

DC Access to Justice Commission

DC Consortium of Legal Services Providers

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Contact: Jonathan Smith
202-662-5960
JSmith@legalaiddc.org

Report: DC legal aid resources slashed as need rises

**Cuts to critical legal assistance programs come as foreclosures,
unemployment in the District soar**

(Washington, DC) Somewhere in the District today, a family will not have enough to eat because of a bureaucratic error, a child will fall ill because of neglected building codes, and a veteran will sleep on the streets because no one has helped him identify the public benefits to which he is entitled, according to a study released today.

The report, by the DC Access to Justice Commission and the DC Consortium of Legal Services Providers, finds that these realities are due in part to the decline in resources to help low-income District residents assert their rights and access the services they need. The study demonstrates that legal service organizations are facing “staggering” budget cuts this year even as the continuing recession swells the number of people seeking their assistance.

The study, “Rationing Justice: The Effect of the Recession on Access to Justice in the District of Columbia,” shows that sources of funding for legal aid programs have been sharply reduced in the District, including:

- a 60% drop in Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts (IOLTA) funds;
- a 20% decrease in DC Government support for legal services; and
- a more than \$1 million decrease in charitable donations and volunteer services.

The effects of this funding shortfall, which is expected to continue to decline in 2010, have been severe. Already twenty-one of the 170 lawyers working in legal aid in the District have been laid off, as well as 37% of staff. The staff for one long-standing project on education reform has been eliminated altogether, and a domestic violence program has been forced to dramatically reduce its counseling services.

"The D.C. Bar Foundation is working hard to raise additional funds to support programs, but in this environment, it will be a challenge to fill the gap created by the drop in IOLTA revenue," said Katia Garrett, executive director of the DC Bar Foundation.

Jonathan Smith, Executive Director of the Legal Aid Society, agreed. “These cuts affect critical programs that help families and individuals affected by unemployment, domestic violence, foreclosures and economic hardship,” he said.

“Legal services programs are a vital part of the safety net that supports low-income people in times of need. Instead, these reductions mean that literally thousands of District residents who could have been helped won’t have a legal advocate to help them get the assistance that they need.”

The report finds that many areas of the District have been hit particularly hard by the recession. In the second quarter of 2009 alone, 2,353 single-family homes and condominiums were placed in foreclosure.

“Not everyone may see the effects of the recession in the District,” Smith said, “but it is severe. For example, while the unemployment rate in Ward 3 is only 3.2%, it is nearly ten times that—28.3 percent—in Ward 8, and Ward 7 and Ward 5 aren’t faring much better.”

Legal services lawyers in the District estimate that demands for assistance have risen 20% in the past year even as they have been forced to reduce staff and curtail services.

Peter Edelman, chair of the DC Access to Justice Commission, said the cut in legal aid will exacerbate the effects of the financial crisis.

“It will be a long time before the recession is over for people living in poverty. The crisis will deepen in many District neighborhoods before it gets better. Legal services can make a profound difference,” Edelman stated. The loss of resources for lawyers to assist to resolve problems related to basic human needs will be costly for the families involved and the District as a whole.”

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