



NEWS RELEASE

October 13, 2003

RE: Task Force on Civil Equal Justice

FROM: Wendy K. Ferrell
(360) 705-5331

Wendy.Ferrell@courts.wa.gov

Civil justice out of reach for most low-income residents

An overwhelming majority of low-income residents in Washington get little or no help with serious legal problems involving such basic needs as housing, family safety and employment, according to a ground-breaking study commissioned by the Washington State Supreme Court's Task Force on Civil Equal Justice.

The Washington State Civil Legal Needs Study, received earlier this month by the Supreme Court, reveals an alarming lack of access to legal services for the state's most vulnerable residents, with findings that have significant implications for the state's justice system, say task force members involved in the study.

"The most troubling aspect of the survey is that unmet civil legal needs disproportionately affect women and children in our society," said Washington Supreme Court Justice Charles W. Johnson, Co-Chair of the Task Force. "The study serves as a wake up call for all of us who believe in our democracy's promise of equal justice under the law."

The study is the first of its kind in state history, commissioned after the state Supreme Court established the Task Force on Civil Equal Justice Funding in November, 2001. The Task Force was created to assess whether the state's poor and vulnerable residents have meaningful access to the civil justice system, to learn the consequences of poor access, and to develop recommendations for improving access.

The study involved three parts — An in-depth field survey of 1,300 low-income residents across the state by researchers from Portland State University; a random telephone survey of 800 residents by Washington State University's Social and Economic Research Services Center; and a series of interviews with stakeholders such as judges, attorneys, court personnel, social service providers and legal service providers.

According to their findings:

- Each year, Washington's low-income residents encounter more than one million urgent civil legal problems.
- Unmet civil legal needs disproportionately affect women and children in our society. The most common needs that are neglected relate to housing needs and protecting their family from domestic violence.

(more)

- The number of census-based low-income residents has grown 46 percent since 1990. All told, there are now approximately 1,039,000 low-income residents in Washington State.
- More than 75 percent of low-income households experience at least one important civil legal problem each year, but only 15 percent of those receive any legal help. Low-income residents face more than 85 percent of civil legal problems without help from attorneys.
- Unlike civil legal problems of middle- and high-income residents, the civil problems of low-income residents primarily involve basic needs such as housing, family safety and employment.
- Minorities in Washington State, the elderly and residents with disabilities experience specific types of civil problems at higher rates than the general population.
- Low-income residents spoke of several reasons for not seeking legal help — they didn't know there were laws to protect them or provide relief, they didn't know where to turn for help, they were fearful, they believed they could not afford legal help, or had language barriers.

“This survey demonstrates that low-income people experience tremendous unmet legal needs and that these needs involve fundamental human concerns,” stated Court of Appeals Division One Chief Judge Mary Kay Becker, Co-Chair of the Task Force. “Access to justice cannot be denied based on the ability to pay. The poor and vulnerable individuals in our society must have representation in order to protect their legal rights.”

The Task Force on Civil Equal Justice will use the study findings to complete the second part of its mission, to develop recommendations for improving access to the civil justice system for the state's low-income and vulnerable residents.

A copy of the full report can be obtained by calling the number listed above, or visiting the Washington Courts website at www.courts.wa.gov.

CONTACTS: Task Force Co-Chair Justice Charles W. Johnson, Washington Supreme Court 360-357-2020; Task Force Co-Chair Chief Judge Mary Kay Becker, Court of Appeals Division One 206-464-7656.

#####