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EDITORIAL

Closing the Justice Gap

Here's another way the rich are different from the poor: They have lawyers. Poor people can count on free legal aid in criminal cases, but in civil proceedings — battles with landlords, employers, government bureaucracies — justice costs money, which means lots of people have to do without it.

The excellent news is that Gov. Eliot Spitzer is adding tens of millions of dollars in new spending for civil legal services. He has done it through a simple regulatory change. It will take New York's main source of money for civil legal services — the interest earned in special accounts that law firms use to temporarily hold clients' fees — and quintuple it, by requiring banks to pay competitive interest rates.

Mr. Spitzer has also broken with past practice by including money for civil legal services in his executive budget and working with the Legislature to ensure that legal services have a reliable source of financing. This is especially important at a time when federal support for civil legal services has lagged. Kudos should also go to the largest of the 80 banks that participate in the program, JPMorgan Chase, which agreed to comply with the new interest-rate rules before they take effect.

For the nonprofit legal agencies that help thousands of poor New Yorkers, the money will be a godsend. Organizations like Legal Services of the Hudson Valley, which stretches its thin budget over seven counties, will no longer have to turn away about half the people who come to it for help — a typical ratio in this line of work. In sparsely served areas upstate, the money will help traveling lawyers, riding a circuit like old-time preachers and peddlers, to bring more people into the civil justice system.

The benefits are widespread, since each dollar for legal assistance saves many that would be spent on other social services. People unfairly rejected for Medicaid wind up in emergency rooms. Families that can't fight unfair evictions end up in homeless shelters. By finally patching the state's threadbare legal safety net, Mr. Spitzer is doing right by all New Yorkers, poor, rich and in-between.