

Editorial, July 20, 2007

Aiding Legal Aid

Tell all the lawyer jokes you want. But if your landlord refuses to repair an obviously dangerous floor, or your estranged spouse is about to take your children to another state, you want a lawyer at your side in the courtroom.

For most poor people, finding money to hire an attorney is an insurmountable hurdle, which is why Congress in 1974 authorized legal aid offices across the nation. The message was that justice isn't only for those who could afford it.

Since then, funding for legal aid has gone through dry spells, even though the need for this kind of help hasn't dwindled. A slight recent uptick in money from Congress won't solve the problem. The inevitable effect is fewer cases being brought to court on behalf of those who often get the short end of the legal stick.

Legal Aid of North Carolina took on 25,000 cases last year. But cuts to the nonprofit agency meant that for each of those cases, eight were turned away -- and not because they were without merit, George Hausen Jr., executive director of the state's Legal Aid office, tells The N&O. Rather, the agency's 120 lawyers in 24 local offices simply can't meet all the needs.

Legal Aid offices handle only civil cases, and they aren't allowed to represent illegal immigrants or to file class action suits. Criminal defendants are guaranteed a lawyer, even if the public has to pay, but someone involved in a civil dispute is on his or her own when it comes to legal representation.

A number of North Carolina's legal luminaries -- including former state Supreme Court Justice Willis Whichard of Durham and A.P. Carlton Jr., a Raleigh lawyer and former president of the American Bar Association -- are leading a campaign to channel more private money to the public agency. They are trying to raise \$1 million over three years and persuade more lawyers in private firms to represent lower-income clients for free. The federal government now funds just 47 percent of the agency's \$18.6 million budget, and private support has become a common pattern in other states.

The cause -- access to equal justice under the law -- is a good one. Responsible corporate citizens (most of which know the value of effective counsel, if their legal departments are an indication) will respond.

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