

Access to Justice Campaign

Ensuring Access and Fairness for All in the Justice System

By Edward H. Pappas and Jennifer Bentley

Having access to civil legal aid is instrumental in protecting homes and incomes and in helping to secure safe living environments for Michigan's most vulnerable citizens. The Access to Justice Campaign provides support for civil legal aid programs throughout the state. The campaign is administered by the Michigan State Bar Foundation, in partnership with the State Bar of Michigan, to increase resources for 15 civil legal aid programs in Michigan, including seven regional and eight state-wide programs.¹

The ATJ Campaign was centralized beginning July 1, 2018, and the participating programs encourage donations through the campaign. The campaign has active fundraising committees (see sidebar on the facing page) and has hosted several receptions to encourage increased giving. We discovered that many firms did not understand the services that legal aid provides, the tremendous need, and the lack of resources.

In 2018, over 108,000 of the more than 2 million people living in poverty were impacted by the power of free civil legal services.² Michigan's regional programs serve individuals living 125 percent below the poverty level in every county.³ The state-wide programs serve specialized populations who have legal issues unique to their demographic. Civil legal aid attorneys practice law with a compassionate hand, and their work not only gives Michigan's most vulnerable a voice in court, but moves us one step closer to fairness for all in the justice system.

As the ATJ Campaign grows, Michigan will be able to expand free legal help for those in need. Michigan is far below the

national average in legal community giving to civil legal aid.⁴ When the campaign reaches the national average, legal aid organizations will be able to hire approximately 30 more attorneys to help vulnerable families.⁵

By supporting access to justice, the Michigan legal community shows how it values equal justice under the law as a right, not a privilege. We know that legal representation is a true advantage, especially for those living in poverty.

The Michigan legal community supports the ATJ Campaign in different ways.

Many leading Michigan firms use the State Bar of Michigan's voluntary standard as a guide and give more than \$300 per attorney to the ATJ Campaign.⁶ Other firms encourage their attorneys to give independently with the expectation that a minimum of \$300 or \$500 will be donated. Some firms combine the two approaches by giving as a firm and encouraging their attorneys to give independently. All attorney donations are attributed to their respective firms, and the ATJ Campaign recognizes firms based on total giving and per-attorney average. The Leadership Law Firm list recognizes law firms donating at least \$300 per attorney.⁷

In addition, with the help of Jane Regan and Bradley Gayton from Ford Motor Company, ATJ Campaign leaders are developing methods to engage in-house counsel. Ford Motor Company gives a generous annual contribution to the campaign and encourages in-house counsel to donate. Corporate legal departments are recognized on a tiered list based on total donations.

Finally, many lawyers give significant individual contributions to the campaign. Lawyers are best suited to understand the importance of having legal representation and prioritize supporting the Access to Justice Campaign. Attorneys know that a positive outcome to a legal issue can have a significant impact on their clients; this is equally true for civil legal aid attorneys' clients who are living in poverty.

To learn more about the impact access to justice has on veterans, older adults, Native Americans, homeowners, renters, families with children, individuals who are ill or disabled, survivors of domestic violence, and immigrant safety and rights, visit www.atjfund.org and see how access to an attorney protects a family's home, livelihood, and safety. ■

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chairman emeritus of Dickinson Wright PLLC and a former president of the State Bar of Michigan and the Oakland County Bar Association.



Jennifer Bentley is the executive director of the Michigan State Bar Foundation and leads the ATJ Campaign Steering Committee along with Laura Musachio, the ATJ Campaign coordinator. In addition, she serves on the Michigan Supreme Court

Justice for All Task Force, the State Bar of Michigan Justice Initiative Committee, and the boards of Management Information Exchange and the National Association of IOLTA Programs.

ENDNOTES

1. Access to Justice Campaign, Michigan State Bar Foundation <<https://atjfund.org/>>. All websites referenced in this article were accessed November 11, 2019.
2. *Id.*
3. Our Grantees, Legal Services Corp <<https://www.lsc.gov/grants-grantee-resources/our-grantees>> [<https://perma.cc/J3H3-HJSU>].
4. Resource Center for Access to Justice Initiatives, ABA <https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_aid_indigent_defendants/resource_center_for_access_to_justice/> [<https://perma.cc/X23R-JCK9>].
5. *Id.* The Michigan State Bar Foundation gives 100 percent of the dollars raised to the legal aid programs in Michigan and the majority of their costs are personnel costs. This figure was derived from MSBF Annual Grantee Reports, using average salary including benefits for a legal aid attorney, totaling approximately \$65,000.
6. The SBM's Voluntary Pro Bono Standard implements MRPC 6.1 by suggesting that each lawyer annually (1) provide 30 hours of free representation, (2) handle three cases free for low-income persons, or (3) donate \$300 to civil legal aid (\$500 for lawyers whose income allows a higher contribution) <<https://www.michbar.org/programs/ATJ/voluntarystds>> [<https://perma.cc/ACV2-TLD9>].
7. 2018 ATJ Campaign Leadership Firms, Access to Justice Campaign, Michigan State Bar Foundation <<https://atjfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2018-Leadership-Firms.pdf>> [<https://perma.cc/E2WX-PD7W>].



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