

TOP NEWS

Judges want more legal aid for low-income residents

Michael Neibauer, The Examiner
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WASHINGTON -

The District's chief local justices on Tuesday called for the D.C. Council to provide additional funding to help low-income residents navigate the civil justice system.

Too many people living in poverty have no access to lawyers and in many cases have little understanding of civil law, particularly with regard to tenant-landlord matters, Chief D.C. Superior Court Judge Rufus King III and Chief Court of Appeals Judge Eric Washington told the council. Up to 50,000 litigants each year represent themselves, Washington said.

"As judges, we know how critically important it is for low- and moderate-income residents to have legal representation in many of the matters that come before us and how crucial that representation is to the fair administration of justice in the District of Columbia," Washington said.

Mayor Anthony Williams included \$1 million in his proposed fiscal 2007 budget to provide legal services to the poor. King and Washington, among other witnesses testifying during the council budget hearing, called for between \$3 million and \$6 million from the city, most of which would be used to hire lawyers.

"Very few lawyers work full time on behalf of the poor," said Peter Edelman, chairman of the D.C. Access to Justice Commission, a group formed by the Court of Appeals.

One suggestion, to charge lawyers a fee to cover the costs of providing legal help to the poor, did not go over well with Council Member David Catania, I-at large.

"I think that's an easy suggestion, just to say 'Let the lawyers pay for it,' " he said. Council Member Phil Mendelson said it might be worth dipping into the city's general fund to finance legal services.

The District could save money by reducing the homeless population, cutting social services costs and ensuring that the poor get access to federal benefits, he said.

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