

ANNUAL CONFERENCE TAKES A LOOK BACK, A LOOK AHEAD FOR CIVIL LEGAL AID

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NLADA's 2003 Annual Conference in Seattle celebrated the 40th anniversary of the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Gideon v. Wainwright*, which promised the right-to-counsel for indigent defendants accused in criminal matters. Defenders marked the anniversary by beginning a dialogue to evaluate what was learned from the past and begin to develop the strategies that will be necessary to fulfill *Gideon's* mandate in the next decade. The civil legal aid community likewise addressed an agenda that looked back upon the many struggles and successes of the past, while also taking stock of a future filled with challenges and great promise.

A day-long civil track on the theme of *Navigating the Crossroads of Change: Where Do We Go from Here?* addressed a wide array of questions. Many of the discussions and workshops focused on how to enhance quality and program performance in light of the most important issues facing civil legal assistance providers.

Many issues were explored. Some questions were answered, though probably more were raised or refined. Participants grappled with such complex challenges as:

- 1) **The evolving civil delivery system:** Now that most states have developed, or are in the process of developing, state justice communities, what should be the logical next steps in their evolution?
- 2) **Supporting excellence in leadership and passing the torch to a new generation of advocates/leaders:** How do we as a community nurture and mentor a new generation of leaders while also helping current leaders excel and acknowledging the tremendous contributions of those heroes who have led this community for decades?
- 3) **The 20 percent solution:** How can we move beyond the historical limits on our ability to meet the tremendous need for services, only 20 to 30 percent of which currently is being addressed? Is a civil counterpart to *Gideon* feasible? In what form? What new messages, partners and models must we incorporate into our practices and systems in order to expand our capacity to represent our clients and communities effectively?
- 4) **Diversity:** What does the decision in *Grutter v. Bollinger* mean for our advocacy? How can we ensure that program staff reflect the wide diversity of the client community? How can the community expand its capacity to provide services to an ever-growing diversity of client populations, cultures and languages?
- 5) **Pursuing an agenda of quality:** How do we look at issues of program enhancement in the current climate? Do we need new standards for civil providers? How do we use evaluation tools and outcome measures to improve real service to clients and meet the demands of funders?
- 6) **Nurturing the core:** While the civil legal assistance community rightly seeks to broaden significant collaborations and partnerships with other stakeholders, how do we ensure that the traditional core infrastructures, such as national and state support offices, training entities and others remain resources to a new generation of advocates? How do we preserve the strong sense of national networking, partnership and support that the current system has enjoyed for so many years?
- 7) **The never-ending debate – impact versus service work:** Or in today's terms, limited legal assistance versus extended representation. Do new technologies and service techniques really expand the community's ability to provide meaningful service to many more clients, while enhancing the capacity to provide services with an impact upon the underlying conditions of poverty? Or do they represent an effort to maximize the numbers of clients served at the expense of the quality of the service?
- 8) **Relative equity – myth or possibility:** For decades, due to the paucity of resources available for civil legal aid, programs have had to make choices with regard to the allocation of resources. Rural areas have often suffered, due to the high cost and difficulty of reaching remote communities. Is it possible in today's environment to provide more equitable services to rural areas, many of which are among the poorest communities in the country?

These issues, and many more, fueled rich and invigorating debates in Seattle, surely raising more questions than they answered. NLADA looks forward to working with its members and partners in continuing to seek wise solutions to the challenges of developing the best possible civil legal assistance system in the future.

The following collection of articles from the conference highlight in depth some of the sessions exploring these themes:

- *New Partnerships, Creative Advocacy, Leadership Seen as Key Challenges for Civil Legal Aid*, by Robert Echols... page 10
- *Building State Justice Communities: Where Do We Go From Here?*, by Robert Echols... page 12
- *Raising the Voice for Rural Clients, Advocates Plan for Improved Delivery*, by Claire Parins... page 13
- *Civil Gideon: The Right To Counsel In Civil Cases*, by Alan Houseman... page 14
- *Leadership & Diversity Luncheon*, by Cynthia Works... page C1
- *Connecting the Dots to Meet the Legal Needs of New Immigrants*, by Alan Houseman and Linda Perle... page 15
- *New Developments In Community Lawyering*, by Cait Clarke, David Gibson, Tanya Neiman, and Jim Neuhard... page 16 ■

