

# Rivers: Low-income residents deserve access to civil legal aid

By Sen. Ann Rivers

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My greatest joy as a legislator is helping people. I love that this position gives me the opportunity to assist my friends and neighbors almost every day.



Time and time again, I've gone to bat for folks frustrated by the bureaucracy of state agencies, I've walked members of my community through a maze of forms and websites, I've introduced bills to right a wrong — but sometimes my hands are tied and all I can do is listen.

There is a clear and distinct separation between the legislative and judicial branches of government. The separation of powers is the cornerstone of our democracy, but it can be a bitter pill to swallow at times. If one of my neighbors needs help that is legal in nature — at all — I cannot assist them. They must take their troubles to the judicial branch. That works if you can afford an attorney, but what if you can't? Or what if you don't know the struggles you are facing could be easily solved through the legal system?

Every Washingtonian deserves fair and equal access to our justice system. But a new report finds individuals and families living in poverty in our state are experiencing a growing number of civil legal problems, including issues that affect their ability to secure safe housing, steady employment and access to health care.

Survey research by Washington State University, the "2015 Washington Civil Legal Needs Study Update" finds that 7 in 10 low-income households have at least one civil legal problem each year. Unfortunately, those in our state who face at least one civil legal problem likely face many more, with the average number topping nine civil legal problems per low-income household each year.

While our constitution guarantees defendants the right to an attorney in a criminal case, there is no such guarantee in cases involving legal problems that are not criminal in nature. In fact, the same study found 76 percent of low-income households in our state that had a legal problem received no help at all.

## Volunteer lawyers program

Here in Southwest Washington, we are fortunate to have organizations like the Clark County Volunteer Lawyers Program, which connects private attorneys willing to donate their time and expertise with families and individuals to help resolve pressing civil legal problems. In 2014, this program assisted 601 local clients. This year, though the economy is improving, 500 low-income clients will be helped.

It's gratifying to know that more than 120 lawyers in our community have been willing to take on clients with the only compensation being the satisfaction of assisting a neighbor. One of these lawyers helped a young mother get her abusive husband out of her home, obtain a divorce and secure court-ordered protection. Another assisted a father of four who had lost his job and nearly lost the family's home.

At the same time, I'm deeply concerned about the more than 500,000 low-income Washingtonians who are unable to get at least some kind of civil legal help.

This is not acceptable. Washington can and must do better.

Let's begin by supporting legal aid programs and nonprofits like the Clark County Volunteer Lawyers Program.

Currently, Washington state has one state-funded legal aid lawyer for every 10,783 low-income residents. That's less than half of the national minimal service level of 1 attorney for every 5,000 residents.

Please take a few minutes to look at the new Civil Legal Needs report posted at: [ejc.org/justiceforall/](http://ejc.org/justiceforall/). Then please join me in making sure that, in Washington state, there is fair and equal access to justice for all.

State Sen. Ann Rivers serves Washington's 18th Legislative District. Learn more about the Clark County Volunteer Lawyers Program at: [www.ccvlp.org/](http://www.ccvlp.org/) (<http://www.ccvlp.org/>)

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