

Justices present funds to assist civil representation of the poor

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The Mississippi Center for Legal Services, which provides legal assistance to the poor in civil matters, received \$30,000 Wednesday from fees assessed to out-of-state lawyers.

The money was distributed by the Mississippi Supreme Court from the Civil Legal Assistance Fund. A total of \$50,000 was disbursed this week.

Mississippi Supreme Court Justices James E. Graves Jr. and Michael K. Randolph presented the \$30,000 check to Sam Buchanan Jr., executive director of the Mississippi Center for Legal Services, at a ceremony at the Legal Services office in Jackson on Wednesday.

Justice George C. Carlson Jr. on Tuesday presented a check for \$20,000 to Ben T. Cole II, executive director of North Mississippi Rural Legal Services, during a ceremony in Oxford.

The formula for distribution of funds to the two Legal Services programs is based upon percentage of the poverty level population living in the counties served by those offices. About 548,000 people at or below the poverty level are eligible to seek civil legal assistance from Legal Services programs statewide.

Legal Services programs in Mississippi have lost about \$1 million in federal funding, forcing Legal Services to cut staff, consolidate programs and close some offices.

"It is having a devastating effect on poor people in this state," Buchanan said.

Justice Graves, who early in his career worked for Legal Services, said, "You have done so much for so many for so long that now you are expected to do almost everything with nothing."

The Mississippi Center for Legal Services handled about 10,000 civil matters last year for clients in the 43 central and southern counties, Buchanan said. About 40 percent of those cases were family law matters, most of which involved domestic abuse, he said.

Clients of Legal Services offices can't afford to pay for a private attorney. "That leaves many low income people without effective legal counsel," Justice Randolph said. "But for the public service and sacrifices of attorneys of the Center for Legal Services, those needs wouldn't be met."

North Mississippi Rural Legal Services offers legal representation in civil matters for the poverty population in 39 counties.

Justice Carlson, who spoke in Oxford on Tuesday, said the closing of some of the Legal Services offices has forced poor people to travel farther for legal help. Transportation is an obstacle to access to legal services.

Justice Carlson said, "The practical effect is that those indigent poor persons who are in need of legal representation quite likely also have difficulty in obtaining transportation, meaning they have more

difficulty in actually getting to those offices for legal services."

Justice Carlson said, "The Mississippi Legislature in 2003 created the Civil Legal Assistance Fund, which allows money to be accepted from public and private sources to provide legal services for low income people."

Jackson attorney Steve Orlansky, chairman of the Equal Justice Foundation, called for private attorneys to contribute money and time to civil legal representation of the poor.

Orlansky said, "It's the professional responsibility of all Mississippi lawyers to see that justice is provided and representation is available to all Mississippians. I commend the court for its demonstration of its continued commitment to legal services."

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