

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

SEYMOUR W. JAMES, JR.

Creating Partnerships for Justice

Every year, millions of people in New York State are forced to navigate the justice system alone because they are unable to afford to hire an attorney. They often face complicated matters involving housing, health care, sustenance, safety and other basic life essentials, without the benefit of legal counsel. This fall at the State Bar, we have had some great opportunities to reaffirm our association's commitment to enhancing access to justice for people in need by advocating for appropriate public funding for civil legal services, promoting our members' pro bono activities and engaging in creative partnerships with state agencies and the state court system. We are incredibly proud of our members' efforts to assist low-income individuals and families, and we recognize that, together, pro bono service and appropriate government support can make an enormous difference in the lives of millions of New Yorkers and have a positive impact on our justice system.

Legal Assistance Partnership Conference

In September, we hosted the 2012 Legal Assistance Partnership Conference, a biennial event sponsored by the Committee on Legal Aid for providers of civil legal services to the poor. The three-day conference featured timely and practical CLE programs focused on the legal needs of vulnerable populations including people with disabilities, veterans, victims of domestic violence, immigrants and low-income individuals and families. The conference also provides a rare opportunity for more than 400 civil legal service providers from across the state to

come together to discuss their work. In light of persistent economic instability and reductions in government funding for legal services, it is more important than ever that providers have access to high-quality, affordable educational programs. We are grateful for the critical work performed by civil legal service providers and we believe this conference serves as an invaluable resource for them.

During the Partnership Conference, the Committee on Legal Aid presented the 2012 Denison Ray Awards to Ian Feldman (director of Legal Services, Mental Health Project, Urban Justice Center), Michael Hanley (senior staff attorney, Empire Justice Center), Richard S. Hobish (founding executive director, Pro Bono Partnership) and the New York Legal Assistance Group of New York City. The Committee also posthumously recognized Michael Rothenberg, the founder of New York Lawyers for the Public Interest who served as its executive director from 2001 to 2012. We were honored to be joined by Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman, who provided the evening's keynote address. The Committee on Legal Aid also presented Chief Judge Lippman with an award in recognition of his advocacy for quality legal services for the poor.

Legal Services Initiative Partnership

We are also proud to be involved in a new partnership with the Office of Court Administration and the New York State Office for the Aging, established to examine and address the unmet need for civil legal services among senior citizens and New Yorkers with disabilities. Too many older



residents and people with disabilities face complicated bureaucracies and legal processes without the guidance of an attorney. Some need help planning for their financial future, while others may need assistance remaining in their homes or obtaining life's basic essentials. In many cases, legal services are available, but people are unaware of their existence or how to access them. It is our hope that this legal services initiative will empower older residents and people with disabilities, by helping them to identify the legal issues in their lives and connecting them with the legal counsel they need.

We kicked off the legal services initiative in September with a free CLE webinar that introduced the partnership and The Elder Preparedness Self Assessment Tool (TEPSAT), a questionnaire designed to help older New Yorkers and their loved ones identify the issues they may face as they age and establish a practical plan for the future. TEPSAT is the first in a variety of resources that will be developed through the legal services initiative, with the invaluable assistance of individual attorneys like Bob Abrams (Abrams, Fensterman, Fensterman,

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Eisman, Formato, Ferrara & Einiger, LLP), the dedicated elder law attorney and former chair of both the Elder and Health Law Sections, who facilitated this partnership.

Chief Judge's Hearings on Civil Legal Services

The State Bar was again honored to take part in the Chief Judge's Hearings on Civil Legal Services, which were held in September and October in each Appellate Division Department in the state. Representatives from the state bar have assisted in presiding over these hearings each year since they began in 2010. Every year, we receive testimony from civil legal service providers, advocates, experts, judges, district attorneys and clients about the vast unmet need for civil legal services in New York State. We continue to learn more about the enormous impact legal representation can have, not only in the lives of people in need, but also on the justice system as a whole. Our courts operate more smoothly when people who cannot afford to hire an attorney have access to legal counsel; it helps expedite the judicial process and can save millions in tax dollars by reducing delays, resolving legal problems and averting the need for more costly government interventions.

Chief Judge Lippman has been an extraordinary advocate for access to justice in New York State. Through his infusion of funding for IOLA and his dedication of \$25 million of the judiciary budget to civil legal services funding, Chief Judge Lippman has offered a lifeline to providers and people in need, when so many other

sources of funding are shrinking or disappearing altogether. We are tremendously grateful to the Chief Judge for his continued commitment to this critical area, and we are proud to have been involved in his hearings again this year.

Doing the Public Good

We have also continued to encourage and facilitate pro bono efforts by individual attorneys and law firms through educational programs and recruitment initiatives coordinated by our various committees and our Department of Pro Bono Affairs. Although pro bono can never fully meet the need for civil legal services for the disadvantaged, it is nonetheless an important professional responsibility and a necessary component in our overall strategy to address the gap in legal services.

Each year at the State Bar, we participate in the American Bar Association's National Pro Bono Week by co-sponsoring and hosting events designed to engage attorneys in pro bono service and connect them with opportunities that match their expertise. This fall, the State Bar has been involved in coordinating a series of CLE training events and recruitment efforts to promote pro bono among our members. On October 4, we held a free CLE training on unemployment insurance appeals as an incentive to get attorneys in the third and fourth judicial districts involved in pro bono, and specifically to represent low-income claimants in these matters. That event was co-sponsored by the Albany County Bar Association and the Legal Aid Society of Northeastern New York.

On October 25, along with the New York County Lawyers' Association, the New York State Courts Access to Justice Program, and the Office of the Mayor of the City of New York, the State Bar co-sponsored a pro bono week celebration featuring an award ceremony and a volunteer expo in New York City.

This November, we will host two exciting pro bono events at the Bar Center. On November 13, we will hold our annual pro bono CLE training and recruitment event. The theme this year is "Pro Bono Anew," and many civil legal service providers will be on site to meet with local attorneys and discuss volunteer opportunities in the third judicial district. On November 29, the Bar Center will host a CLE program on LGBT rights that will also serve as a recruitment effort for attorneys who are interested in assisting members of the LGBT community. That event will be co-sponsored by the State Bar's Committee on LGBT People and the Law, the Legal Aid Society of Northeastern New York and The Legal Project. In addition to those events, on November 7 we are co-sponsoring a CLE training for attorneys who are interested in assisting low-income individuals and families in landlord-tenant disputes. This program will be held at the Albany County Judicial Center. For more information about these events, please visit www.nysba.org/probono.

The unmet need for civil legal services is a complex and challenging problem, and one we believe is best addressed with a multi-faceted strategy, in collaboration with bar associations, state agencies, the courts and other members of the legal community. We appreciate these opportunities to work with so many outstanding organizations throughout New York State. Our work on addressing the legal services gap and promoting access to justice for all New Yorkers is, and will remain, a top priority for the state bar now and for the years to come. ■

