

LSC Launches Efforts to Expand Pro Bono, Technology, Public Awareness

In 2012, the number of Americans eligible for LSC-funded legal assistance reached an all-time high, more than 61 million, while LSC's congressional appropriations fell to \$348 million, an all-time low in inflation-adjusted dollars.

This financial perfect storm forced many LSC grantees across the nation to lay off staff, close offices, and turn away more people in need. Between 2010 and 2012, for example, 923 full-time positions—385 of them attorneys—were eliminated at LSC grantees because of funding cuts. That represents more than a 10 percent loss of staff in just two years.

To help meet this deepening challenge, LSC launched new initiatives in 2012 to further extend our reach—through collaboration with our many partners in the legal community, more effective use of technology, and increased efficiencies wherever they can be found. The LSC board adopted a far-ranging, five-year strategic plan to guide those efforts and to establish foundational goals.

LSC's national Pro Bono Task Force, composed of more than 60 distinguished leaders of the legal community, released its wide-ranging report and recommendations at events in Washington, Boston, Chicago, and Durham. The Task Force Report seeks to expand the number of lawyers who are willing to do pro bono work and better match those lawyers with the growing unmet need. An implementation steering committee from the task force is now hard at work to make sure those recommendations are translated into action, and we expect to see many exciting developments as we move forward.

LSC also convened its second-ever Technology Summit, with meetings in Washington, DC and Jacksonville. Many of the innovations in the use of technology in our country's civil justice system grew out of LSC's first technology summit in 1998. LSC and its partners have built a network of websites stretching from coast to coast delivering significant legal information, self-help videos, and automated forms to assist low-income individuals with their legal needs. These resources are accessed many thousands of times a day. We look forward to seeing similar ground-breaking developments from the 2012 tech summit.

In April 2012, LSC co-hosted at the White House a forum on the state of civil legal assistance in this country. At the event, President Obama pledged to be a "fierce advocate" for LSC and civil legal aid, and Attorney General Eric Holder, State Department Legal Adviser Harold Koh, and Senior Adviser to the President Valerie Jarrett joined the president at the podium.

The forum also featured two panels. The first, composed of state supreme court justices and national leaders of the legal community, explored the critical role of civil legal assistance for the poor in fulfilling the promise of "justice for all," and in maintaining America's commitment to the rule of law. Six executive directors of LSC grantees

formed the second panel, and they highlighted success stories and discussed innovative ways in which they are serving their clients in an era of high demand and scarce resources.

Following the White House event, the LSC Board convened panels of

state supreme court chief justices and other legal experts in regions of the country where it was holding quarterly meetings—Ann Arbor and Durham. These forums also highlighted the many issues confronting the civil legal assistance system as it attempts to deliver services to the many low-income Americans who need help, explored broad strategies, and educated the public—and our fellow lawyers—about what is at stake.

At our board meetings, we also heard from panels on a variety of topics, including domestic violence, veterans' issues, the role of technology in providing self-help information to unrepresented litigants, and the use of civil legal partnerships with pro bono attorneys to extend scarce resources.

At our first Board meeting of 2012, in San Diego, we were privileged to hear from the remarkable Pepperdine Law Dean and former Chief Judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit, Deanell Reece Tacha—also a member of LSC's pro bono task force. In stirring rhetoric, she spelled out the importance of ensuring equal access to justice:

"When the great majority of the individuals and small businesses of the nation no longer can, or believe they no longer can, get a lawyer, be represented effectively, go to court, settle their disputes in a fair and impartial way, and be treated like every other citizen, we quite simply, have lost the guiding principle of our republic—equal justice under law. When that goes, the rule of law goes, and when that goes, the great dreams of those patriots who founded and fought for this republic go with it—never to be reclaimed. Something must be done!"

LSC and its grantees are heeding Dean Tacha's call, and every day we indeed do something very fundamental as we strive to ensure equal access to justice. It is not enough to have a system of laws if millions of our citizens do not have access, or believe they do not have access, to that system.

LSC-funded legal service lawyers do all they can to meet the basic responsibility to low-income Americans of ensuring that the justice system is available to them and an even greater responsibility to future generations to make sure that the justice system we hand them remains true to our founding values.



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