

MISSISSIPPI CENTER FOR JUSTICE

PRO BONO WISH LIST

Pro Bono Counsel:

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I. History and Mission

With the advent of the 21st century, Mississippi no longer had concerted, statewide capacity to combat continuing problems of discrimination and poverty. In the 1960s and 1970s, nonprofit law firms provided critical legal support to Mississippi's civil rights movement. In the 1980s and 1990s, federal funding from the Legal Services Corporation supported statewide advocacy for low-income people. As of 2002, the legal needs of Mississippi's low-income people and communities of color were addressed by a committed and overwhelmed few. To make matters worse, Hurricane Katrina aggravated existing systematic problems for South Mississippians

In response, the Mississippi Center for Justice has committed itself to creating an infrastructure for legal advocacy that achieves social justice through multiple strategies. Equality continues to elude most Mississippians in the areas of affordable housing, fair credit, quality public education, consumer protection, voting rights, employment opportunities, and fair working conditions. If the Center were to employ only traditional methods of legal advocacy to address these problems, a focused effort in any one of these areas could occupy the full attention of a small staff. Instead, the Center economizes its resources and accomplishes its goals by enlisting legal talent from within the state and around the nation.

Law firms, law students, corporate legal departments and community activists provide crucial support to the Mississippi Center for Justice's community lawyering outreach. There are numerous opportunities for attorneys from a wide range of practice areas to get involved in the work to improve the state of social justice throughout Mississippi. The outpouring of *pro bono* support from around the country taught us how *pro bono* representation can be done remotely, and we pride ourselves on making that feasible for our out of state volunteers.

On behalf of the Mississippi Center for Justice, we express our heartfelt thanks for your ongoing support. We cannot adequately put into words how moved we continue to feel by the national and local outpouring of care, concern, and offers to help.

II. How you can help:

A. Attorney Support

1. Staffing

Options include:

a) Fund a Fellow: Underwrite the salary for a one-year fellow to conduct advocacy, outreach coordination, direct representation, and facilitation of *pro bono* to the firm.

b) Lend a Lawyer for 1-6 months: either one attorney for the full rotation or a series of lawyers each spending a shorter period of time.

c) The Center often conducts legal clinics, and firms can send lawyers for a week, allowing the volunteers to help prepare for the clinic, do intake onsite, and do any follow-up needed to prepare matters for *pro bono* referral.

2. *Pro Bono* lawyers serving Mississippians

Addressing the massive, unaddressed social justice and legal needs of Mississippians requires support of both the national and local bar. Thanks to the Mississippi Supreme Court and Mississippi Bar, out of state *pro bono* attorneys can volunteer through a simple affidavit process without *pro hac vice* admission or local counsel.

Most representation is feasibly handled remotely; however, if the matter requires an appearance and the out of state *pro bono* attorney is unable to attend, the Center will attempt to partner the volunteer with a local *pro bono* attorney.

Katrina-related Direct Representation Matters:

Responding to the massive and continually emerging housing-related legal needs of low-income survivors and their communities left in Katrina's wake remains to be one of the greatest challenges for the Mississippi Center for Justice.

a) Contractor fraud: Now that some south Mississippians have received insurance payments and/or a Homeowner Grant, many have become victims of contractor scams or unacceptable work. Clients in these situations need help with: determining whether local criminal prosecutorial bodies are pursuing the matter, locating the contractor and preparing a demand letter for the return of funds paid; negotiating a settlement; and in some cases, representing the client in

a lawsuit. Most cases settle before needing to file a lawsuit. If necessary, a volunteer's engagement letter can limit representation to assistance up until, but not including, filing a lawsuit. It may be possible to identify local counsel for appearances where out-of-state volunteers prepare and file all the pleadings. Local and out-of-state attorneys are also needed to co-counsel with the University of Maryland Legal Clinic for Mississippi contractor fraud clients whom they are representing. Contractor fraud is our biggest Katrina-related direct service need. A practitioner's manual, sample forms, and mentors are available for this subject.

b) Collections: As our staff and *pro bono* attorneys address the onslaught of contractor fraud matters, we are in dire need of additional *pro bono* attorneys to help with the collections process once a judgment is obtained.

c) Zoning and Obstacles to Rebuilding: As families begin to rebuild their homes and lives, local municipalities are preventing them from doing so through overly burdensome zoning ordinances and the refusal of building permits. Individuals facing this dilemma need help researching and verifying zoning ordinances and the impact thereof on Fair Housing. Attorneys may need to contact local officials and make appearances; however, local attorneys can be made available for co-counsel.

We are also seeking a *pro bono* firm or individual attorney to draft a *pro se* manual advising those facing such obstacles so that they may do so independently yet armed with information.

