Lawyers Working to End Poverty

Nearly 50 million Americans now live below the federal poverty line. Recent societal, economic and political events (economic meltdown, mortgage foreclosure epidemic, Trayvon Martin, Hurricane Katrina, Ferguson, Missouri, Michelle Alexander’s “The New Jim Crow,” 9/11, the “school to prison pipeline,” unaccompanied minors coming across the border, etc.) have given rise to unprecedented public awareness of historic levels of income inequality, numbers of children living in poverty and disparate treatment and impacts of the law and justice systems on communities of color and populations that face other barriers and obstacles to justice, such as disability, limited English proficiency, immigrant status and other factors. Through this initiative, the Commission is identifying, promoting and implementing best practices for eliminating legal and justice system-related policies, practices and procedures that unfairly perpetuate or worsen the harmful effects of poverty on low-income people and communities, including obstacles and barriers to public benefits, employment, housing, treatment and services needed by people experiencing homelessness or living in poverty.

Homeless Children and Youth Initiative

With at least one million youth in America on the streets and in shelters, the Commission is equipping lawyers with the tools needed to address their special legal needs. Some of the most popular tools include the publications: Educating Children Without Housing and Runaway and Homeless Youth and the Law: Model State Statutes. The Commission is also the proud continuation sponsor of Project Street Youth, which was previously led by the Young Lawyers Division as a special initiative to facilitate clinics to provide basic legal assistance to homeless youth. In June 2015, the Commission hosted the first ever International Conference on the Legal Needs of Street Youth in London. The conference served as a kick-off for an ongoing initiative that will foster greater collaboration and information sharing internationally about model laws and policies that affect street youth.

Homeless Veterans Justice Initiative

Nearly 60,000 veterans experience homelessness on any given night, and roughly 1.4 million other veterans are considered at risk of homelessness. In support of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ Five Year Plan to End Homelessness among Veterans, the Commission is fostering the development of Veterans Treatment Courts and pro bono legal services programs aimed at removing barriers to benefits, employment, housing, treatment and services for veterans. Through this initiative, the Commission provides free technical assistance to judges, lawyers and providers across the country on how to launch a Veterans Treatment Court and other model programs, including a national pilot program launched in collaboration with the VA and HHS on child support issues for non-custodial homeless veterans.

Homeless Court Program

Typically set within homeless shelters, the Homeless Court Program provides a non-threatening environment for participants to resolve outstanding warrants and criminal charges that serve as barriers to treatment, housing, and employment. Instead of facing fines or incarceration, homeless individuals voluntarily participate in treatment and job training prior to appearing in court. The Commission has helped develop over 50 Homeless Court Programs nationwide, providing a desperately needed mechanism for homeless individuals to receive the legal services needed to reconnect with the community. The Commission provides free technical assistance to communities interested in launching a Homeless Court.

Curtin Justice Fund Legal Internship Program

An endowed fund maintained within the ABA Fund for Justice and Education, the Program provides $2,500 stipends annually to three law students in support of their summer internships at legal services organizations assisting homeless clients. Named in honor of former ABA President John J. Curtin, Jr., the Program aims to foster careers in public interest law.

Get Involved!

Support the Commission by reaching out to judges and lawyers in your community to promote model programs and best practices and connect the legal community to the Commission for technical assistance.