



NEWS

EQUAL JUSTICE ILLINOIS CAMPAIGN

Access to the Legal System Makes the Difference in People's Lives

The Honorable Philip J. Rock and the Honorable James R. Thompson, Co-Chairs

Fighting Discrimination through Empowerment

Statewide organization helps people with disabilities fight discrimination through self advocacy

The history of the United States is marked with movements by marginalized groups to secure their civil rights. For people with disabilities and mental illness, the fight against discrimination is waged daily. With the help of persistent and vocal advocates, people with disabilities are finding ways to combat discrimination in their communities and workplaces.

Attorney Howard Rosenblum is at the forefront of this effort as a member of the Training Institute for Equip for Equality, a non-profit advocacy organization designed to serve people of all ages throughout the state of Illinois.

"Discrimination against people with disabilities and mental illness is rampant, even today," said Rosenblum.

"The discrimination is not mean-spirited, but out of ignorance.

My job is to help people with disabilities self advocate to end this discrimination."

In 1985, Illinois Governor James R. Thompson designated Equip for Equality to protect the rights of people with disabilities in Illinois under the federally mandated

Protection and Advocacy (P&A) System.

Through the Equip for Equality Training Institute, Rosenblum conducts seminars for people with disabilities and their family members on the protections guaranteed by the American Disabilities Act. He tells his audience what those protections are and how to respond when guaranteed rights are being violated.

"Most of the time it's about self advocacy," said Rosenblum about the subject of his training sessions. "Depending on the audience, we work on rights in the workplace, financial independence and housing options."

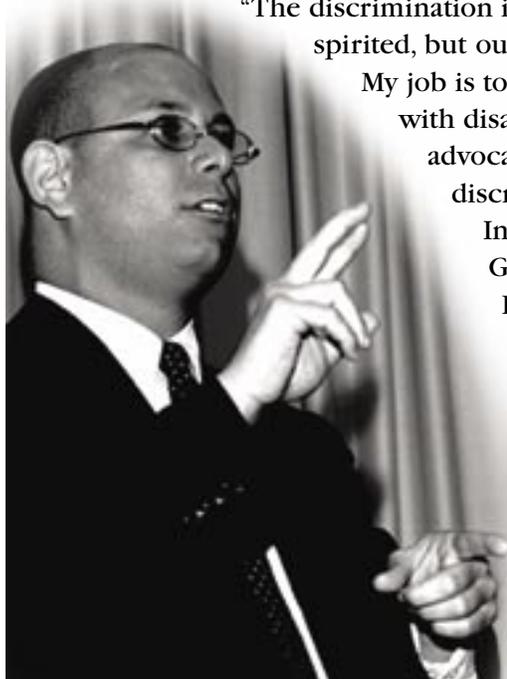
Rosenblum designs his curricula with the audience in mind. During a recent training session, Rosenblum guided a class on interpersonal communications at Harold Washington College through the process of setting and achieving goals.

"You don't get from here to there by sitting at home watching TV," Rosenblum told the college-aged students. "You have to get up and get going. You have to have an action plan." Students nodded; shouts of "yeah!" sprung up among the group.

He went on to talk about learning one's own limitations and opportunities. "Don't listen to people who tell you, you can't do something because of your disability. Only you can find out what you are capable of. I didn't listen to those people and that's why I'm a lawyer!" The class erupted into powerful applause. Rosenblum is currently the only profoundly deaf attorney practicing in Illinois.

The training institute's goal is to create a model

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State Funding for Legal Aid Receives Critical Increase; Funds Will Help Tens of Thousands of Illinoisans

FY 2007 Budget Includes \$3.5 Million for Illinois Equal Justice Foundation

More Illinoisans will be able to get the legal help they need under the State's FY 2007 budget, which increases the appropriation for the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation (IEJF) to \$3.5 million, from the previous level of \$2 million. The

"This critical increase in legal aid funding will help ensure that Illinois is not divided into citizens who have access to the judicial system and citizens who do not," Attorney General Lisa Madigan said. "While the General Assembly has

"We're extremely pleased the General Assembly recognizes the importance of a strong legal aid system. Without adequate funding for legal aid, we end up with a two-tiered system of justice, with those who cannot afford representation

"While the General Assembly has wisely increased the funds available for legal aid, we must continue to increase those funds so that we do not have a system of haves and have-nots when it comes to access to justice."

