

# A Coordinated Approach for Justice Initiatives

all it restructuring, dismantling the old, integrating, and coming up with a new configuration or something in a similar vein—what's clear is that the State Bar now has a broad-based program called Justice Initiatives. Where once the Open Justice Commission and the Access to Justice Task Force (now dissolved) were familiar buzzwords, the new set up incorporates a broader landscape. Efforts that deal with legal aid, equal access, pro bono, and fund raising all now come under one umbrella. While there has been a structural shift, the purpose remains the same—to provide high quality legal services to all Michigan citizens especially the poor, and to reduce barriers so that the justice system is strong, equal, and fair to everyone.

"Before, we had several committees, commissions, all working on the same issues," observed Judge Cynthia Stephens, one of two people chosen by the Bar to help make justice for all a reality. "It was not a good use of staff time certainly. It was probably not the most effective use of volunteer time. If volunteers are all a part of an overall structure, when there's a need for cross pollination or where there's a project that calls upon the pro bono community, for example, to assist in an equal access issue, you've got everybody there at the table. You don't have to go through five different committees, four budgets to re-staff people, and a partridge in a pear tree."

Judge Stephens, who is from the Wayne County Circuit Court and Richard McLellan, a partner at the Dykema Gossett law firm, together co-chair a 17-member Standing Committee on Justice Initiatives (SCJI), which serves as the Bar's policymaking body on these issues. The committee will coordinate ongoing justice work through four major prongs or initiatives: Equal Access, Pro Bono, Legal Aid, and Resource Development. A one-year planning workgroup



*SCJI Standing Committee members: Seated left to right: Terri Stangl, Nancy Diehl (SBM President), Richard McLellan, Hon. Paul Teranes, Charlotte Johnson, Robert Gillett, Ronald Keefe, Hon. Cynthia Stephens. Standing left to right: Daniel Hopp, Frank Eaman, Hon. Alfred Butzbaugh, Albert Quick, Representative Steve Tobocman, Linda Rexer, James Neuhard and Valerie Newman. [Not in photo: Teresa Caine Bingman and Hon. Kurtis T. Wilder.]*

chaired by Linda Rexer, executive director of the Michigan State Bar Foundation, will help the SCJI in identifying additional ways to coordinate work in both the civil and criminal arenas over the next three to five years. (See chart.)

"The idea is to initiate major programs within a broad-based standing committee rather than have many small committees. It is a significant change and it is untested," observed McLellan. In fact, the new model is unique to Michigan, which has one of the best-established Access to Justice structures in the country. Candace Crowley, Manager of the Justice Initiatives Department at the Bar, adds that while some states look only at pro bono or at fund raising and don't have organized Equal Access initiatives, "Michigan may likely have the broadest range of interests with certainly some of the best financial and volunteer support around the country."

Ron Keefe chairs the Resource Development Initiative, which through the Bar's Access to Justice (ATJ) Campaign raised nearly \$1.4 million in new cash and pledges during 2003 to help fund non-profit legal aid programs and provide pro bono assistance to those seeking help in dealing with issues such as domestic violence, family law, and housing. Since 1998, \$4.5 million has been raised with more than \$2 million currently held in a permanent endowment fund. The plan is to continue to raise more money because the need is great. Recent statistics show that there is one lawyer for every 319 people in the general population, but only one legal aid lawyer for every 7,585 individuals living in poverty.

