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Legal system that aids society's poor in need itself

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A victim of domestic violence seeks refuge in a shelter, where a volunteer lawyer helps prepare the paperwork for a restraining order and initiate divorce proceedings.

The landlord in a low-income housing unit, despite repeated calls from tenants, refuses to correct a rodent infestation, prompting the tenants to contact a local legal aid group.

An elderly Medicaid recipient is denied health benefits and turns to a legal services provider for assistance.

Every day in every community across the country, lawyers handling cases like these - often free of charge - are helping improve the lives of the most vulnerable members of their communities. Many are doing so through programs funded, at least in part, by the Legal Services Corp., the cornerstone of a public/private partnership aimed at ensuring that the neediest among us have equal access to justice under the law.

For many of us, our drive to serve our communities was a primary motivation for entering the legal profession in the first place. Beyond that, it is an important part of our legal culture, one of the core values articulated in the oath we take upon becoming lawyers and codified in our ethics rules.

ABA Model Rules of Professional Conduct Rule 6.1 says that, "Every lawyer has a professional responsibility to provide legal services to those unable to pay. A lawyer should aspire to render at least (50) hours of pro bono public legal services per year." The Legal Services Corp. serves as the essential infrastructure through which many of us strive to meet that goal.

Unfortunately, that infrastructure - which has never been given enough resources - has been allowed to deteriorate. After reaching its highest, but still inadequate, funding level in 1995 with a \$415 million appropriation, its budget has since been whittled down to \$338 million.

President Bush has been supportive of the Legal Services Corp., but on the whole and over the years our political leaders have failed to provide adequate resources to provide our nation's poor with legal help.

The sad irony is that 40 years ago, President Johnson announced the war on poverty. Despite his grand promise to eradicate poverty in America, we have made little progress toward that goal and little progress toward serving the legal needs of those whom poverty drags down.

In fact, with so many men and women out of work, the need to provide legal services for our nation's poor may be higher than ever.

Studies consistently show that 70 percent to 80 percent of the legal needs of our nation's poor are not met. A nationwide ABA legal-needs study in 1993 showed that legal help was not obtained for more than 70 percent of the serious legal problems encountered by poor people.

In the decade since, studies in states across the nation suggest that matters have only gotten worse. A September 2003 report by the District of Columbia Bar Foundation, for example, estimated that less than 10 percent of the need for civil legal assistance is being met.

Individual lawyers, of course, cannot shoulder this burden alone. But ours is a profession like few others, one in which our very livelihoods are predicated upon serving the public interest. We are the ultimate volunteers and public servants in our society. There is hardly a chamber of commerce, a battered woman's shelter, a symphony orchestra, a Boys and Girls club or nonprofit board in the country that does not have lawyers from the community intimately involved.

But we can, and must, do more. More of us need to find the time to provide pro bono service - as counselors, advisers, problem-solvers and peacemakers for the most vulnerable in our society. We all must continue to encourage our lawmakers to adequately fund the Legal Services Corp.

Acting alone, none of us can achieve systematic change. But together our work can improve our communities - one family at a time.