

April 2007

Update:
Massachusetts Access to Justice Commission

The Massachusetts Access to Justice Commission held a final hearing on "Barriers to Access to Justice and Recommendations for Overcoming the Barriers" in Boston on April 4. Chief Justice Margaret Marshall and other members of the Supreme Judicial Court attended. The Chief Justice delivered an introductory address in which she declared that all residents of Massachusetts should have access to needed representation.

Previous hearings have been held in New Bedford, Springfield, and Lawrence. The Commission plans to issue a report on the barriers to access for justice for low-income people and to seek implementation of the most important recommendations arising from the hearings.

Former Chief Justice Herbert Wilkins chairs the Commission. Witnesses have included advocates, clients, and representatives of law schools, social services agencies, and community development groups.

Questions that witnesses have been asked to address include the following:

- What are barriers to justice that you see?
- How can identified barriers be removed?
- What areas of the justice system are working well in terms of access?
- How do low income persons enter the justice system from your position in the community?
- Do you know the experiences of your clients or community in accessing the justice system? Can you comment on their experiences?
- What ideas do you have for removing barriers to access for your clients or segment of the low income community? Are there alternate means for access that you would recommend?

In addition, the Commission is exploring the extensive but poorly understood role of social service agency workers in providing legal information to low-income individuals. Other current Commission interests are expanding the right to counsel in civil cases, allocation of *pro hac vice* fees to legal aid, loan forgiveness for legal aid advocates, and an add-on to attorney registration fees to benefit legal aid. A statewide Access to Justice Conference, the first in more than four years, is planned for the fall.