

# Supreme Court distributes Civil Legal Assistance funds

May 6, 2005

Members of the Mississippi Supreme Court next week will distribute \$100,000 to programs which provide civil legal assistance to the poor. The money is generated by fees from out of state lawyers.

The Supreme Court has directed that the money be divided among the state's two Legal Services programs and the Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project. The distribution includes:

- \$51,000 to the Mississippi Center for Legal Services;
- \$34,000 to North Mississippi Rural Legal Services;
- \$15,000 to the Volunteer Lawyers Project of the Mississippi Bar.

Presiding Justice Kay B. Cobb will present a check to North Mississippi Rural Legal Services at **8:15 a.m. Monday, May 9**, in the office of University of Mississippi School of Law Dean Samuel Davis in Oxford.

Chief Justice James W. Smith Jr. will present a check to the Mississippi Center for Legal services at **11 a.m. Wednesday, May 11**, at the Gartin Justice Building at 450 High Street in Jackson.

Presiding Justice William L. Waller Jr. will present a check to the Volunteer Lawyers Project in the same gathering at **11 a.m. Wednesday, May 11**, at the Gartin Building.

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. About 548,000 people at or below the poverty level are eligible to seek civil legal assistance from Legal Services programs statewide.

North Mississippi Rural Legal Services' 11 lawyers provide civil legal assistance for poor people in 39 counties. Offices are in Clarksdale, Greenville, Oxford, Tupelo and West Point.

The Mississippi Center for Legal Services has 16 attorneys who serve clients from 43 counties. Offices are in Gulfport, Hattiesburg, Jackson, Meridian and McComb.

Legal Services attorneys provide civil legal representation to poor people in areas such as domestic law, housing and consumer disputes.

The Mississippi Volunteer Lawyers Project is a joint venture between the Mississippi Bar and the state's two Legal Services organizations. The Volunteer Lawyers Project recruits lawyers who are willing to give their time to represent poor people, and puts poor people in touch with lawyers willing to help.

The Civil Legal Assistance Funds disbursed by the Supreme Court will assist both Legal Services organizations in paying salaries for attorneys. On Monday, a new attorney will begin work in the McComb office of the Center for Legal Services, bringing that organizations' attorney staff to 16. The new funds will go toward the salary of an additional attorney for North Mississippi Rural Legal Services.

Ben Cole of Oxford, executive director North Mississippi Rural Legal Services said, "We are stretched very thin. Right now we have a shortage of attorneys, especially in the Delta offices." Only one attorney works in the Greenville and West Point offices, although there needs to be at least two to

handle the work load.

With additional funding, "It will help North Mississippi Rural Legal Services in being able to assist more poor people who contact us for services," Cole said.

Sam Buchanan Jr. of Hattiesburg, executive director of the Mississippi Center for Legal Services, said, "If there were not legal services programs, more people would fall through the cracks and not have any access to the legal system."

Buchanan said, "The most recent contributions and the previous contributions have been a tremendous asset to the program."

No tax dollars are involved.

The Mississippi Legislature in 2003 created the Civil Legal Assistance Fund, which is authorized to accept money from any public or private source to provide legal services to low income people.

One source of funding for civil legal assistance comes from fees assessed to out of state lawyers. The Supreme Court in March 2003 began to require a \$200 fee from attorneys who are licensed in other states and who represent clients in Mississippi courts.

The Civil Legal Assistance Fund is authorized to accept money from any public or private source. The Supreme Court administers the funds through the Administrative Office of Courts.

The funds to be distributed next week will bring the total to \$346,000 which has been distributed from the Civil Legal Assistance Fund since July 2003.

####

**Media Contact: Beverly Pettigrew Kraft, Administrative Office of Courts, 601-354-7452**