



Equal Justice Illinois Campaign Video: Full Transcript

NARRATOR:

YOU'D NEVER KNOW IT IF YOU MET HER TODAY, BUT A FEW YEARS AGO EDITH CRUZ WAS BEING BEATEN BY HER ABUSIVE HUSBAND, AND WITH FIVE SMALL CHILDREN AND NO EDUCATION, HER FUTURE LOOKED BLEAK.

Edith Cruz:

I thought that I was just doomed. I had already lived such a horrible life that, whatever came, I was kinda ready.

SHE'S REMARRIED, AND LIVING COMFORTABLY IN CHICAGO. EDITH CRUZ TURNED HER LIFE AROUND. IT WASN'T EASY, OF COURSE, BUT IT WAS THAT INITIAL CONTACT WITH LEGAL AID THAT GOT THE BALL ROLLING.

Edith Cruz:

It was like a door opened. When I called legal aid, I found out there was so much help that I couldn't even believe it. To me, they didn't have to say it but it was like, we're gonna protect you. And they did.

PEOPLE INVOLVED IN CRIMINAL CASES AUTOMATICALLY HAVE THE RIGHT TO COUNSEL. BUT THAT'S NOT THE CASE IN THE CIVIL JUSTICE SYSTEM. CIVIL MATTERS LIKE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, PREDATORY LENDING, ILLEGAL EVICTIONS AND CHILD SUPPORT DIFFICULTIES CAN SPIRAL INTO CRISIS WHEN PEOPLE DON'T HAVE, OR CAN'T AFFORD, A LAWYER. AND LEGAL AID IS OFTEN THE ONE SOCIAL SERVICE THAT CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE. IN FACT, A STUDY BY COLGATE UNIVERSITY AND THE UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS FOUND THAT LEGAL AID IS THE ONLY SERVICE THAT REDUCES DOMESTIC VIOLENCE OVER THE LONG TERM.

BUT LEGAL AID AGENCIES ACROSS THE STATE ARE SO UNDERFUNDED AND OVERBURDENED THAT LOW-INCOME ILLINOISANS ARE ONLY ABLE TO GET LEGAL HELP FOR ONE OUT OF EVERY SIX PROBLEMS THEY FACE.

James R. Thompson, Co-Chair, Equal Justice Illinois Campaign:

One of the most fundamental promises that government makes is equal justice under law.

And the only way to ensure equal justice under law is to ensure that poor people have access to the same kind of court system and the same kind of legal relief as those who can afford to pay. And while Illinois is a leader in many respects as far as government services go, we're not a leader in this area.

IN 1999, THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY PASSED THE ILLINOIS EQUAL JUSTICE ACT, RECOGNIZING THE STATE'S RESPONSIBILITY TO ENSURE EQUAL ACCESS TO THE JUSTICE SYSTEM. IT ALSO CREATED THE ILLINOIS EQUAL JUSTICE FOUNDATION, TO DISRIBUTE FUNDING TO LEGAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDERS.

FUNDING FOR THE FOUNDATION HAS INCREASED OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, BUT THE UNMET NEED FOR SERVICE IN ILLINOIS IS STILL OVERWHELMING.

Lisa Madigan, Illinois Attorney General:

One of the worst problems that we're seeing people face right now is what we refer to as mortgage rescue fraud. So individuals who for whatever reason cannot make their mortgage payments – they're in foreclosure. Somebody shows up at their home and tells them – we're here to help you. We want to make sure you can stay in your home. Well, at the end of the day, all they really want to do is strip the equity out of that person's home. And frequently people are ending up losing their home in these transactions, and only ending up with maybe a thousand, three thousand dollars. These people need representation.

DESPITE TIGHT FUNDING, THE LEGAL AID SYSTEM HAS MANY SUCCESS STORIES.

HERE IN WAUKEGAN, THE LAW LIBRARY IN THE COUNTY COURTHOUSE HOSTS THE LAKE COUNTY CENTER FOR SELF-REPRESENTATION WHICH ALLOWS INDIVIDUALS TO RESEARCH THE LAW AND PREPARE THEIR OWN CASES.

EVEN THOUGH THE CENTER SERVES A GOOD NUMBER OF PEOPLE EVERY DAY, THERE ARE PRESSURES TO EXPAND THE SERVICE BEYOND ITS CURRENT SPECIALTY IN FAMILY AND DOMESTIC LAW.

Judge Jane Waller, 19th Judicial Court, Lake County:

The people of Illinois have benefited because the time that the court has to devote to the more serious cases is now available.

THERE ARE ALSO SELF-HELP DESKS IN CHICAGO'S DALEY CENTER, BUT THE DEMAND FOR SERVICE FAR OUTSTRIPS CAPACITY. AND IT'S THE SAME STORY AT ILLINOIS' LEGAL AID HOTLINES.

Cathy Schneider, CARPLS Board of Directors:

This is CARPLS. CARPLS is Coordinated Advice and Referral Program for Legal Services. It's kind of a long name, kind of a funny acronym. CARPLS is a legal aid hotline and what you're looking at behind me are cubicles that are manned by attorneys and they're on the phones helping low-income people here in Cook County who can't get legal help.

