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LAW Fund Receives Grant to Bolster Legal Aid for Washington's Low-Income Residents
Three-Year Grant Will Sustain Beleaguered Legal Aid Providers Statewide

In the wake of the recession, the number of low-income families needing legal aid to help prevent injustices has skyrocketed. At the same time, traditional revenue streams for civil legal aid programs have greatly diminished. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has pledged \$3-million over the next three years to sustain critical legal help for the poor throughout Washington. Without this grant, drastic funding cuts would have left Washington's nationally recognized legal aid system unable to meet the pressing needs of struggling families across the state.

Demand for help with urgent legal problems ranging from foreclosure to domestic violence is so high that legal aid offices are being forced to turn away at least half of the people seeking assistance. Funding from the Gates Foundation will help provide relief to families in our state struggling with the impact of the economic crisis.

"The availability of civil legal aid is particularly important to help maintain individual well-being, family unity and functioning communities during one of the most challenging times in our state and nation's history," explains Joachim Morrison, a senior legal aid attorney in Wenatchee.

The funding comes at a critical time for Washington's legal aid programs. The economic downturn, the housing market crash, and plummeting interest rates resulted in an 80% drop in revenue for a primary funding source for legal aid, the Interest on Lawyers Trust Account program. Although revenue is anticipated to make a full recovery as the economy improves and interest rates go up, the short-term funding crisis threatened the fundamental infrastructure of Washington's legal aid delivery system. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's grant will help keep services comparatively stable until the economy recovers.

"The Gates Foundation's grant is preserving our state's extraordinary legal aid system and meeting the urgent legal needs of its most vulnerable people during this difficult time," says Karen Falkingham, Director of Legal Aid for Washington Fund (LAW Fund), the fundraising entity that applied for the grant on behalf of more than 20 programs.

"The recession has increased bankruptcies and fraudulent business practices that prey on the most vulnerable, and with rising unemployment, more people are in need of necessary supports such as unemployment insurance, food stamps and health care. Legal aid helps connect families to these much needed services. The Gates funding is making a brighter future for those who have nowhere else to turn." says Paula Boggs, executive vice president, general counsel and secretary for Starbucks Coffee Company and Co-Chair of the Campaign for Equal Justice, LAW Fund's annual fundraising drive for legal aid in Washington.

LAW Fund will partner with the Legal Foundation of Washington to distribute these funds in 2010 through 2012 to provide operating support to Washington's legal aid programs. The Legal Foundation of Washington makes annual grants to programs that enable the poor and the most vulnerable to overcome barriers in the civil justice system. LAW Fund supports that work by raising additional charitable dollars to provide vital resources for those programs. In 2008, 35,000 people in poverty received direct legal help from programs funded by these sister organizations. An additional 250,000 benefitted from impact advocacy. And pro bono legal aid programs leveraged more than 80,000 hours of volunteer attorney assistance.

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