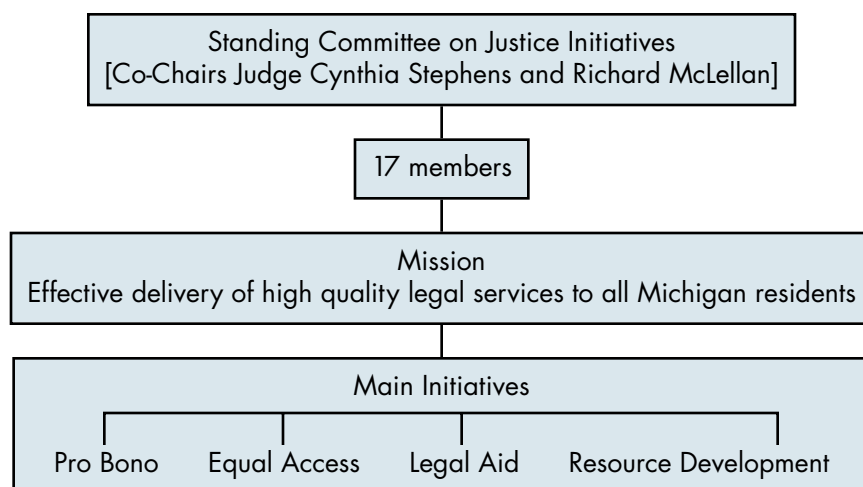
In mid October, Keefe and other volunteers from all the major geographic regions of Michigan and representing diverse interests—solo practitioners, corporate counsel, the Governor's office, the legislature, large law firms,

legal aid providers, law schools, fund raising experts, and judges gathered in Lansing. They charted their course for the coming year, set new meeting dates, and adopted plans to coordinate and achieve their goals.

The Equal Access Initiative under the leadership of Charlotte Johnson will focus efforts on reaching both the underserved and underrepresented populations, for example the indigent poor, people with disabilities, youth offenders, migrant groups, Native Americans, Arab Americans, and others as the need arises. The efforts will be broad based (i.e. working with other groups to get a statewide public defender system) as well as more focused, i.e. an Alternative Dispute Resolution project. "There is a dearth of people of color serving on formal arbitration and mediation panels. We think that trying to increase the pool and making the pool more diverse is important because when people come before a panel, it helps when they see that the panel is diverse. They see people like them on the panel. It facilitates the perception of fairness," Johnson said.

The Legal Aid Initiative under Chairperson Terri Stangl will continue its work reviewing legislation and court rules that come out and will offer comments to the SCJI about how those rules and bills may affect indigent persons around the state. Stangl says that the new structure will also allow those from other initiatives like Pro Bono or Equal Access to weigh in so that "we have a more coordinated recommendation to take to the final policy body." Before, each committee took their own ideas to the Representative Assembly and to the Board of Commissioners and then it would get sent out to everyone else for comments again. "This year, its formalized, everything has to go through the Standing Committee before it gets to the Representative Assembly or the Board of Commissioners," Stangl emphasized.

The Pro Bono Initiative led by Robert Gillett will focus on encouraging and coordinating the delivery of pro bono legal services statewide. Gillett said the main goal is to work with all aspects of the Bar, including local Bar associations, local legal aid pro bono programs, and large firms so that pro bono opportunities can be developed for every attorney in the state. Michigan's Vol-



\*A one-year Planning Workgroup will help identify ways to coordinate work.

untary Pro Bono Standard recommends that all active State Bar members participate in the direct delivery of free legal services to the poor annually by either providing free representation to three low-income individuals, a minimum of 30 hours of representation without charge or at reduced rates, or contributing a minimum of \$300 to not-for-profit programs or organizations.

While there are challenges to the new set up, both SCJI co-chairs, McLellan and Stephens are optimistic about the potential. McLellan thinks that pulling so many initiatives together is doable because of the strong support of the State Bar Board of Commissioners and because of the commitment of the people involved in the effort, some of whom have been volunteers for many years.

The biggest problem according to Judge Stephens is to "blend the cultures and processes of independent groups into a community fabric—that's going to be the challenge. People have to understand that this is a process, that equal access and justice itself is in fact a process, it's not a short-term destination." In the long run what she would like to achieve is the "institutionalization of the process of constantly examining and re-examining our systems, our committees, our institutions to ensure that they are affording equal access in the most efficient way and providing wide access particularly to the underserved communities." ♦

*Naseem Stecker is a staff writer for the Michigan Bar Journal. She can be contacted by e-mail at [nstecker@mail.michbar.org](mailto:nstecker@mail.michbar.org).*