

Statement Of The Connecticut Bar Foundation Upon Release Of Its 2003 Legal Needs Survey Report

The Connecticut Bar Foundation commissioned the University of Connecticut's Center for Survey Research and Analysis to conduct a statistically sound telephone survey of the civil law needs of low-income households in Connecticut. The survey was conducted from November 8 through December 13, 2002, and we are now pleased to release a report of its findings.

What we have learned from this survey

The survey's two most important lessons are (1) that there is a huge unmet need for civil legal aid in Connecticut, and (2) that the legal aid agencies in our state, although they experience very high levels of active demand for their services, have low visibility within their population of potential clients.

Huge unmet need

- When we commissioned the survey, we had a clear picture of the active demand for legal services in Connecticut. Reports submitted to us by the IOLTA-supported legal aid programs in the state revealed that these programs each year receive over 30,000 documented requests for service, open 10,000 new cases, and provide services in an additional 6,000 cases carried forward from prior years. In addition, we knew that Statewide Legal Services, a legal aid telephone hotline, provides telephone advice and occasionally brief services beyond telephone advice in another 13,000 cases.

What we wanted to learn was the size and character of the unmet need beyond this active demand.

- The need that the survey reveals is dauntingly large. Households in Connecticut that are eligible for services from legal aid agencies (households with incomes at or below 125% of federal poverty levels) face an average of 2.7 civil law problems a year. This rate translates into a staggering 289,000 civil law problems a year among households at or below federal poverty levels, and an even higher number of problems for the full set of households eligible for legal aid.
- Civil law problems were defined as life problems involving civil law matters for which one needs legal representation or counseling.
- The most frequent types of problems reported by survey respondents were those relating to housing, consumer, employment, and livelihood support law. The most common housing problems reported were housing discrimination, electric/gas shut-offs, and landlord failures to make repairs. The most common consumer law problems reported were problems regarding making credit card payments, harassment by creditors, and bankruptcy. The most common employment problems reported were problems regarding disagreements about pay or benefits, job discrimination, and job firings. And the most common livelihood support problems reported were those related to obtaining social security benefits, obtaining food stamps, and obtaining child care assistance.
- The survey also found significant numbers of other serious problems: for example, problems involving evictions, domestic violence, children's schooling, and governmental medical coverage.

- 90% of the civil law problems identified in the survey did not receive any attention from a lawyer. However, respondents who sought legal assistance reported that it was helpful regarding 92% of their problems. Legal assistance helped them
 - understand the legal aspects of their problem (22%)
 - protect or assert legal rights (21%)
 - resolve the problem (20%)
 - or make an informed decision concerning the problem (18%.)
- The large gap between the current capacity of legal aid agencies and the huge need revealed by this survey reinforces the importance of :
 - the legal aid programs continuing to strive to maximize their effectiveness by a) designing and employing triage strategies that focus their limited resources sharply on the most compelling of the civil law problems faced by their potential clients, b) developing and implementing community education programs aimed at equipping social services agencies and clients with knowledge that will help them prevent problems from happening, or deal with problems when they cannot be or have not been avoided, and c) attempting to address widespread problems in ways that solve them for groups of clients, and
 - public and private sources providing additional funding to increase the service capacity of our state's legal aid network.

Legal aid's lack of visibility

- The survey reveals that the availability of legal aid is not very well known among potential clients.
 - Legal aid agencies were involved in only a third of the problems for which the assistance of a lawyer was sought.
 - 30% of respondents with problems who did not seek assistance from a legal aid agency said they did not know that legal aid was available.
 - Only 12% of all respondents could name any of the large legal services organizations in the state (Connecticut Legal Services, Greater Hartford Legal Aid, New Haven Legal Assistance Association, and Statewide Legal Services.)
- These findings suggest that a campaign should be mounted to improve the visibility of Connecticut's legal aid programs. Improved visibility would increase actual demand for legal aid services, which would result in the legal aid triage systems picking up more of the very compelling, highest priority cases that arise each year than they now do. Fewer clients with such serious problems would go without essential help.

However, this highly beneficial result would not come without a cost. Increased active demand would further strain legal aid's already overburdened intake apparatus, and result in legal aid programs turning away without full representation additional numbers of applicants for service.

Supplemental survey

- CSRA and Connecticut's three law schools under our sponsorship plan to undertake this coming fall a supplemental face to face survey of a subset of low-income people who are hard to reach by phone and, therefore, not represented in the telephone survey we have been describing. CSRA estimates the percentage of legal aid eligible households in Connecticut who are not reachable by phone to be less than 3%. However, this group may include people with the greatest need for civil legal aid.