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## D.C.'s indigent lack lawyers in civil court, study says

**By Bill Myers**

Examiner Staff Writer 10/7/08

Despite millions pouring in from public and private donations and a city chock-full of lawyers, the District's poor typically don't have legal representation when they go into civil court, a new study has found.

"Low-income residents face tremendous obstacles in the civil legal system," D.C.'s publicly appointed Access to Justice Commission reported. "The consequences of unaddressed civil legal problems can be devastating and spill over into other aspects of life."

The commission's findings, titled "Justice for All?" will be released today. It serves as a kind of report card for how D.C. — with more than 80,000 licensed lawyers — is looking out for the legal needs of its poorest residents. Nearly one out of every five D.C. residents lives below the poverty line. Criminal defendants are guaranteed representation even if they can't afford it; civil litigants are given no such guarantees.

As a result, poor people find themselves fighting for their homes, their children or their inheritance without benefit of legal advice, today's report found. The report's authors argue that the lack of representation not only victimizes the poor, but also drains public resources because taxpayers then have to continue funding social services for those who are, for instance, evicted from their homes.

Georgetown law professor Peter Edelman, who led the commission, told The Examiner on Monday that D.C. has set aside more than \$3 million each year since fiscal 2007 to provide legal aid.

"We've improved, I think," he said. "But there's still a long way to go."

Private law firms have donated another \$3 million, and lawyers have chipped in thousands of free hours to help. But the needs are immense, Edelman said. There are just 171 full-time legal aid lawyers in D.C., he said.

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