

President's Message

Do the Best You Can Until You Know Better: My Access to Justice Awareness Journey

By Judge (Ret.) John C. Davidson, 2024-25 LBF President

I joined the Louisiana Bar Foundation in 1999, initially believing that my free legal work was sufficient. My understanding of the critical need for civil legal aid among impoverished populations deepened after my election to the district court bench in 2004. Before then, my time was devoted to family, building my legal practice, and coaching sports, particularly soccer.

However, as a judge, I often encountered individuals unable to afford legal representation, struggling to navigate their cases alone. Public defenders, legal service attorneys, and pro bono lawyers worked tirelessly to address these challenges. My involvement with drug court revealed how clients often faced legal issues – housing, employment, child custody – while battling addiction, frequently unaware of their legal needs. My time on the juvenile docket further highlighted poverty as a recurring factor in cases ranging from child removals to truancy and criminal matters.

In 2019, I helped launch My Community Cares in Louisiana, a pilot project by the Pelican Center and the Department of Child and Family Services aimed at improving child welfare outcomes. Focused on high-removal areas, the initiative mobilized community activists to support at-risk families, working to prevent removals and keep families intact. This direct engagement with vulnerable populations reinforced my awareness of systemic challenges.

Although I had been a Bar Foundation Fellow for many years, I initially underestimated its impact. That changed when Judge Jules Edwards appointed me to join the executive board. Through this role, I saw firsthand how

the foundation's efforts aligned with the needs I encountered in court, particularly in addressing access to justice. Serving on the board provided me with insights into the vast, unmet demand for civil legal aid in Louisiana.



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While legal representation is guaranteed in criminal cases, no such right exists in civil matters. Civil legal aid is crucial for addressing challenges such as housing, custody, and domestic violence. Louisiana's sobering poverty statistics – 2nd highest overall, 3rd in child poverty, and 3rd lowest in median income – emphasize the urgency. Many families are one paycheck away from homelessness, as evidenced by cases where divorce plunges individuals into poverty, even with child support.

Public service, whether through legal aid organizations, pro bono work, or other avenues, is essential for our communities and state. Justice cannot truly exist if access is denied. We must actively support public service efforts, engage with bar associations and foundations,

“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

– Maya Angelou

and participate in shaping the conversation about improving access to justice. By fostering statewide and national connections, we can drive meaningful change. Additionally, collaboration with agencies and nonprofits is vital to addressing the broader, nonlegal needs of our citizens, ensuring they receive the comprehensive support they deserve.

As I come to the end of my presidency, I am proud to be an LBF Fellow and proud of our mission to ensure access to justice remains paramount. Together, we can continue to make a significant impact in the lives of those in need. Join LBF and continue your access to justice awareness journey at www.raisingthebar.org.

LBF Annual Fellows Membership Meeting Set for April 11

The Louisiana Bar Foundation's (LBF) Annual Fellows Membership Meeting is Friday, April 11, at the Four Seasons Hotel New Orleans. This luncheon meeting is an opportunity for Fellows to be updated on LBF activities and elect new board members. The President's Award will be presented, and recognition will be given to the 2024 Distinguished Honorees and the Calogero Justice Award recipient.

All LBF Fellows in good standing will receive an official meeting notice with the Board slate in early March. For more information, call the LBF at (504)561-1046.