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For more information contact:

Leslie Corbett

312-938-2381

lcorbett@iejf.org

ILLINOIS EQUAL JUSTICE FOUNDATION AWARDS GRANTS TO 22 ORGANIZATIONS PROVIDING CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES TO LOW-INCOME RESIDENTS STATEWIDE

Adds Grants for Veterans' Benefits Project and 10 Court-Based Self-Help Legal Information Centers Serving the Rural Poor in Downstate Counties

(CHICAGO)....The Illinois Equal Justice Foundation (IEJF) announced today that it has awarded over \$3.3 million in grants to 22 not-for-profit organizations that provide legal representation, information and advice to low-income residents facing critical legal challenges throughout the state. The grants range in scope from funding for web-based legal information resources and telephone advice hotlines to mediation and full-scale litigation. The IEJF also supports legal aid programs that partner with county courthouses, public libraries and community-based social service organizations to offer help where and when people need it, and to develop solutions to life problems, not just legal problems.

"With these grants, legal aid organizations are able to directly help some of our most vulnerable residents, including children, people with disabilities, the elderly, veterans and working families, to 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 programs that empower people to resolve their legal issues and regain control of their lives. Last year, our grants enabled over 68,000 low-income people to receive legal assistance and provided web-based legal resources that were accessed more than 400,000 times."

State funding for civil legal aid is appropriated through the Illinois Equal Justice Act and passed through the budget of the Attorney General. 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. 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 appropriation has remained level at \$3.5 million for the past three years. Of the ten most populous states, Illinois ranks ninth in what it spends on critical civil legal aid services. The average spent among the ten most populous states is \$10.7 million.

Despite level funding, the IEJF was able to provide grants for new projects in its quest to support innovative, cost-effective initiatives to help low-income people understand the legal system and resolve their routine legal problems more effectively. The Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation and Prairie State Legal Services were awarded grants to develop 10 new court and library-based self-help legal information centers serving the rural poor in downstate counties. The Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago was also awarded a grant to provide civil legal assistance on veterans' benefits issues.

To learn more about the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation, visit www.iejf.org. To learn more about the Equal Justice Illinois Campaign, a bi-partisan effort to increase the state appropriation for civil legal services for the poor, visit www.equaljusticeillinois.org.

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