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Legal Aid seeking \$1 million in fundraising campaign

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RALEIGH, N.C. - A nonprofit law firm that helps poor clients is turning to the private sector as it launches a three-year campaign to raise \$1 million from companies and large law firms.

Legal Aid North Carolina gets less than half of its \$18.6 million budget from the federal government, relying largely on state and local governments, interest earned on trust accounts and other sources, according to Legal Service Corp., a national umbrella organization that manages the federal money.

Still, the organization says the funding isn't enough to provide the necessary resources for poor clients, who include abuse victims who don't know how to fill out paperwork for protective orders.

"We in North Carolina have a lot of folks that need the assistance," said Willis Whichard, a Durham-based attorney and former justice on the state Supreme Court.

Legal Aid has 120 lawyers working out of two dozen offices statewide. Last year, they took on civil cases for 25,000 people living at or below the federal poverty level.

But for each client it helps, the organization turns away eight people because it lacks resources _ not because the cases are considered frivolous, said George Hausen Jr., executive director of Legal Aid North Carolina.

"This is to keep people off the bottom," Hausen said. "We're the safety net."

Whichard, also the former dean of Campbell University's law school, is leading the \$1 million fundraising campaign with Alfred P. Carlton, Jr., a Raleigh lawyer and former American Bar Association president.

Whichard and Carlton also are trying to get more private lawyers to represent needy clients for free.

Funding for legal services for the poor was established by Congress in 1974, but the programs were cut significantly during the 1980s and 1990s, said Carol Spruill, an associate dean at Duke University Law School.

In most cases, restrictions bar nonprofit law firms from representing criminals or illegal immigrants. The groups also cannot file class-action lawsuits under restrictions put in place by Congress, Hausen said.

Spruill said many people are surprised that lawyers are guaranteed in civil cases as they are in criminal cases, often leaving poor clients to maneuver a confusing legal system on their own. Some often don't pursue a case even if they're in the right, she said.

"People simply don't get served," Spruill said.

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