IT'S HERE AT CARPLS, ONE OF THREE LEGAL AID HOTLINES IN ILLINOIS, THAT THE UNMET NEED FOR LEGAL SERVICES TO THE POOR BECOMES STARKLY OBVIOUS.

Cathy Schneider:

We just don't have the people to help them. We don't have the manpower. We answer every call that comes in, and lots of callers sit on hold waiting for the next available attorney. So there are just a lot of people who go unserved.

Phil Rock, Co-Chair, Equal Justice Illinois Campaign:

The state of Illinois really has to step up to the plate. We have in this state 11-1/2 million people, we have a 54 or 55 billion dollar budget, and the amount of money that is made available for legal services simply is disgraceful.

Delores Barskdale:

Once I filled out the application, when the final contract came the amount that was financed was 20-almost 24 thousand dollars, and I would have been paying \$500 a month to pay this back for 60 months. That's an awful lot of money for me to have to pay back.

SHE CAN HARDLY BELIEVE IT WHEN SHE LOOKS BACK ON IT NOW, BUT THAT 24 THOUSAND DOLLAR CONTRACT DELORES BARKSDALE SIGNED WAS FOR DENTAL WORK. THAT'S WHAT AN UNSCRUPULOUS DENTIST WANTED FOR SOME IMPLANTS AND TOOTH EXTRACTIONS.

FACING A CRUSHING FINANCIAL BURDEN, SHE SOUGHT LEGAL HELP, AND FOUND HER WAY TO THE LEGAL ASSISTANCE FOUNDATION OF ILLINOIS.

Delores Barksdale:

If it hadn't been for the Legal Assistance Foundation, the house would belong to the bank. So, all I can say is, I'm thankful that they are there and in position to help people like me that are being sort of misused and jerked around by unethical professionals.

MATILDA POLVIS FELL VICTIM TO A SIMILAR SCHEME WHEN A PREDATORY CONTRACTOR WHO WAS SUPPOSED TO WEATHERIZE HER HOME DID ALMOST NO WORK AND LEFT HER WITH MONTHLY PAYMENTS OF \$1,667 – ON A HOUSE SHE'D PAID OFF DECADES AGO. AGAIN, LEGAL AID CAME TO THE RESCUE.

Benjamin Brown, Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance:

These are our grandparents and parents, our brothers and sisters. These are people who are going without legal assistance.

DOWNSTATE LAWYER BENJAMIN BROWN KNOWS ALL ABOUT THE WAYS HELPLESS SENIORS CAN BE VCTIMIZED. HE'S THE ONLY STAFF ATTORNEY TO SERVE THE MORE THAN 60,000 SENIORS ELIGIBLE FOR LEGAL AID IN 12 COUNTIES ACROSS CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN ILLINOIS.

Benjamin Brown:

They're being forced and tricked into signing documents, and having no recourse because no one's gonna help them. The only people that can help them are us. And we're not given the help that we need to help them. These are people who need orders of protection against abusive children, abusive neighbors, and abusive caretakers. They may or may not get assistance because, frankly, we don't have the resources.

OUTSIDE OF COOK COUNTY THERE ARE ONLY 84 LEGAL AID LAWYERS TO SERVE NEARLY 400,000 LOW-INCOME RESIDENTS IN 101 COUNTIES. THREE JUDICIAL CIRCUITS HAVE NO LEGAL AID OFFICES AT ALL AND SEVERAL OTHER CIRCUITS CONTAIN MORE COUNTIES THAN LEGAL AID LAWYERS.

Benjamin Brown:

I would say that if I am seeing one-third of the people who need my help, that's probably a generous estimate.

THE EQUAL JUSTICE ILLINOIS CAMPAIGN IS CALLING ON THE STATE TO INCREASE ITS FUNDING, BECAUSE THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE NEEDING HELP JUST KEEPS GOING UP.

Lisa Madigan:

We see them all the time – people turning to the Attorney General's office when they have a variety of problems, whether it's consumer fraud, problems with health care and access, problems people are having surrounding foreclosures, identity theft, domestic violence, so we know that need is out there. It will make an enormous difference in people's lives to actually have quality representation before they lose their child, before they lose their home, and we think that we have to continue to expand this funding.

Dorothy Brown, Clerk, Circuit Court of Cook County:

If a person loses their home or can't fight a particular legal case and wind up having to go bankrupt, then who has to pay for that individual - the state, which is the taxpayer. We're still paying whether we help individuals or not, so we might as well provide proper legal aid. And thereby, we wind up helping individuals to stay on their feet and then be able to get jobs and provide for themselves.

James Thompson:

So I think a compassionate governor and a wise legislature should stop, think, understand that there are a number of indigent poor people in our state, that they have the same constitutional right to be in court, to protect their rights, or to defend themselves. And oftentimes the only way that can happen, the only way we can keep the constitutional promise – is by making sure that somewhere in the budget, there are sufficient funds to help these people.

TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE EQUAL JUSTICE ILLINOIS CAMPAIGN AND THE ILLINOIS EQUAL JUSTICE FOUNDATION, PLEASE CALL 312-335-0100 OR LOG ONTO WWW.EQUALJUSTICEILLINOIS.ORG.