

Program updates legal aid for poor

By Richard Locker

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The Tennessee Supreme Court announced an initiative Friday to improve access by low-income people to legal assistance in civil cases.

The effort includes a commission to develop a comprehensive plan to address the growing problem.

Unveiling the project to a large group of judges, lawyers and law group representatives at the State Capitol, Chief Justice Janice M. Holder of Memphis said it "is no exaggeration to say that low-income Tennesseans have little hope of legal assistance when they encounter civil legal problems.

"Only one in five income-eligible people will receive the legal help they need. We have 75 very dedicated legal-aid attorneys in Tennessee but they simply are not able to assist all of the many low-income Tennesseans who encounter legal problems on a daily basis," she said.

Currently in Tennessee, civil legal assistance for low-income people and the working poor is provided by four federally funded legal aid societies with a total of 75 lawyers -- including Memphis Area Legal Services -- the pro bono work of lawyers, and legal clinics at the four law schools in the state.

But the Tennessee Bar Association estimates there are over 1 million Tennesseans living in poverty eligible for civil litigation services.

They often need help with landlord-tenant, domestic, predatory lending, consumer and debtor-creditor disputes.

With the numbers of unemployed Tennesseans rising, the Tennessee Bar Association and its president, Memphis lawyer George T. "Buck" Lewis, have worked to increase the number of lawyers and firms that provide pro bono work through a program called 4All.

The program unveiled Friday includes:

Creation of a statewide Access to Justice Commission under the court's auspices that will study access to justice issues, develop a plan to address those issues and act to implement the plan.

Hiring an access to justice coordinator at the state's administrative office of the courts, which has already been done.

Redesigning the Tennessee Supreme Court's Web site to be more user-friendly and provide a single point of access to all information and services provided by the state judicial system.

Educating the public about the problem, including a series of five public meetings across the state from January through March. The Memphis public meeting is set for Feb. 20.

Asking judges to help, both in educating the public and the legal community, and in offering ideas to increase legal assistance.

Lewis called Friday's announcement "an unprecedented collaboration among the private bar, the legal services community and the courts to increase the level of pro bono representation for indigent citizens at a time when the need has rarely been greater."

Contact Nashville Bureau chief Richard Locker at (615) 255-4923.



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