

Judge addresses legal services for the poor

By ROBERT GAVIN Staff writer
Published 12:00 a.m., Wednesday, October 5, 2011

The state's need to expand legal services for the poor is well-documented.

To address it are pro bono efforts, help centers in courthouses and even a free "Do-It-Yourself Program" in which low-income litigants can answer step-by-step questions online.



But should the state turn to recent law school graduates?

That was the recommendation of one of New York's top judges Monday in his testimony to the Task Force to Expand Access to Civil Legal Services, which was formed to address the issue. Michael Coccoma, the deputy administrative chief judge for counties outside New York City, suggested the panel consider the graduates as he urged "new ideas" during a hearing at the Court of Appeals.

"For example, when I hear that an increasing number of recent law school students are unable to find jobs, I ask myself, why can't we develop funding streams and programs which would provide an opportunity for these attorneys, who are eager to put their skills to work in a public-service program, providing legal services for the poor?" Coccoma asked.

Coccoma suggested that in exchange for a two- or three-year commitment in that type of program, the new lawyers could receive a reduction in their student loan. He compared it to AmeriCorps programs which enables college graduates entering health care fields to get assistance with their tuition.

"This is an idea which I believe you should consider recommending to the Legislature to appropriate funding for," Coccoma testified.

Coccoma's was not the only time the fields of law and health care would be intertwined Monday. Among the witnesses were James Barba, president and CEO of Albany Medical Center.

But Coccoma noted one major difference in his testimony, as he illustrated the plight of unrepresented low-income litigants.

"Imagine if a patient arrived at a hospital in this state and was told upon arrival that they must supervise and administer their medical procedure that day because the hospital did not have any sufficient medical staff to carry out that role?" Coccoma testified. "Such a situation would not occur and it should be no different in our courts."

Lawyers aid flooded counties

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Three attorneys with ties to the Capital Region have formed a nonprofit group to offer free legal services to flood-ravaged residents in Schoharie, Greene and Montgomery counties.

Guilderland-based lawyer Cynthia LaFave and attorneys Sean Doolan of Windham and Joseph Belluck, whose firm has an Albany office, have created New York State Trial Lawyers Care Inc. With help from the New York State Trial Lawyers Association and Albany County Bar Association, the group now has about 50 volunteer attorneys and helped some 100 residents in Greene and Schoharie counties, the group said.

The group announced it was expanding into Montgomery County, where a clinic will be set up at the county courthouse at 58 Broadway in Fonda.

The pro bono legal services are to help the victims of Tropical Storm Irene who have suffered loss of homes and businesses. The lawyers also are expected to help them with mortgage and loan issues, reviewing insurance policies, landlord and tenant issues and appeals to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The nonprofit will meet with anyone interested from 1 to 4 p.m. on Oct. 9 at the St. Catherine's Church, 111 Wells Ave., Middleburgh, and from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Prattsville Firehouse, 12468 Main St.

Albany Law School students are volunteering for the effort.

Anyone interested was asked to contact Robert Axisa, the group's executive director, at 421-2674 or NYSTLCInc@gmail.com

Reach Robert Gavin at 434-2403 or rgavin@timesunion.com.

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