— *Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan*

IEJF distributes state funding for civil legal aid to not-for-profit organizations throughout the state. This additional funding will enable those organizations to help tens of thousands additional families in crisis, victims of domestic violence and the elderly.

wisely increased the funds available for legal aid, we must continue to increase those funds so that we do not have a system of haves and have-nots when it comes to access to justice." Funding for the IEJF is provided through the Office of the Attorney General.

entirely shut out of the process," said Phil Rock, former Illinois Senate President and co-chair of the Equal Justice Illinois Campaign. "Legal aid is often the last piece of the social safety net that keeps people from slipping into poverty and dependence."

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IEJF GRANT RECIPIENT SPOTLIGHT

South Suburban Program Focuses on Critical Housing Issues

Foreclosure becoming all too common scenario for many working families

More and more people are homeowners than ever before. New developments are popping up and older buildings are being rehabbed on many city and suburban streets. However, there is an asterisk next to

said Edwards. “People are either being taken advantage of through unfair loan practices or they’re unable to afford higher real estate taxes or interest rates on adjustable loans,” said Edwards.

individuals and families in more than 51 south suburban communities including Dolton, South Holland, Tinley Park, Blue Island and Orland Park.

It’s often the most economically vulnerable, like the elderly or single-

“I merely use my legal training to try in some small way to live up to the lofty goals we set 30-40 years ago.

At one time I felt I could save the world, now I just want to help one family at a time.”

— *Legal Aid Attorney Eugene Edwards*

all this boom. As homeownership rates are at their highest levels ever, so too is the incidence of foreclosure. Legal aid attorney Eugene Edwards has witnessed this alarming trend firsthand.

“Day in and day out, foreclosures are the most common cases we see,”

Edwards, managing attorney at the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago’s South Suburban office, has made housing rights his focus for the past twenty years. Thanks in part to a grant from the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation, LAF’s South Suburban office serves

parent households, who are preyed upon by unscrupulous lenders or scam artists.

A practice commonly known as “rescue fraud” is a prime example. According to Edwards, the scenario looks like this. A family is behind on

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for comprehensive curriculum that can be used in high schools and through other organizations in other states. “Currently, most high school curriculum does not include legal rights,” said Rosenblum. “Our goal is to train people with disabilities about their rights before they leave high school. This will make their transition into adulthood more successful.”

When self advocacy cannot solve a discrimination problem, the legal services division of Equip for Equality provides direct representation in federal and state court.

In addition to the Legal Services Program and the Training Institute, Equip for Equality has an Abuse Investigation Unit, Public Policy Program and a Self-Advocacy Assistance Program. The Abuse Investigation Unit was instrumental in exposing abuse at the Lincoln Developmental Center.

The work of the Training Institute at Equip for Equality is all about empowering people with disabilities and mental illness, one at a time. By teaching students to self advocate they are equipping them with tools that will last beyond a class or a workshop, and ultimately help them win the fight against discrimination.



State Senator Jeffrey Schoenberg (D-9) and State Senator Kirk Dillard (R-24) were the recipients of CARPLS' Golden Gavel Award for leading the charge in the Illinois General Assembly to increase state funding of legal aid. The two legislators, pictured here with Sally McDonald of DLA Piper Gray Cary, were honored at CARPLS Annual Fundraiser at Northern Trust in May. CARPLS (Coordinated Advice and Referral Program for Legal Services) is Cook County's legal aid hotline, serving as the first point of contact for many residents in need of legal assistance.

