

## Center for Legal Services gets \$51,000 to assist poor clients

**August 27, 2004**

Mississippi Supreme Court Justice Michael K. Randolph on Friday encouraged private attorneys to give some of their time to representing the poor.

Justice Randolph, acting on behalf of the court, was in Hattiesburg at the headquarters of the Mississippi Center for Legal Services to deliver a \$51,000 check that will help the poverty law program provide civil legal representation for poor people in 43 counties.

The money, which comes from the Civil Legal Assistance Fund, is generated by fees paid by out of state lawyers who represent clients in Mississippi state courts. Justice Randolph said no tax dollars are involved.

The Mississippi Legislature created the Civil Legal Assistance Fund in 2003 and authorized it to accept funds from any public or private source to provide civil legal services to low income people. Justice Randolph encouraged private sector contributions to the Civil Legal Assistance Fund.

The Supreme Court in 2003 amended its rules to require each out of state attorney to pay a \$200 fee in each case in which that attorney participates, with the money earmarked for the Civil Legal Assistance Fund. Since March 2003, the Supreme Court has collected \$246,000 and distributed it to Legal Services offices and the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project.

This week, \$130,000 was distributed from the fund. In addition to the \$51,000 to the Center for Legal Services, the court distributed \$34,000 to North Mississippi Rural Legal Services and \$45,000 to the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project. Division of the \$85,000 designated for Legal Services is based upon percentage of the poverty level population living in the counties served by the two Legal Services programs.

Supreme Court Justice George C. Carlson Jr. on Wednesday visited the North Mississippi Rural Legal Services Tupelo branch office and delivered a check for \$34,000.

Twelve lawyers from North Mississippi Rural Legal Services provide legal representation to poor clients in 39 counties.

Justice Carlson said, "Despite the fact that the North Mississippi Rural Legal Services offices are comprised of staff attorneys and other personnel who are underpaid and overworked, they are dedicated servants to our low-income citizens who are in desperate need of legal representation in civil matters. Hopefully, this check will assist them to continue their efforts until additional funding is found."

Justice Randolph said, "It's important that everyone have equal access to the courts."

The price of legal representation is out of reach for many of the state's poor, Justice Randolph said. "Many times the amount of money they would be arguing about would be less than the attorney fees."

The Mississippi Center for Legal Services and North Mississippi Rural Legal Services provide civil legal representation to poor people in areas such as domestic law, housing and consumer disputes. Legal Services programs in Mississippi have lost about \$1 million in funding in the past two years, forcing staff cuts, program consolidation and office closings. Legal Services offices have in the past also relied on grants from Interest on Lawyer Trust Accounts (IOLTA) to supplement their budgets, but low interest rates shrank those funds as well.

Hattiesburg attorney Michael Adelman, chairman of the board of the Mississippi Center for Legal Services, said, "The mandate for Legal Services is to provide equal justice for all. In order to provide those services, we need the proper funding."

Adelman said, "The support of the Mississippi Supreme Court has been constructive and very beneficial to this program."

Sam Buchanan Jr. of Hattiesburg, executive director of the Center for Legal Services, said the Civil Legal Assistance Fund dollars are "a tremendous help in providing the services. We are still inadequately funded."

Buchanan estimated that Legal Services attorneys covering 43 counties concluded about 3,600 cases in 2003 and have about 2,000 open cases now. There are 14 staff attorneys to handle those cases.

Justice Randolph called upon private attorneys to volunteer their time to represent indigent clients through the Volunteer Lawyers Project of the Mississippi Bar.

“We owe a duty and a responsibility to the profession we are in,” Justice Randolph said.

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