

**A NEW “COMMUNICATIONS HUB”
FOR CIVIL LEGAL AID
November 2013**

Beginning this month, the civil legal aid sector gains an important new resource – a communications hub. The primary goal of this collective communications initiative will be to raise the public’s awareness and understanding of the vital role of civil legal aid in assuring fairness in the justice system. The hub will cast a constant spotlight in the media on the work of the sector in order to strengthen the brand identity of civil legal aid; garner deeper recognition by key audiences, including policy makers, opinion leaders and donors; and ultimately, help increase overall funding and resources for the sector.

The Crisis and the Opportunity

The “justice gap” for low-income people seeking civil legal aid has gone from bad to worse. More than 60 million low-income Americans are eligible for civil legal aid to help them get their day in court. Yet state and national studies estimate that 80 percent of the serious legal needs of low-income Americans go unmet because of grossly insufficient funding and support. Funds from the two major revenue sources for civil legal aid, the Legal Services Corporation and the state-based IOLTA programs, have decreased dramatically in recent years.

Unlike in serious criminal cases, there is no guaranteed right to counsel in civil cases. Most low-income people facing pressing legal problems of everyday life must do so without basic assistance. Even relatively minor problems can escalate. Often, the failure to resolve these core matters of livelihood, health and family security threatens to tear families apart and drive them further into poverty.

The good news: Today, “civil legal aid” encompasses more inclusive and expansive activities and actors than it did even a few years ago. In the face of the drastic funding crisis, the sector has broken new ground, devising significant innovations that are not only serving more people but are proving to be game changers. Access to justice commissions, judicial leadership, self-help centers, web-based access to information and forms, court-based services, expanded pro bono models and more – all comprise a broader and more effective sector that continues to be anchored by legal aid programs serving low-income people across the country.

The bad news: Hardly anyone knows about these innovations, and hardly anyone is talking about how to solve the serious crisis in access and funding. Civil legal aid is largely invisible to those outside it, and the story of innovation in a field on the move has gone untold. This became clear as far back as 2000 when public opinion researchers found that the sector’s biggest communications challenge was its sheer invisibility. Research recently completed by Lake Research and the Tarrance Group confirms that today civil legal aid is as invisible as ever.

The Communications Hub

The communications hub will generate and give voice to a common narrative about the essential role of civil legal aid in assuring fairness in the justice system, leveling the playing field and providing legal representation as well as access to information so people can know their rights. As a collective communications capacity, the hub will have national reach, working to support the sector’s key national

organizations and their partners, among them the Legal Services Corporation, National Legal Aid and Defender Association, American Bar Association and National Center for State Courts. In close collaboration with state and local groups, the hub will lift up in the media the good work and innovations of these groups to steadily garner attention, support and resources. The hub will serve as a key communications resource, essential to the sector's success in today's media driven world.

The hub will be a “peddler-in-chief” to the media and will:

- Generate coverage in media consumed by key audiences;
- Conduct and share public opinion research about public attitudes and powerful messages;
- Build a common narrative as well as specific, tailored messages that connect with key audiences;
- Recruit diverse spokespersons, including judges, business and civic leaders and other new allies, as well as *pro bono* and legal aid lawyers;
- Create a drumbeat of media events and media hits that feature key messengers and messages;
- Publicize empirical research reports and pitch compelling stories;
- Convene a broad range of civil legal aid actors to strategize and help local stories become national stories;
- Organize trainings with spokespersons to enhance capacity;
- Develop and distribute toolkits to key actors; and
- Devise web-based and social media strategies to add to the drumbeat.

The hub will evaluate, innovate and refine its responses and work over time so that the initiative becomes ever more nimble, flexible and capable of breaking through in the media.

Funding, Structure and Governance

The Public Welfare Foundation and the Kresge Foundation have taken the lead in providing the initial core funding for the hub, whose small staff will be bolstered by extensive consulting services of an established communications firm. As of November 1, 2013, Martha Bergmark is the hub's founding executive director and Elizabeth Arledge is deputy director. Martha was previously president/CEO of the Mississippi Center for Justice, a civil legal aid organization she launched in 2003 to advance racial and economic justice in her home state. Elizabeth, a communications professional, joins the hub from her previous position as LSC communications manager. Both have held positions of national leadership in the civil legal aid sector.

The hub will be housed within and legally administered by an intermediary organization, the New Venture Fund, based in Washington, DC. Its work will be guided by an Advisory Committee of leaders of key institutions, many of whom have been around the table as this concept was developed in recent months and who are enthusiastically committed to the effort.

Next Steps

To be successful, the hub will need the continued engagement and collaboration of civil legal aid and access to justice leaders nationwide. The first order of business for the new staff will be to seek the sector's input and involvement. Any immediate comments can be shared with Martha Bergmark at martha.bergmark@gmail.com or Elizabeth Arledge at elizabetharledge@gmail.com.