

**OP-ED**     JANUARY 7, 2016 4:07 PM

# Justice shouldn't be denied to low-income citizens

**HIGHLIGHTS**

Low-income households in Washington face an average of 9.3 civil legal problems each year

Cases include massive medical bills and keeping a home or job

State must restore cuts to civil legal aid to ensure justice for all



BY CHRISTINE KILDUFF

*Contributing writer*

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The tidal wave of the great recession shrank the middle class and zapped the purchasing power of everyday Americans.

People are working longer hours than ever before, but they're still one emergency away from not being able to pay rent or buy the prescription medicines they need.

One of the toughest and most expensive emergencies is a legal problem. These days, legal bills are astronomical, and can be a stretch even for people with high salaries.

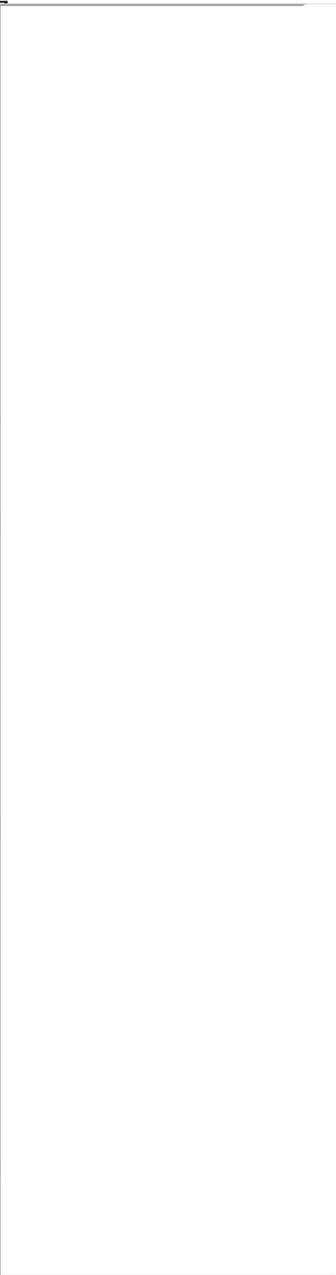
Imagine being hit with nine legal problems a year. F

That statistic is no exaggeration. Here's the truth:

- Seventy-one percent of low-income families in our problem in 2014.
- In 2002, the same survey found an average of 3.3 household.
- By 2014, that number skyrocketed to 9.3 problem from a single event, like being a victim of domestic unfathomable; most middle-class and wealthy people their lifetimes.

These aren't criminal charges. We're only talking about trouble with massive hospital bills, protecting children job.

Going to court or tackling a complex legal issue with car with two flat tires. You're at a serious disadvantage pounce on the brave soul who dared to navigate the



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And it's a system that's broken. There's supposed to be one civil aid attorney for every 5,000 low-income people who may need help. Today, Washington state has one attorney for every 11,000.

The bottom line is, if you're a victim of domestic violence, a senior on a fixed income, or somebody working hard just to get by, everybody knows you can't afford an attorney. They can get their way by taking you to court or simply threatening you with a lawsuit.

So it happens, again and again. Families from Lakewood to Walla Walla are devastated.

Here's one of the stories unearthed in the latest survey: "I moved here one year ago from Portland after my service to this country and I have had to sell my truck, all my tools and constantly fight to stay afloat. If it were not for my wife and child, I do not believe I would even fight to stay alive. People are struggling, and it's getting worse."

This problem has gotten out of control. It's hurting families, neighborhoods and the entire American commitment to justice for all.

For all. Not for the wealthy few, for all of us.

Everyone in this state needs access to justice and fair treatment by our courts and laws. That bedrock principle is the beating heart of our Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution and Washington Constitution.

Our choice, as taxpayers and lawmakers, is simple. The first choice is to do nothing to fix it, which means paying more to clean up the wreckage caused by this problem, including joblessness and homelessness.

Or we can pay far less to prevent this legal carnage.

The solution is simple: Restore cuts to civil legal aid made during the great recession.

Through innovation and investment, we can help families stay on their feet and avoid a downward hopeless spiral. Instead of seniors, veterans and the working poor facing nine legal problems per year, they'd get basic legal help. Lawmakers could stop the bleeding during the 2016 session for a little over \$550,000. That's a small price to help local families, including those who are defending our nation.

Little problems would stop snowballing into a family crisis, and people would know they couldn't walk all over a family by taking them to court.

It's long past time to address this critical need. Together, Democrats and Republicans must deliver on the American promise of justice for all.

*State Rep. Christine Kilduff, D-University Place, is vice-chair of the House Judiciary Committee and a former assistant attorney general who has staffed volunteer legal clinics in Pierce, Thurston and King counties.*



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**James Ward**

This is a very interesting and well written article. I am glad to see that there is at least one Representative in Congress attempting to help the citizens of Washington State. The legal system in this state and around the country is completely broken. The public defenders get paid regardless if they do their job or not, there is no incentive if they do a terrific job, there is no oversight if they don't do their job at all they still get paid and quite well I might add. Please correct me if I am wrong but the law firms in Washington State are paid on a case by case basis, I do believe they are ... See More

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