

Times Editorial

Helping justice

Legal aid shouldn't be reserved for those with money

Sitting in a courtroom can be a frightening experience for anyone. If you're someone who has zero experience with legal matters, the feeling can be a hundred times worse.

Consider how one must feel if he's being wronged by someone and cannot afford to seek justice because of a lack of money.

Such concerns help explain why local lawyers and judges spent the first Thursday of the month helping with the launch of a statewide effort to raise \$500,000 on behalf of poor Arkansans.

Referred to as the Promise of Justice Campaign, this effort is the result of work of the Arkansas Access to Justice Commission, which was appointed by the state Supreme Court. Last year the commission noted that the number of Arkansas residents representing themselves in court had risen during the past three years. Not surprisingly, our sour economy isn't helping things.

Of course, it would seem like a good thing that two groups (Legal Aid of Arkansas and the Center for Arkansas Legal Services) work to provide assistance to more than 500,000 eligible souls in Arkansas. Just so, the two groups estimate that it would take an extra \$6.8 million and 71 more attorneys to provide one legal aid attorney for every 5,000 eligible low-income residents, the minimum standards recommended by experts regarding such affairs. In case you're curious, the current ratio in Arkansas is one attorney for every 14,000 eligible residents.

Worse still, 25,000 residents across the Natural State reached out for legal assistance from legal aid organizations last year alone. Ultimately about half that number were turned away.

We ought to thank any member of the legal profession who gets behind this campaign. It's practically impossible for most of the people to genuinely appreciate what it means to be mixed up in some sort of legal quandary and lack access to worthy counsel.

It would be nice if money played no role in the level of justice meted out within our judicial system, but the rules of procedure and the legal parameters within the courthouse — designed to support a fair hearing of grievances — are difficult to navigate. Folks who represent themselves are at a disadvantage from the beginning. Trust us. We've seen them struggle with judges' rulings that simply negate any information they prepared to submit but for which there is no legal basis to allow them in court. It's sad, because justice is not always the result.

Imagine a poor man who finds himself on the right side of a legal dispute but lacks the financial resources to help burnish his cause.

Here's another one: Imagine being forced to choose between bread for your family and paying a lawyer to assist with mounting legal bills. Which one do you think most Arkansans would choose? Losses in court have been known to completely wipe out the fortunes of the vastly rich. If that's the case for rich Americans, think of the pressure and fears inflicted daily on any number of Arkansans whose bank accounts are depleted.

For all its good intentions, the above-mentioned campaign could serve, but not solve, the powerful lack of legal aid thousands of Arkansans lack annually. Reporting by the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* explains that Arkansas is one of the 16 states in this country that do not appropriate legal aid funding from state revenues.

Should we?

It depends. Do you think justice should exist for all, or just those who can afford to buy into such concepts?

The Arkansas Access to Justice Commission would not bother with such a campaign to help the poor unless a major problem existed. And fundraising in the midst of an economic recession will never be easy work.

Which means, in the end, that the General Assembly may have more difficult tasks ahead of it.