

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
July 10, 2003

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Survey Reveals Majority of Needy Residents' Legal Needs Unmet

Poverty level households in Connecticut face more than 289,000 civil law problems per year, according to a survey commissioned by the Connecticut Bar Foundation (CBF).

The University of Connecticut's Center for Survey Research and Analysis conducted a statistically sound telephone survey of the civil needs of low-income households in Connecticut. The center conducted the survey from November 8 through December 13, 2002.

"We have learned two important lessons from this survey," said Sandy Klebanoff, the CBF's executive director. "First, and most important, there is a huge unmet need for civil legal aid in Connecticut. Second, the legal aid agencies in our state, although they experience very high demand for their services, have low visibility within their population of potential clients."

The survey reveals a daunting need for legal services among Connecticut's neediest citizens. Connecticut households are eligible for legal aid services if their incomes are at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty levels. Eligible households face an average of 2.7 civil law problems a year, which translates into a staggering 289,000 civil law problems among households at or below the federal poverty level.

Civil law problems were defined as those involving non-criminal matters for which a person needs legal representation or counseling. The most frequent types of problems reported by survey respondents were in housing, consumer, employment and securing government benefits.

Legal services programs in Connecticut currently receive more than 30,000 documented requests for assistance each year. They open 10,000 new cases and provide legal services

in an additional 6,000 cases carried forward from prior years. These programs also provide telephone information and advice in an additional 12,000 cases, and lawyers in private practice provide free legal services to legal aid eligible clients in an additional 1,000 documented cases and an undetermined number of undocumented cases

The survey found that 90 percent of the civil law problems identified by respondents did not receive any attention from lawyers. However, those respondents who sought legal assistance reported that it was helpful in addressing 92 percent of their problems. Legal assistance helped them understand their problem (22 percent), protect or assert their legal rights (21 percent), resolve their problem (20 percent), or make an informed decision concerning the problem (18 percent).

The large gap between the current capacity of legal aid agencies and the huge need revealed by the survey reinforces the importance of legal services programs' continuing efforts to focus their limited resources on the most compelling legal problems faced by their clients. This gap also underscores dramatically the need for public and private sources to provide more funding to increase the service capacity of the state's legal aid network.

Another major finding of the survey was that Connecticut's legal aid programs are not well known among potential clients. Legal aid agencies were involved in only one-third of the problems for which individuals sought the assistance of a lawyer, according to the survey. A total of 30 percent of respondents with problems who did not seek assistance from a legal aid agency said they did not know that legal aid was available. Only 12 percent of all respondents could name any of the large legal services organizations in the state: Connecticut Legal Services, Greater Hartford Legal Aid, New Haven Legal Assistance Association and Statewide Legal Services.

"These findings suggest that a campaign should be mounted to improve the visibility of Connecticut's legal aid programs," Klebanoff said. However, an awareness campaign would come with a cost. Increased active demand would further strain legal aid's already overburdened intake apparatus and result in legal aid programs turning away – without full representation – additional numbers of applicants for service.

Attached are copies of a statement by the Connecticut Bar Foundation and the Executive Summary of the University of Connecticut Center for Survey Research & Analysis Report, *Civil Legal Needs Among Low-Income Households in Connecticut*.

Attachments:
Statement of the Connecticut Bar Foundation
Final Report