

Excerpt from Remarks
by
John G. Levi
Chairman, LSC Board of Directors
Reception & Pro Bono Awards Ceremony
Sidley Austin LLP, Chicago
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It is a special privilege to welcome you all this evening to my law firm—my legal home for over 30 years.

It is a pleasure to be surrounded by leaders of the Chicago legal community, my friends, my longtime colleagues, together with the Board of LSC, its president and senior staff.

And it is a distinct honor for all of us to be here with our very distinguished speaker, the Honorable Diane P. Wood of the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit.

The Legal Services Corporation is the single largest funder of civil legal assistance in the nation. Here in Illinois, LSC provides nearly half of the funding for its programs, as is the case in many other states. The Corporation's Board has not met in Chicago or Illinois since 1998, and is not likely to be back again for another decade or so. So thank you for coming out to share this special evening with us. Let's hope by the time the LSC Board returns to Chicago, the Cubs have won a World Series!

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The LSC Board has benefited greatly from its firsthand visits to legal aid programs throughout the country. It has been a longstanding tradition of the LSC Board that it holds three meetings each year in the states. So as you can see, it takes a long time to cover the country.

We have heard from executive directors of LSC programs about their priorities and received briefings on an array of matters—Red Cross disaster-relief, medical-legal partnerships, mortgage foreclosure projects, veterans initiatives and tribal courts.

As our Board crisscrosses the country, we have asked each of the local LSC programs to nominate for special recognition two individuals or law firms that have been especially supportive of pro bono. And that is what we are doing here today, celebrating pro bono efforts by the bar.

Next week, the ABA will once again be putting a spotlight on pro bono with its national Pro Bono Week and its Pro Bono Summit in Washington, D.C.

LSC is also encouraging pro bono by taking a good, hard look at how the profession can use technology and the sharing of best practices to better match unmet civil legal needs with the potential pro bono talent.

The LSC Board just this August created a Pro Bono Task Force, led by Board members Dean Martha Minow of Harvard Law School and Harry Korrell of Davis Wright Tremaine, with five terrific subcommittees drawing on outstanding members of the profession and asking them to come up with innovative recommendations that can help increase pro bono in a measureable way.

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Our Board is committed to helping LSC fulfill its mission—promoting equal access to justice and ensuring the delivery of high-quality civil legal assistance to low-income Americans.

We are tremendously concerned, as we all should be, about the staggering unmet civil legal needs in low-income communities and our country's commitment to the promise of equal justice for all.

In the legal profession, law firms, especially big city firms, have increased their pro bono hours significantly over the last decade. That is something to celebrate. But, unfortunately, with all the efforts made by so many dedicated people in past decades, we have been unable to make a meaningful dent in meeting the legal needs of low-income Americans or in closing this nation's justice gap.

In some way, we have accepted the notion that there will be a huge number of unrepresented individuals who can be helped through online or self-help desks, where these unrepresented persons can be assisted in filling out court forms or other filings they have to make. This is a far cry from actual representation by a trained practitioner.

So when we say we have an unmet need, what we mean is this: folks who are not getting even this type of minimal help. We're talking about people who are completely left out, turned away because of a lack of any kind of resources to help them.

Funding is one of our biggest challenges—at the federal, state and local levels. IOLTA and other non-federal sources of funding have declined over the last three years, and Congress reduced LSC funding by 4 percent in Fiscal Year 2011 and appears to be headed for a further reduction in 2012.

The Great Recession of 2008 has left no doubt that legal aid programs require increased funding and greater pro bono support. In 2008, about 54 million Americans qualified for LSC-funded services. These are Americans at or below 125 percent of the federal poverty line. Today, that number has jumped to more than 60 million. And projections based on Census data indicate that the country's poverty population will continue to grow over the next few years.

Across the nation, we understand that less than 20 percent of the legal needs of low-income Americans are being met. And we are at a juncture where legal aid programs, already stretched thin, are being forced to lay off attorneys and staff because of a shortage of funds.

While the country has been through a very difficult decade, and continues to be confronting those issues, we simply cannot let the turbulence we have experienced to cause us to turn away from properly funding our civil justice system in this country.

The cracks in that system may not be as visible as those on our bridges and highways, but we all know that they exist. And because they are not as easy to see, we in the profession have a responsibility to speak up and let the country know the risk to one of the fundamental pillars of our great democracy.

That promise of a fair, equal and accessible system of justice was a part of our country's founding, and our Founding Fathers placed "establish justice" before the common defense in the preamble to our Constitution.

As lawyers and citizens, we owe an orderly civil justice system to future generations of Americans. Just as we have benefited in the profession from what

our predecessors gave to us, we in turn have a responsibility to those who will succeed us.

Thank you very much.