



Barry: D.C. Needs More Legal Services Funding for Poor



Marion Barry (Courtesy photo)

By Dorothy Rowley

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D.C. Councilmember Marion Barry (Ward 8), who represents the city's poorest ward, said he wholeheartedly agrees with a new study that indicates the city's poor are the least likely to get the legal support they need for civil court matters.

Barry offered his comments following an AFRO query surrounding the recently-released, "Justice for All? An Examination of the Civil Legal Needs of the District of Columbia's Low-Income Community." The study was done by the District of Columbia Access to Justice Commission (DCAJC).

The 125-page report states that the demand for civil legal services by low-income residents continues to vastly exceed the supply for acquiring adequate representation related to issues that include small claims, child custody and landlord tenant disputes.

About 34 percent of working families in the District come from low-income households. Many are trying to survive on annual incomes of \$30,000 or less. Because they have little or no money to hire legal counsel, these families often feel they have no avenue for pursuing their rights.

But according to the study, which was prepared pro bono by the DL Piper Law Firm, too many of D.C.'s low-income residents fail to realize they have options for securing civil legal services. "So far, nobody has stepped to the plate to request that the city allocate more funding to assist poor people seeking legal counsel," Barry said. "In next year's budget I'm going to try to identify some monies to get these law firms to put together a consortium for pro bono work. We have some of them doing criminal justice work but it's woefully inadequate, and I'm going to be the one to stand up and say something about it."

Over the past few years, the District government has allocated \$10 million to help residents with civil legal problems. Last year, the city shelled out \$3 million and hired 31 attorneys to assist residents. Seven of the attorneys were specifically assigned to housing issues.

Barry says that is still not enough and that he will seek additional funding within the FY10 budget. "I don't know how much money is needed but we have over 40,000 lawyers in this town," Barry told the AFRO. "I think that if we can get some of these law firms to do pro bono work that would take up a lot of the slack."

Peter Edelman, a Georgetown University Law Center professor, chairs the 18-member commission that was created three years ago to improve access to legal services for low- and moderate-income families. He said the District should be doing a better job ensuring the poor are properly represented in court. "While the legal services community has made great progress in recent years to increase service delivery, this report illustrates just how much more must be done," said Edelman. "[In addition], the recent downturn in the economy has made the need for civil legal services more acute than ever."

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Sunil Mansukhani, DCAJC spokesperson, added that one of the findings of the study indicated that community-based organizations don't always know about the legal services that may be available to their clients. He said an avenue for addressing such shortcomings would be through education in conjunction with legal services regarding the rights of people seeking assistance.

Said Mansukhani, "Many people in times of trouble will turn to community and faith-based organizations like food [banks] and medical care facilities -- and that's when it will come out that there are legal problems." He said if organizations such as DCAJC can find better ways to inform community service agencies about the availability of legal services, it would go a long way to providing assistance. Otherwise, he added, "Our study shows that despite these efforts, lack of knowledge still runs pretty deep."