The Mississippi Center for Justice also desires support addressing the following needs affecting the entire state:

a) Foreclosure Assistance: The current economic crisis has catapulted foreclosure assistance to the top of our list in terms of direct service needs. Homeowners across the state need help obtaining workout agreements with the existing lender or refinancing with another lender. If attempts to negotiate a new payment plan or to refinance are unsuccessful, attorneys will be needed to file bankruptcy as counsel of record on behalf of the debtors so that they will not lose their homes. A practitioner's manual, sample forms, and mentors are available for this subject.

This is our largest direct service need affecting the entire state.

b) Title clearing: Many low-income, particularly minority, homeowners across the state inherited their property through generations without adjudication. Others purchased property without sufficient or correct documentation. We are finding that this is a huge problem in the Mississippi Delta. Cloudy title prevents the homeowner from mortgaging the property, obtaining the true value of their property in the case of sale, and obtaining disaster recovery grants. As a result, the

economic wellbeing of entire neighborhoods is affected. *Pro bono* attorneys are needed to work with the homeowner, to draft pleadings and estate documents, and to file them with the court. A practitioner's manual, sample forms, and mentors are available for this subject.

c) Hospital Accountability: We are partnering with the Coalition for Citizens with Disabilities to address the problem of medical debt for families and to learn best practices in other states. *Pro bono* attorneys are needed to perform research and program development.

d) Public Housing: Beth Orlansky, advocacy director, is responding to a crisis for approximately 300 low-income individuals and families, many of whom are elderly and disabled, whose rent unexpectedly more than doubled in Belzoni, Indianola, Hollandale, Rosedale, Cleveland, and Rolling Fork. The landlord is South Delta Regional Housing Authority, a public housing authority, which is required by statute to charge the lowest possible rent. Residents filed grievances with the Housing Authority. Meanwhile, we filed a complaint in federal court and obtained temporary injunctive relief preventing the rent increase from taking effect August 1, 2009. However, we do not have the capacity to pursue such litigation on our own; as a result, we are seeking a *pro bono* law firm to take the lead. We will act as co-counsel for the litigation, and a young lawyer from Cleveland, MS, is on board to assist with plaintiff contact.

e) Small Business Development: We are facilitating micro-enterprise throughout the state, especially in minority communities and are seeking *pro bono* attorneys to advise new entrepreneurs as they form and expand their small businesses. A manual for practitioners will be available shortly thanks to Hogan and Hartson and Baker Donelson.

f) Denial of Food Stamps: Along with community partners, we are seeking a firm to pursue a class action suit addressing the lack of due process in the state agency's denial of food stamps to families.

g) Discrimination in Child Care Subsidies: Along with community partners, we are also seeking a firm to pursue litigation against the Department of Human Services for its rare policy requiring everyone applying for child care certificates to file a suit for child support. This requirement is impossible or, at minimum, severely burdensome for some single parents and is not imposed for head start programs or public schools. Furthermore, it has a disparate impact on minorities. Initially, we need a *pro bono* partner to research whether a similar suit has been filed elsewhere and whether it was successful.

B. Other Law Firm Support

1. Technical Support

In December 2005, we secured space for our branch office in Biloxi to address hurricane-related legal needs, but since then has had neither the resources, time nor expertise to bring its technology infrastructure up to speed. We would benefit greatly by an IT expert who could analyze our systems, technology tools, recommend improvements, and assist in their implementation and relevant trainings.

For example, we need assistance with the following:

Document Transfer and multi-office networking between our

Video and/or web-based conferencing to connect not only our two offices but work with other in- and out-of-state partners.

2. Office equipment

a) Portable scanners: Scanners would greatly facilitate our ability to conduct onsite intake and get matters placed with volunteers.

b) Laptops: Many of our staff are operating on their own personal computers and on out of date laptops. A sufficient number of technologically and programmatically up to date laptops would greatly improve daily operation.

3. Communications/multimedia assistance

We have had significant success advancing our goals through the use of multimedia and other visual presentations of our advocacy efforts. However, limited resources are available for this type of investment. We would be thrilled to have the following kinds of assistance from a firm's marketing and/or public relations professionals:

a) Help developing multimedia presentations that can convey our stories, impact and benefits to Mississippi to policy makers, civic groups, and the public at-large.

b) Help creating power maps, citizen's guides, and envisioning materials for community meetings using computers, power-point style software and projectors. Audio and video media packages to pitch stories to media, to recruit volunteers across the internet, and to do targeted advocacy, alerts, and public service announcements in English, Spanish and Vietnamese. Some of these could be done for radio, television or the internet, and/or podcasts.

c) Multimedia CD or DVD orientation and training materials for law students and volunteers to ensure a consistent and high quality transmission of information, and to reduce the burden on staff to give repetitive speeches. In some instances, these materials may be suitable as models for responding to future disasters.

d) Slideshows to capture the precise flavor of conditions on the ground and to track progress or stagnation over time.

e) Digital mapping, including GIS research, as an analytical and advocacy tool.