

Legal Services for D.C.'s Poor

The Washington Post Editorial, Friday, February 17, 2006; A18

AS MAYOR Anthony A. Williams develops his fiscal 2007 budget, we hope he weighs carefully the request of the D.C. Access to Justice Commission for an annual appropriation to provide civil legal services to low-income District residents. By one estimate, more than 100,000 poor people in the District have unmet legal needs that include housing-related problems, family law and language assistance. Clearly, access to civil justice in the nation's capital should not turn on income or economic status. By providing official funding for civil legal assistance -- similar to programs available in 42 states -- Mr. Williams and the D.C. Council would be ensuring that residents who are unable to overcome impediments to justice on their own will get the help they need.

The commission is an organization of considerable legal heft. It was created by the D.C. Court of Appeals last year to tackle the glaring problems of unmet legal needs and barriers to legal access. The commission's membership is diverse: It consists of judges from the D.C. Superior Court and the Court of Appeals, past presidents of the D.C. Bar, community leaders and other providers of legal services.

It is difficult to see how the mayor could ignore the commission's request for \$6.2 million annually. More than 30,000 lawyers work in the city, but only a dozen provide legal services in offices east of the Anacostia River. What's more, no full-time legal-services lawyers are working in Northeast Washington, according to the commission. What does that mean in practical terms? Reports the commission: "Of the 49,000 cases filed annually in landlord/tenant court, about 99% do not have lawyers even though tenants face eviction in virtually every case." Similar legal barriers exist for the more than 39,000 District residents who speak little English and who have trouble accessing government services and the legal system.

City leaders should find these conditions, and more like them, unacceptable. The D.C. Access to Justice Commission has provided a sound remedy -- one we hope Mr. Williams will adopt in his fiscal 2007 budget.

© 2006 The Washington Post Company