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## Poorer D.C. Residents Lacking Legal Services

Report Suggests Area Firms Offer Help

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Low-income D.C. residents are not getting enough assistance in pursuing landlord-tenant cases, custody disputes, small-claims matters and other civil litigation, according to a report issued yesterday by a court-appointed panel.

Many low-income residents are unaware of their rights and unsure of where to turn for help, the District of Columbia Access to Justice Commission said in its findings. The report said that these residents are more likely to represent themselves in court, putting them at a disadvantage.

The 17-member commission was created in 2005 by the D.C. Court of Appeals to improve access to legal services for poor and moderate-income residents. It includes judges, attorneys and legal services providers. The report, prepared pro bono by the law firm DLA Piper, was part of a mission to raise awareness about the issue. It relied upon court statistics, surveys of lawyers and law school clinics, and input from 28 community-based nonlegal service organizations.

The 125-page study found that poorer D.C. residents are not adequately represented in a variety of proceedings. For example, the report said, 2 percent of tenants in the District's landlord tenant court and 2 percent of parties involved in domestic violence cases are represented by attorneys.

Poor and low-income residents have options. The area's legal community provides help through legal aid organizations and pro bono efforts. And the District has allocated \$10 million in the past three years for civil legal services. In the past year alone, the city spent \$3 million and hired 31 attorneys to provide assistance. Seven were specifically designated to housing issues.

"We will do everything we can to address this issue. It will get our full and committed support," said Mayor Adrian M. Fenty (D), who attended a reception last night during which the report was released.


The report's authors said they hoped that the study would identify more D.C. government funds for fiscal 2009. The report was prepared before the city's \$131 million budget gap was discovered late last month.

Peter B. Edelman, the commission's chairman, said that while additional funds from the city would be helpful, more District law firms could step in by selecting senior lawyers in their firms to commit to pro bono work or by contributing money to hire lawyers.

"We have to reach people and we have to convince them to step up," Edelman said.

Eric T. Washington, chief judge of the D.C. Court of Appeals, said the report is a "blueprint to focus our resources and identify critical issues." Lee F. Satterfield, the newly appointed chief judge of the D.C. Superior Court, said he plans to encourage judges in civil cases to be more "sensitive" when the people before them have

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no representation. In addition, he said, the court is considering adding a second judge to landlord-tenant court, which should give judges more time on individual cases.

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