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Attorneys hope to ease burden on poor of legal needs

HIGHLIGHTS

Survey: Many low-income people face legal problems without help

Legal woes per household pile up since 2003

Attorneys want program to help people regain suspended drivers' licenses

BY JORDAN SCHRADER

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Attorney Leslie Owen greeted her client with good news last week: A fine for driving with a suspended license had been dropped in Grant County, wiping out \$1,500 of what Teresa Nisbet owed.

The two celebrated the latest step out of a hole Nisbet had dug with credit cards, payday loans, drug use and bad luck. Nisbet recalls how she felt at the bottom of that hole: "I can't see the light. I have no hope."

Now the Olympia resident says she is sober and happy and has resolved the criminal charges against her. What's left are years-old fines scattered across courts and collections agencies in Olympia, Lacey, Thurston County and across the state in Grant County, much of it having accumulated interest at 12 percent a year.

Civil legal-aid lawyers are helping Nisbet, but say their numbers are not nearly enough to represent everyone trying to deal with legal problems.

More than three-quarters of poor Washingtonians with civil legal problems face them without attorneys, according to a recent survey due to be presented to state lawmakers at a Thursday committee hearing.

That's actually an improvement from a 2003 survey, but the latest report also found low-income households face far more legal problems than they did before — more than nine problems per household instead of more than three.

Medical bills, debt collection, credit access and other woes pile up for the poor, according to the survey commissioned by the state Supreme Court and conducted by Washington State University.

An advocacy group for civil legal aid, the Equal Justice Coalition, says the state would need to add 124 more state-funded civil legal aid lawyers to the 107 on the job now to meet what the group said are nationally recognized standards for access to legal aid.

That would cost more than \$15 million a year at a time when the Supreme Court demands more money for schools, so lawmakers may look for other solutions.

Owen, senior attorney at the Olympia office of the Northwest Justice Project, said one way to reduce the need for lawyers is a statewide program to help people address suspended-license fines.

Owen said 7 percent of drivers' licenses are suspended and low-level misdemeanor charges for driving with suspended licenses take up about a third of district courts' workloads. She said losing a license is one of the biggest barriers to employment faced by the poor.

"The public should be interested in these people getting their licenses back so they can get a job," said Gerry Alexander, a former state Supreme Court chief justice and an advocate for civil legal aid.

The program Owen envisions would allow participants to access multiple courts at a time as they try to have unpaid fines dropped, put on a payment plan, forgiven through community service, or reduced by pulling them away from collections agencies. Spokane County has a similar program and has seen more revenue, not less, Owen said.

Lacking such a program, Owen goes judge by judge, jurisdiction by jurisdiction on Nisbet's behalf.

"She doesn't have her license yet," Owen said Wednesday, "but we are so close."

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