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**IL Equal Justice Foundation Awards Civil Legal Aid Grants to Organizations Helping Low-Income Residents with Nowhere Else to Turn**

*However, Flat State Funding Forces Foundation to Reduce Support to Organizations Serving Rural Poor and People with Disabilities*

(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 23 not-for-profit organizations that help lower-income Illinois residents gain access to legal representation, information and advice. The grants ranged in scope from funding for a program helping families victimized by mortgage rescue fraud to a consumer protection project for veterans to a special education hotline to court-based legal information and mediation centers downstate.

"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 Christine M. Ory, president of the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation and former president of the Du Page County Bar Association. "Our mission is to support innovative, cost-effective programs that empower people to resolve their legal issues and regain control of their lives. Last year, our grants enabled 118,000 low-income people to access the legal system."

"The consumer protection work these funds support is vital as Illinoisans face escalating mortgage foreclosure rates, rescue fraud and other predatory scams," says Attorney General Lisa Madigan. "My office is a proud partner with the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation in helping ensure that all Illinois residents have the legal tools to protect their rights." The IEJF is funded through the Office of the Attorney General.

Governor Blagojevich's budget, presented to the General Assembly in March, included an increase of \$1.5 million for the IEJF. The Governor vetoed that increase this summer and as a result, the appropriation remains level at \$3.5 million. Due to flat funding, the IEJF was forced to eliminate funding for two recent grantees, the Midwest Center for Law and the Deaf and Catholic Charities of Chicago. Additionally, the IEJF was forced to trim funds from its four largest grantees in order to fund equitably across the state and across its five statutory funding categories. These organizations include Coordinated Advice and Referral Program for Legal Services (CARPLS) and Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago in Cook County; Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation serving 65 counties in central and southern Illinois; and Prairie State Legal Services serving 35 counties in northern and western Illinois.

The IEJF added one new project to its grant roster this year, the Center for the Analysis of Alternative Dispute Systems, for a pilot project to develop two mediation centers in downstate communities.

Despite the breadth of the Foundation's grants, 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 10 most populous states, the average appropriation for legal aid is \$10.6 million. The end result is that low-income households have legal assistance for only one out of every six legal problems they encounter.

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.

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