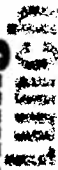


Trying to Meet the Overwhelming Need for Lawyers

Legal Times News Editor Brendan Smith met with Georgetown University Law Center professor Peter Edelman on Oct. 5 to discuss his work as chairman of the D.C. Access to Justice Commission,

Working



which was created last year by the D.C. Court of Appeals to help increase resources for civil legal aid services.

do when they have a legal problem, and poor people have a lot of legal problems.

LT: How will the D.C. Council's recent \$3.2 million appropriation for legal aid services be used?

EDELMAN: This will enable legal aid providers in the city to hire 25 to 30 more lawyers to work in communities, particularly on housing issues. The money is appropriated to the D.C. Bar Foundation, and they will put out a request for proposals. Then their board will decide how to distribute the money. The money is specifically for three purposes. One is for underserved communities and groups in the city. The second priority is housing, which is such a difficult problem here. The third area is interpretation and translation services for people who can't communicate sufficiently in English.

LT: Is gentrification exacerbating legal issues related to housing?

EDELMAN: Poor people are being forced out of the city at an alarming rate. We have an ever-increasing shortage of housing that's affordable to low- and moderate-income people. With rents going up as significantly as they are, the rate of evictions is going up as well.

LT: Legal aid providers often focus on a certain population or certain types of



DECO M. RAGNINICH

cases. What can the commission do to encourage a more unified approach?

EDELMAN: We've had discussions going on now for the better part of a year about how we can make the system more accessible. We probably need an investment in laptops for lawyers who are remotely located and different types of software. We probably need a more sophisticated hot line that is well publicized.

LT: What areas of law are undercovered by legal aid services?

EDELMAN: The D.C. Bar Foundation study identified housing and public bene-

fits and family issues as being areas with a very acute shortage. There is almost a complete dearth of probate services for low-income people. Also, in the consumer area there is a huge gap.

LT: What is the commission doing to increase pro bono work from law firms?

EDELMAN: We're going to try to use some of the public money and will encourage the people who apply for it to leverage greater pro bono commitment.

LT: What can be done to increase the low salaries of legal aid attorneys?

EDELMAN: A piece of this money is for a new [law school] loan-repayment assistance program. That, in effect, is a salary increase.

LT: Should legal aid providers tackle more issues of systemic reform?

EDELMAN: Yes, I think those are probably areas that will develop with private money. It is certainly true that in the past legal services lawyers were able to do more systemic work. The ability to do that by way of litigation has changed over the past 25 years, and the courts are not as responsive. But systemic work can also be policy advocacy in the legislative and executive branches.

Working Lunch runs every other week in Legal Times.