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**STATEWIDE COALITION REPORT DETAILS GROWING CRISIS IN MEETING
CRITICAL LEGAL NEEDS OF LOW-INCOME PENNSYLVANIANS**

Urges creation of new commission

HARRISBURG – A report released today by the Pennsylvania Civil Legal Justice Coalition concludes that the staggering number of unrepresented low-income litigants in civil legal matters adversely impacts the quality of justice for all parties in Pennsylvania courts, negatively impacts the courts' administration of justice and undermines the rule of law.

The report, which was released at a meeting of the Senate Judiciary Committee, recommends the creation of a first-ever Access to Justice Commission to serve as a vehicle for studying and implementing measures to expand access to justice in the state.

In *Toward Equal Justice for All: Report of the Civil Legal Justice Coalition*, the 30-member coalition documents evidence presented at three statewide hearings held in 2013 by the Senate Judiciary Committee to explore the state of access to justice in Pennsylvania.

The report shows that access to civil legal services in basic human needs cases provides significant economic and social benefits for litigants and their communities. It also showed that the unmet need for civil legal assistance is profoundly impacting vulnerable Pennsylvanians and costing taxpayers millions of dollars by increasing homelessness, failing to prevent domestic violence and increasing poverty. It cites one recent study that found that for every dollar spent on legal aid in Pennsylvania, there is an \$11 return to the state and its residents.

“Equal access to legal representation is one of the most critical justice issues we face today,” said Senator Stewart Greenleaf. “I am pleased to see the legal community come together to offer their insights and recommendations to the Judiciary Committee.”

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Demand has surged for civil legal representation on behalf of the poor, whose ranks have swelled following one of the worst recessions in the nation's history. Those needs have been largely unmet due to a "perfect storm" of sustained and severe cuts in federal and state funding and a tight private fund-raising environment that has resulted in layoffs of legal aid staff and office closings. The gulf between client need and availability of legal help has been termed "the civil justice gap." State and national studies estimate that 80 percent of critical legal needs of low-income people go unmet due to insufficient funding and support.

At the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings, people with serious legal problems shared their personal stories of struggle:

- A veteran, after a lifetime of employment, became unable to work after collapsing from a heart condition. Without income he fell behind on his mortgage payments and was served by the sheriff with foreclosure papers on the small trailer he called home. He did not have the information or skills needed to obtain disability benefits that could have helped with the mortgage payments or to stop the foreclosure.
- A woman, subject to vicious abuse at home, appeared in court on her own, trying to obtain a protection from abuse order against her child's father. She did not know to bring witnesses or that she could subpoena people to testify about the abuse, and her plea was rejected.

In each case, it was only after assistance from lawyers that these individuals were able to achieve positive outcomes for themselves and their families.

To address the growing crisis and gap between client need and the availability of legal help, the coalition's report recommends that:

- Pennsylvania Supreme Court establish an Access to Justice Commission to serve as a vehicle for studying and implementing measures to expand access to justice, including proposing and promoting strategies to adequately increase levels of public, private and volunteer resources and funding for civil legal aid providers in Pennsylvania. Thirty-two states currently have such commissions.
- Pennsylvania's legislature annually appropriates an additional \$50 million for civil legal services to adequately address the immediate crisis in access to justice.
- Pennsylvania work toward establishing a right to counsel in civil legal matters in which fundamental human needs are at stake.

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The Pennsylvania Civil Legal Justice Coalition is a statewide coalition of leaders from the Philadelphia, Allegheny County, Dauphin County and Pennsylvania Bar Associations; representatives of the public interest community; and other key stakeholders who work to explore and implement strategies to improve access to justice for low-income Pennsylvanians. Pennsylvania Supreme Court Chief Justice Ronald D. Castille is the coalition's honorary chair.

A copy of the coalition's report, video and audio recordings, complete witness lists and copies of the testimony presented at the statewide hearings are available at the Civil Gideon Corner page of the Philadelphia Bar Association's website at www.philadelphiabar.org/page/CivilGideon.

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