an Advice Desk in the Cook County Circuit Court (\$69,150);
- To provide legal representation on family law matters to Latina victims of domestic violence in the South Chicago community (\$25,000).

**Chicago Volunteer Legal Services (*Chicago*)**

- To protect hundreds of children by serving as Guardian Ad Litem in Cook County probate guardianship cases (\$50,000);
- To support the Access to Justice Program in its appointed representation of low-income families facing foreclosure, subsidized housing eviction and other Chancery Court matters at the Richard J. Daley Center (\$50,000).

**Coordinated Advice & Referral Program for Legal Services (*Chicago*)**

- To help thousands of low-income people in Cook County by providing legal advice, self-help materials, guidance on how to use the court system and referrals through a telephone hotline (\$260,000);
- To assist unrepresented parties with advice, information and form preparation at the Domestic Relations Self-Help Desk (\$35,000) and at the Collections Self-Help Desk (\$35,000) in the Cook County Circuit Court.

**DePaul College of Law Asylum & Immigration Clinic (*Chicago*)** – To support the Legal Resources Project For Immigrant Services Providers plans to identify the most effective means of delivering legal information to low-income immigrants and refugees through its network of local community-based organization partners (\$10,000).

**Equip for Equality (*Chicago, Rock Island, Carbondale & Springfield*)**

- To provide legal information on the American with Disabilities Act, special education and guardianship to people with disabilities across the state through the Training Institute (\$65,000);
- To provide legal advice, information and referrals on Special Education legal issues via a telephone helpline (\$70,000).

**Illinois Legal Aid Online (*Statewide*)** – To support a Statewide Virtual Self-Help Center that provides Illinois residents with user-friendly online legal resources and interactive forms to help them better resolve their legal problems and which coordinates, supports and provides technical assistance to self-help and legal information projects across the state (\$200,000).

**Immigration Project (*Granite City*)** – To support monthly legal information and advice clinics in nine downstate communities with large immigration populations (\$50,000).

**Kankakee Center for Conflict Resolution of the Victims Assistance Center (*Kankakee*)** – To assist people throughout Kankakee County in resolving a wide array of disputes through mediation (\$37,500).

**Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation (*Alton, Champaign, East St. Louis, Carbondale and Springfield*)**

- To serve thousands of low-income people in 65 counties in central and southern Illinois by providing legal advice, self-help materials, guidance on how to use the court system and referrals through a telephone hotline (\$260,000);
- To help elderly people in 25 counties in central and southern Illinois by providing legal assistance for elder abuse and neglect, guardianship, health and long-term care issues and consumer matters through senior centers, nursing homes and home visits (\$50,000);
- To provide low-income people in 65 counties with representation on family and housing law cases (\$370,000);
- To provide information and assistance to low-income people with landlord/tenant issues in Madison, Morgan and Sangamon County Circuit Courts and to provide instruction on divorce to self-represented litigants in the southern and eastern regions of the state (\$9,000);
- To coordinate legal information centers in the Madison and Sangamon County Circuit Courts and to develop similar centers in Macon & Jefferson County (\$60,000).

**Lawyers for Better Housing (*Chicago*)** – To support a Pro Bono Coordinator and a Legal Assistant position to increase and improve pro bono representation of low-income defendants facing eviction and other housing matters (\$17,000).

**Legal Aid Bureau of Metropolitan Family Services (*Chicago*)**

- To protect and support families on the south side of Chicago in which grandparents are assuming full-time parenting roles and to protect seniors abused by guardians and caregivers (\$58,000);
- To support an attorney position to provide legal advice, information and representation on housing and consumer issues to low-income people served by the Calumet and Midway service offices (\$32,000).

**Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago (*Chicago*)**

- To support the Pro Se Divorce Clinic, a series of classes taught in English and Spanish to guide low-income people to represent themselves in uncontested divorces (\$15,000);
- To support a bilingual domestic violence/family law attorney in the Northwest Chicago Office to focus on the needs of Latina immigrant families (\$30,000);
- To protect elderly people throughout Cook County against consumer fraud by providing information and legal assistance (\$55,000);
- To help low-income families with housing legal issues in the south suburbs (\$45,000);
- To help victims of domestic violence in 22 western Cook County suburbs by providing information, advice and legal assistance (\$45,000);
- To provide legal assistance on family and housing issues to families in the north and northwest suburbs of Cook County (\$30,000);
- To provide legal representation for public housing tenants affected by the Chicago Housing Authority's Plan for Transformation (\$45,000); and
- To provide legal services to families victimized by rescue fraud via the Home Ownership Preservation Project (\$55,000).

**Life Span Center for Legal Services (*Chicago*)** - To provide domestic violence and family law assistance to battered immigrant women in Jefferson Park (\$50,000).

**Midwest Center for Law and the Deaf (*Statewide*)** – To produce video/web-friendly content in American Sign Language to help deaf and hard of hearing people use the court system more effectively (\$15,000).

**National Immigrant Justice Center (*Chicago, Berwyn, Waukegan*)** – To educate immigrants on consumer and immigration issues in partnership with Instituto del Progreso Latino (\$50,000).

**Prairie State Legal Services (*Carol Stream, Waukegan, Galesburg, Peoria, Ottawa, Batavia and St. Charles*)**

- To serve thousands of low-income people in 35 counties in northern and central Illinois by providing legal advice, self-help materials, guidance on how to use the court system and referrals through a telephone hotline (\$260,000);
- To provide representation to victims of domestic violence and families in crisis, families with housing emergencies, victims of consumer fraud and senior citizens in northern and western Illinois (\$325,000);
- To assist in the development of Legal Information Centers in courthouses in Kankakee, McLean and Winnebago counties (\$63,300).

**Pro Bono Center for Disability and Elder Law (*Chicago*)** – To support Pro Bono Coordinator positions to provide legal services to elderly people in Chicago (\$45,000).

**Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law (*Statewide*)** - To educate domestic violence survivors, social service providers and landlords on the provisions of the Illinois Safe Homes Act, which takes effect January 2007 (\$25,000).

**Southern Illinois University School of Law Foundation (*Carbondale*)**

- To help low-income families and children resolve custody and visitation issues by providing mediation services through its Alternative Dispute Resolution Clinic in nine counties in the First Judicial Circuit (\$24,000);
- To serve thousands of people in southern Illinois by providing access to legal information by mail, via the internet and a community outpost (\$16,350); and
- To educate immigrants on their legal rights via a program at the Ullin Tri-County Detention Center and via naturalization classes in the Carbondale community (\$1,200).

**Will County Legal Assistance Program (*Joliet*)**

- To support victims of domestic violence in Will County by providing comprehensive legal services to facilitate permanent escape from abuse (\$25,000);
- To provide representation to families in housing crisis and to low-income people impacted by consumer fraud (\$25,000).

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