



New Report: 2015 Washington State Civil Legal Needs Study Update Reveals Troubling Justice Gap

Legal problems facing Washington's poorest families triple in last decade

SEATTLE — Oct. 29, 2015 — A Washington Supreme Court commissioned statewide survey of more than 1,600 low-income Washingtonians discovered that seven of ten low-income individuals and families in Washington State face at least one significant civil legal problem each year, and the average number of problems per low-income household has tripled over the last decade.

Despite the growing number of civil legal problems that often implicate their most basic needs, the vast majority of low-income Washingtonians do not receive the legal help they need to solve these problems. More than three-quarters of those with civil legal problems struggle without a lawyer or any type of legal help.

The survey, conducted by Washington State University, is the most methodologically rigorous assessment of civil legal problems ever conducted nationwide. The results indicate nearly a half million Washington residents who live in poverty suffer because they are unable to find help with their civil legal problems such as access to healthcare, consumer finance and debt collection, and employment related issues. Low-income persons of color, victims of domestic violence or sexual assault, persons with disabilities and youth experience substantially higher rates of legal problems than the general low income population.

“We must recognize the consequences of a system of justice in our state that denies a significant portion of our population the ability to assert and defend their core legal rights. We can and we must do better,” said Supreme Court Justice Charles K. Wiggins, chair of the Civil Legal Needs Study Update Committee.

Washington currently has just one state-funded legal aid attorney for every 10,783 eligible residents, which is less than half the nationally recognized minimal level of service of one legal aid attorney for every 5,000 eligible low-income residents.

“We now have greater clarity than ever that we’re witnessing the erosion of the proud American principle of Justice for All,” says former United States Attorney John McKay. “We’re standing

at a point in our history with the information to defend the rights of those who are most vulnerable. This report allows us not just to see the problem, but act for a solution.”

The 2015 Washington State Civil Legal Needs Study Update follows a similar study published by a Washington State Supreme Court task force in 2003. In response to the 2003 study, the Washington State Legislature increased capacity to address the civil legal problems of low-income Washingtonians by devoting more resources and establishing an agency to administer and oversee the state investment in civil legal aid.

Based on this 2015 Civil Legal Aid Update, the Equal Justice Coalition believes the state should recommit to closing Washington’s Justice Gap by taking the following steps:

1. More than double the number of state-funded Civil Legal Aid attorneys
2. Expand the level of volunteer attorney involvement in the delivery of essential civil legal aid services
3. Build awareness of legal aid services in low-income communities

Find the full 32-page [2015 Washington State Civil Legal Needs Study Update](http://ocla.wa.gov/final-report-2015-civil-legal-needs-study-update/) on the Office of Civil Legal Aid website. <http://ocla.wa.gov/final-report-2015-civil-legal-needs-study-update/>

Regional media availability to service providers, low-income legal aid clients and advocates listed below:

October 29, 2015 **Seattle** – 2pm – 4pm
Location: Northwest Justice Project Seattle, 401 2nd Ave S #407,
Seattle, WA 98104

November 9, 2015 **Mt. Vernon** – 11am – 1pm
Location: Community Action of Skagit County, 330 Pacific Place,
Mt. Vernon, WA 98273

November 10, 2015 **Spokane** 11am – 1pm
Location: Team Child, 1704 W. Broadway Avenue,
Spokane, WA 99201

Vancouver: 11am – 1pm
Location: Northwest Justice Project Vancouver, 500 W. 8th St. #275,
Vancouver, WA 98660

Yakima: 11am – 1pm
Location: Northwest Justice Project Yakima, 311 N. 4th St. #201,

Yakima, WA 98901

Statewide Media Contact:

John McKay

Former United States Attorney

Contact Eric Schudiske at **206-310-3597** to arrange interview opportunities or site visits during media availability.

ABOUT: [The Equal Justice Coalition](#) is a non-partisan organization of civil legal aid providers, funders, and supporters who through education and advocacy work to obtain sufficient public funding for vital legal services for low-income Washingtonians. The EJC is running an awareness campaign “Justice For All” to highlight the importance of civil legal aid and share the findings of the 2015 Washington State Civil Legal Needs Study Update. Commissioned by the Washington Supreme Court, this study documents the type, substance, and prevalence of civil legal problems that low-income Washingtonians face, the degree to which low-income people are able to access legal help, and the effectiveness of legal aid when accessed. The study was conducted by a 12-member Civil Legal Needs Study Update Committee appointed by the Washington Supreme Court in 2012. The study was produced by Washington State University’s Social and Economic Sciences Research Center.