

## President's Message

# The Dollars and Sense of Civil Legal Aid

*By President E. Jane Sherman*

**V**anessa thought she and her daughter had fled her abusive husband. Four years later, she was still being stalked by him. He located her and her daughter, forced entry, destroyed their home and refused to leave. Now homeless and without income, Vanessa turned to legal aid attorneys who put an end to this nightmare terror by obtaining a permanent injunction, divorce and sole custody of her child. Vanessa and her daughter gained a new life through civil legal aid.

The Louisiana Bar Foundation (LBF) funds domestic violence services such as those received by Vanessa and her daughter. Since 1989, the LBF has granted more than \$70.9 million throughout Louisiana to help address the legal needs of indigent citizens, providing services to women, children, the elderly, the working poor, people with disabilities, and those facing loss of their homes.

Protecting lives is the motivating force for providing civil legal aid. However, recent studies have shown that there is another significant benefit that civil legal aid brings to our communities and our state.

In a 2010 study by Louisiana State

University economics Professor James Richardson, titled "Legal Services Programs in Louisiana: Their Economic Impact on the State of Louisiana," it was estimated that for every dollar spent on legal services for the poor, there is a benefit of up to \$2.40, and that the legal services corporations assisted their clients in either acquiring or retaining more than \$58 million, which initiated a series of economic transactions totaling between \$70 million and \$107 million for the state. Since this study, other states have concluded greater economic benefits ranging from \$5 to more than \$11 for every dollar spent on civil legal aid.<sup>1</sup>

Louisiana remains one of only a few states in the country in which civil legal services receive no state appropriation of funds or mandated unified court filing fees contributed toward civil legal aid. Over the last six years, civil legal aid organizations in Louisiana have sustained a significant drop in state and federal funding while the poverty rate in Louisiana has increased significantly to among the highest in the nation at almost 20 percent. Indigent individuals in civil matters, often with life-altering consequences, have no constitutional right to counsel. One of the foundations of our legal system is to ensure that all persons have access to address their legal needs, regardless of their economic circumstances and their ability to pay. We must ask ourselves, is access to justice truly equal if only one party has legal representation due to financial means?

I am happy to report that the LBF, with the Access to Justice Commission of the Louisiana State Bar Association (LSBA), will conduct an economic impact study regarding the need for civil legal aid and the benefits to our state. This study will demonstrate that legal assistance not only



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has an immediate benefit for the recipient of services, but also has a ripple effect, impacting the community at large, schools, businesses, government agencies and the state as a whole. To better understand these current economic benefits, our Legislature recently adopted a resolution pursuant to the direction of the 2016 Regular Session of the Louisiana Legislature contained in the House Resolution No. 2 urging the economic impact study be conducted and that the findings be reported to the Louisiana Legislature.

The Access to Justice Commission, with representatives from the Louisiana Supreme Court, the LSBA, the LBF and other stakeholders, believes that an updated impact study is vital to understanding the multi-fold financial benefits for the community and the state as well as the need for civil legal aid. Civil legal economics is not the primary factor for providing legal aid, but it is beneficial and should not be ignored.

American composer David Haas wrote, "We are called to act with justice. We are called to love tenderly. We are called to serve one another, to walk humbly with God." Civil legal aid gives us the opportunity to provide justice and serve those without means, while also providing a reinvestment in our state.

### FOOTNOTE

1. *Legal Analysis of the Economic Impacts and Social Benefits of Assistance Provided by Alaska Legal Services Corporation*, 2011, reports, "Every dollar invested in ALSOC generates \$5.00 in economic benefit to ALSOC's clients, their communities and the state." *The Economic Impact of Iowa Legal Aid*, 2011, reports, "Iowa's Legal Aid's financial impact on the Iowa economy in 2011 totaled \$28,729,291.29. This represents a return of \$6.71 for every dollar invested in Iowa Legal Aid by sources within Iowa." *Investing in Justice: A Roadmap to Cost-Effective Funding of Civil Legal Aid in Massachusetts*, October 2014, reports, "For every dollar invested in civil legal aid, the return to the state and its residents is as much as \$2 to \$5 dollars." *Economic Impact of Civil Legal Aid Organizations in Tennessee*, March 2015, reports, "Economic impact per dollar of funding - \$11.21."

### Louisiana Bar Foundation Announces New Fellows

The Louisiana Bar Foundation announces new Fellows:

- Roya S. Boustany.....Lafayette
- Alexander N. Breckinridge.....New Orleans
- Hon. Jeffrey S. Cox.....Benton
- Hon. Michael O. Craig .....Benton
- Tiffany Delery Davis .....New Orleans
- George D. (Dave) Ernest III.....Lafayette
- Hon. E. Charles Jacobs.....Benton
- Hon. Jefferson B. Joyce.....Monroe
- Bernard N. Marcantel .....Jennings
- David F. Marcantel.....Jennings
- Hon. Michael Nerren .....Benton
- Larry M. Roedel.....Baton Rouge
- Keely Y. Scott.....Baton Rouge
- Hon. A. Parker Self, Jr. ....Benton
- Bradley J. Tate.....New Orleans