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ILLINOIS SUPREME COURT FORMS SPECIAL COMMITTEE TO INCREASE FREE LEGAL SERVICES FOR THE POOR

The Supreme Court of Illinois announced Wednesday formation of a special committee to study and make recommendations on how to encourage every practicing attorney in the state to render some form of free legal work to those who cannot afford it.

The seven-person committee is designated the Special Supreme Court Committee on Pro Bono Publico Legal Service and is composed of three attorneys from Cook County and one from each of the other four Judicial Districts in the state.

The members of the committee include attorneys with a broad diversity in providing volunteer legal services ranging from a Chicago attorney who counsels the Oglala Lakota Nation in Pine Ridge, S.D., on economic development to a Southern Illinois attorney who chairs the board of the Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation.

The committee is specifically charged with making recommendations “to promote among attorneys a commitment to render uncompensated legal services and to encourage every member of the practicing bar of the State of Illinois to perform pro bono legal work as a matter of course.”

The idea of forming the committee was brought to the Court by Justice Thomas L. Kilbride, who has a rich background in providing legal services to the poor; and follows a call by Chief Justice Moses W. Harrison that every attorney in Illinois provide some free legal service each day.

Chief Justice Harrison urged greater involvement in pro bono services by lawyers in an address Feb. 1, when he accepted the Access to Justice Award from the Illinois State Bar Association.

“When justice is accessible to only the privileged few, it is not justice at all,” Chief Justice Harrison said then. On Wednesday, he lauded creation of the new committee.

“This Court is a progressive Court, and felt it was an appropriate time to have a Supreme Court committee to encourage pro bono publico services,” Chief Justice Harrison said. “This is a very strong committee and this Court expects this committee will do an excellent job at increasing the number of Illinois lawyers who provide free legal services to the poor.”

Justice Kilbride, who worked as a Legal Aid attorney for several years and continued volunteering his services as he developed a private law practice before being elected to the Court last November, said establishment of the committee puts the Court’s influence squarely behind a laudable goal.

“In establishing a committee to study, recommend and promote free legal services for the poor, the Supreme Court has shown as an institution it recognizes how important every lawyer’s charge is to help those in need of legal services who cannot afford them,” Justice Kilbride said. “It has always been understood that it is a lawyer’s responsibility to help others who are in need of legal representation, and this is a formal way of the Court saying we need to be on the watch so that it happens, as the Chief Justice said, on a day-to-day basis.

“One of the noblest manifestations of our calling and profession is to respond to the legal needs of people who don’t have representation otherwise.”

The appointees are:

Marc R. Kadish, Allan W. Masters and Leonard Murray of Chicago from the First Judicial District; John E. Ridgway of Cary from the Second Judicial District; Thomas W. O’Neal of Peoria from the Third Judicial District; Traci E. Nally of Champaign from the Fourth Judicial District; and Russell K. Scott of Belleville from the Fifth Judicial District.

Mr. Kadish was a professor associated with the legal clinic at the Chicago-Kent College of Law. At the clinic, senior law students, practicing under Supreme Court Rule 711 and under the supervision of licensed attorneys like Mr. Kadish, provided legal services to the indigent. Mr. Kadish now is director of pro bono activities and Clinical Legal Education for the law firm, Mayer Brown & Platt.

Mr. Masters is a Chicago attorney who for the past several years has devoted free time and counsel to try to spur economic development for the Oglala Lakota Nation.

Mr. Murray is a former president of the Cook County Bar Association who has performed a substantial amount of community service and pro bono work. He served as a board member for the Reach Out and Read Program and the for the Omega Associates program for developing low-income housing. He founded the Ace Organization, which sends low-income children on trips to Africa and was appointed by Cook County President John Stroger to serve on the Committee for the Needs of the Courts in the 21st Century. He currently chairs the Judicial Evaluation Committee of the Illinois State Bar Association.

Mr. Ridgway is a former public defender in McHenry County, concentrates his practice in criminal law and performs pro bono work referred by the Legal Aid Committee of the McHenry County Bar Association.

Mr. O’Neal, a partner in the Peoria firm of Westervelt, Johnson, Nicoll & Keller, served as director of Peoria State Legal Services Inc., and was its president from 1996-98. He served twice as chairman of the Peoria County Bar Associations Pro Bono Plan and has been a member of the steering committee since its inception the Peoria’s Campaign for Legal Services, which has raised more than \$333,000 to fund operating expenses of the Peoria office of Prairie State Legal Services. He has been honored for his pro bono work by the Illinois State Bar Association and the Peoria County Bar Association.

Ms. Nally, who does pro bono work as a partner in the Champaign firm of Nally, Haasis & Bauer, is former president of the Champaign County Bar Association, a member of the Illinois State Bar Association Assembly, a former president of the Eastern Illinois Foodbank and former chair of the Champaign County United Way. She has been active in the Champaign County Bar Association's pro bono efforts and in raising funds for foundations which provide legal assistance.

Mr. Scott, an experienced attorney in litigation and appellate work with the firm Greensfelder, Hemker & Gale in Bellville, is chairman of the board and president and chief volunteer officer of the Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation, Inc., and in 1995 also was honored by the Illinois State Bar Association for his pro bono service and commitment.