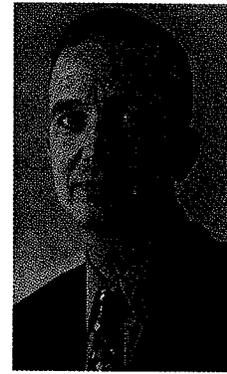


# from the president

By Robert J. Spagnoletti

## An Answer to the Most Persistent and Urgent Question



In a 1957 sermon, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. made the following, powerful observation:

An individual has not begun to live until he can rise above the narrow horizons of his particular individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity. Every person must decide, at some point, whether they will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness. This is the judgment. Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'

At the time, Dr. King was speaking about the broad issue of civil rights, challenging each of us to consider what actions we were taking to further the cause of freedom and equality for all Americans and, indeed, all humankind. He knew the fight for civil justice would require every person to make a sacrifice on behalf of those who were less fortunate, less powerful, and less visible.

It is time to revisit Dr. King's words.

A few short months ago the District of Columbia Access to Justice Commission released a report titled *Justice for All? An Examination of the Civil Legal Needs of the District of Columbia's Low-Income Community*. It is a thorough and compelling study of the significant unmet civil legal needs in our city, and the terrible price paid by our neighbors who lose their benefits, jobs, homes, children, and families because they cannot afford a lawyer.

While the report paints a stark picture of the District's civil legal services needs, it also highlights that nearly \$4 million of the city's public funding was allocated to support those services, bolstered by generous law firm donations of time and money. When the report was released, Mayor Adrian M. Fenty and D.C. Council Chair Vincent C. Gray, along with D.C. Bar leaders, community leaders, councilmembers, and law firm managers, were among

those on hand to praise the commission for its outstanding work and recommit to providing funding for civil legal services to the most vulnerable in our community.

My, how quickly things can change.

We all know that since the release of the commission's report, the nation's economy has suffered a major blow. The public and private sectors face a falloff in revenue that translates into possible layoffs and reduced services. Governments, foundations, law firms, and individuals are looking for ways to economize. Unfortunately, as part of those efforts to save money, they are considering reducing their contributions and donations for civil legal services.

The District of Columbia Bar Foundation recently sponsored several listening sessions of civil legal services providers to assess how they are faring during the recession. Their remarks were eye-opening: these providers face the threat of significant budget cuts in the coming year, some as much as 40 or 50 percent of their operating income. The District also faces a significant budget deficit in the coming year. Foundations, having seen their investment income evaporate, are reducing grant awards. And the funds generated from Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts, granted through the Bar Foundation, are a fraction of what they have been as a result of historically low interest rates.

This reduction of funding translates into a potentially catastrophic decline in civil legal services. Some providers will find it difficult to survive, and virtually all of them will need to reduce their services. The District could lose dozens of civil legal services attorneys who handle thousands of cases each year. All of this comes at a time when those who already were in need are suffering even more: more families are receiving unemployment benefits and risk losing their homes as foreclosure and jobless rates increase. These families are seeking help from the civil legal services providers.

The economic effect of losing these

services could be enormous. For example, the Attorney of the Day Project at the Landlord and Tenant Branch of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia last year received nearly \$575,000 in public funding. Conservatively, the project saved 200 families from eviction and helped many more reach favorable settlement terms with their landlords. If these families lose their homes, it will cost the city more than \$5 million in emergency shelter costs alone. Other data suggests that for every \$100,000 invested in civil legal services in the District, 380 people benefit directly in areas such as avoiding foreclosure, obtaining protection from domestic violence, and receiving food, rent, and health care. In short, an investment in civil legal services is an all-around sound investment.

During the District's economic boom, it was easy for us to pledge support for those living in poverty. We had plenty of real estate tax revenue, law firm business was flourishing, and the high interest on investment income made charitable giving lucrative. But times have changed, and the need for giving is greater because the need for services is greater.

When Dr. King spoke of rising above the "narrow horizons of his particular individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity," he was talking about a moral obligation placed on each of us to help others. As lawyers in the District of Columbia, we have an additional ethical obligation to provide civil legal services to those who cannot afford them.

We all are reeling from this astonishing downturn. But if you have job security, a stable home, health care, and enough resources to pay the bills, you are better off than many of your neighbors. Today I ask you to live up to the challenge set forth by Dr. King and contribute to the D.C. Bar Foundation, the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Program, or another D.C. legal services provider of your choice.

By giving, it is one meaningful way to address Dr. King's most persistent and urgent question.