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Legal Aid steps into void, gives access to justice

By Janet Ward Black, Gerard Davidson

Georgine did not know where to turn. She learned that her former husband was sexually abusing their 3-year-old son during his parental visits. Georgine could not afford to hire an attorney. After hearing about Legal Aid of North Carolina, she visited its Greensboro office and found the advice she needed. Her lawyer helped her obtain a protective order against her former spouse, gain legal custody of her child and stop the abusive visitation. For Georgine and her son, access to the legal system bridged the difference between shattering domestic violence and newfound security.

Legal Aid of North Carolina is a statewide, nonprofit organization providing free legal assistance to children, the working poor, the disabled, the elderly and others living in poverty. Last year in North Carolina, more than 25,000 clients like Georgine were served. In Greensboro alone, 11 Legal Aid lawyers handled more than 2,300 cases in 2006, preventing homelessness, stopping domestic violence, ensuring access to benefits, and more.

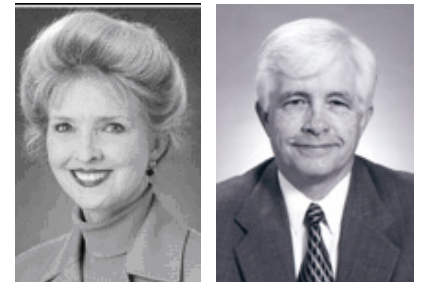
Consider the circumstances of an individual like Georgine, who makes the minimum wage of \$6.15 an hour. Working full time, she will make \$12,792 a year. Paying legal fees is beyond her reach. Legal Aid is her only recourse if she faces an illegal eviction or the domino effect caused by the purchase of a used car that turns out to be a lemon, making it impossible to get to work or arrange child care.

By law, Legal Aid serves those in our community whose annual income is at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty guideline. In 2007, that threshold is \$12,762.50. In North Carolina, an astounding 1.6 million individuals have incomes at or below that level. In the six counties served by the Greensboro Legal Aid office, more than 135,000 people are eligible.

The numbers become more compelling. Between 2000 and 2005, census data shows that the number of families in Greensboro living below the poverty line increased a jaw-dropping 69 percent. At present, Legal Aid cannot begin to meet the extraordinary, and increasing, demands of our community. Many deserving Guilford County residents have to be turned away because of a lack of resources at our Legal Aid office.

As lawyers, we believe it is crucial that our fellow citizens understand that the inability to access our judicial system has dire consequences, not just to the individual involved but to our community. To have a legal right means little if one is unable to protect or enforce that right. Individuals who cannot pay a lawyer are provided counsel only in the criminal system.

Legal Aid steps into this void, performing a service to needy individuals and to the community. In addition to providing experienced lawyers, Legal Aid eases pressure on an overburdened court system by resolving more than 70 percent of its cases without going to court.



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The writers are attorneys and co-chairpersons of the local Access to Justice Campaign for Legal Aid of North Carolina.

Many attorneys generously give their time to represent Legal Aid clients. In addition, groups of lawyers throughout North Carolina recently have launched "Access to Justice" campaigns to raise funds for Legal

Aid. In Guilford County, local lawyers have raised more than \$50,000 for the Greensboro office, but much more is needed. Efforts are also under way to educate our lawmakers, other lawyers and our fellow citizens about how we can all support Legal Aid and, in doing so, strengthen both this vital safety net and our community.

In a democratic society, the protections of the law must be available to all. If access to justice is denied to some, it diminishes what it means for any of us to be a citizen. Please help Legal Aid provide access to justice for all North Carolinians.

To give to Legal Aid, please visit: www.legalaidnc.org.

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