

Arkansas lawyers urged to aid poor

GIVE OF TIME, MONEY, JUSTICE EXHORTS

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LITTLE ROCK — Arkansas Supreme Court Justice Annabelle Clinton Imber urged lawyers Friday to give money and time to increase access to legal services for the state's poor.

Imber, who will retire from the court at the end of the year, said it's not enough to give a few hundred dollars to the state's two legal-aid organizations, which help people with legal advice and civil cases who are at or below 125 percent of the poverty level (\$27,562 for a family of four).

Attorneys should multiply their hourly billing rate by 50 to determine what kind of time and money they should be donating to make sure everyone has a equal access to justice, she said.

For example, a lawyer who bills \$100 an hour would give \$5,000 in money or service.

"Have you made that financial commitment? I'll leave that question unanswered," Imber told attorneys attending the first annual Promise of Justice Conference in Little Rock.

The conference was hosted by the Arkansas Access to Justice Commission, which was created by the state Supreme Court in 2003 to work for more legal aid to the state's poor. The conference sought to highlight the growing number of people who can't afford lawyers.

About half of the 28,000 people in Arkansas referred to legal aid last year were turned away, said Jon Comstock, associate general counsel for Wal-Mart Stores Inc.

Wal-Mart announced a \$50,000 donation to the commission's drive to raise \$500,000 by the end of the year for legal aid.

So far, including Wal-Mart's donation, the campaign has netted \$150,000, said Chad Owens, the commission's program coordinator.

Wal-Mart also donated \$50,000 to Legal Aid of Arkansas to start a medical-legal partnership where doctors and legal-aid attorneys can work more closely on client issues, Owens said.

Imber said many people go to law school to help people, but get distracted by high salaries and fee work.

"Sometimes we get off the track a little bit," she said.

But doing pro bono (free) work can reinvigorate wilting legal passions, she said.

"The law practice becomes exciting again."

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