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Wyoming legal aid expands

The Wyoming Center for Legal Aid will soon help those who are near the poverty level.

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CHEYENNE -- Access to legal aid throughout the state is in the process of expanding to residents hovering near the poverty level.

The Wyoming Access to Justice Commission hosted a meeting Thursday night announcing the formation of the Wyoming Center for Legal Aid.

During the 2010 budget session, the Legislature passed the Indigent Civil Legal Services Act, No. 58, specifying that the Wyoming Supreme Court establish and oversee a program to provide legal services for Wyomingites who couldn't afford it otherwise.

As part of the act, an additional \$10 fee is added to each filing in civil and criminal court. That money is reserved for a separate indigent legal services fund, expected to net \$1 million to \$1.5 million annually.

The center will provide aid to those within 200 percent of the current poverty level.

Though details aren't final, those in attendance at the meeting agreed it was time to get things rolling on the project.

"We all know the need is great and the resources are limited," Chief Justice Marilyn Kite said. "We wouldn't be here today without the Legislature's support."

The hope is to have a state-funded, centralized intake center provide all types of legal aid to those in need. This could range from simple legal advice to representation in court.

According to the statute, the priorities of the program are to provide representation when an indigent person is a defendant in a lawsuit, is involved with domestic relations and family law or simply requires legal advice.

The center cannot help with cases for those seeking tort damages or in cases against public agencies or political subdivisions unless they are seeking owed benefits. They will also not provide representation in criminal cases because those are reserved for the Wyoming Public Defender Office.

A variety of people said they supported an attempt to make many of the most common legal documents more uniform so they are easier for the common person to fill out without assistance. They also discussed putting forms online to make them more accessible.

The next step is for the Supreme Court to hire a board of directors. The directors will then hire an executive director.

Commission member Walter Eggers said that he hoped to start providing services by early next year, though nothing is set in stone.

Legal Aid of Wyoming executive director Raymond Macchia heads a similar federally funded program.

He said that while \$1.5 million may sound like a lot, the resources go by fast.

Legal Aid of Wyoming offers services to residents within 125 percent of the poverty level, and he said there are still not enough people to handle their caseload.

He said they've had about 1,600 cases this year qualify for the program but they have only been able to take about 500 of them. With the acceptance level now at 200 percent of the poverty rate, he said that number would be much higher.

"There isn't one easy answer. We have to work through these things," Macchia said. "There's always going to be a crushing need."