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Despite the major boost in funding, Illinois still lags behind the rest of the nation. Among the ten most populous states, the average appropriation for legal aid is \$71 million.

“We are heartened by the state's efforts over the past two years to increase funding of legal aid. However, there's still more to do to ensure that Illinois adequately provides a safety net for working families, the elderly and victims of abuse,” said former Illinois Governor Jim Thompson, co-chair of the Equal Justice Illinois Campaign. “Legal aid strengthens families and communities, leading to a stronger workforce and a more desirable place to do business.”

The increase in legal aid funding will provide critical relief to Illinois' legal aid network, which is operating in crisis mode. According to a study released last year by the legal community in our state, there are only 280 legal aid lawyers to help the more than 15

million Illinoisans who live in poverty.

The situation in downstate Illinois is even bleaker. A total of 84 legal aid attorneys must provide legal assistance to nearly 400,000 low-income residents in 101 counties. To exacerbate the problem, federal funding from the Legal Services Corporation, which is the largest source of support for legal aid, has dropped by 38% over the past fifteen years, when adjusted for inflation.

State funding for civil legal aid is appropriated through the Illinois Equal Justice Act. The Act, approved by the General Assembly and signed into law in 1999, recognizes the State's responsibility to ensure equal access to the legal system. It sets forth a wide range of innovative, cost-effective initiatives to help low-income people understand the legal system and resolve their routine legal problems more effectively.

For more information about the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation and the Equal Justice Illinois Campaign, log onto www.equaljusticeillinois.org.

its mortgage payments. A so-called “rescuer” swoops in and offers to help with the mortgage payments if the owner just signs the deed to the house over to him.

“As you can predict, the so-called “rescuer” takes out a large second mortgage on the home, pockets the money and is never heard from again,” said Edwards. “The house goes into foreclosure and a family’s livelihood is basically destroyed.”

Rising utility prices, real estate taxes and rates on adjustable loans are also contributing to the amount of foreclosures. “Many people who took out a 5-year ARM are now facing interest rates of 12% to 15%,” said Edwards. “They can’t afford the higher payments so their home goes into foreclosure.”

The rental market also poses challenges for many working families. The south suburbs have unique housing issues not seen within Chicago, according to Edwards.

“The majority of suburbs don’t have their own landlord/tenant

ordinances. It’s not unusual for a landlord to call the local police and ask them to evict people under threat of arrest. A lot of times it’s called get out of town by sundown,” said Edwards. “After people are intimidated into leaving their apartment, the landlord will then go in and change the locks and turn off utilities.”

While LAF’s office exists as a helping hand for countless individuals and families, the staff cannot keep up with demand for legal help. Often Eugene and his staff are able to just buy their clients time so they can adequately move out of their home or apartment. Still, Edwards remains tireless in his resolve.

“I do this type of work despite the obstacles because I am a product of the 1960s and 1970s. That was a time when social service was highly thought of and aspired to. I merely use my legal training to try in some small way to live up to the lofty goals we set 30-40 years ago. At one time I felt I could save the world, now I just want to help one family at a time.”

About the Foundation

The Illinois Equal Justice Foundation is a nonprofit entity created to distribute state funding for legal aid efforts, as outlined in the 1999 Illinois Equal Justice Act. This funding directly helps families in crisis, victims of domestic violence and senior citizens facing consumer fraud, estate-planning and health-related issues.

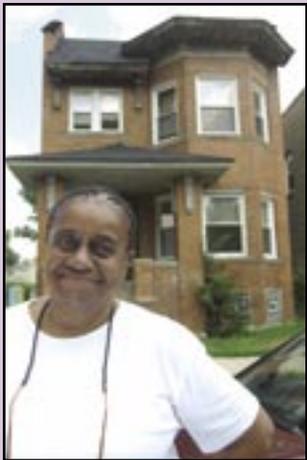
In order to reach the largest number of Illinois residents, the Foundation grants fund projects such as legal telephone hotlines for immediate advice and referrals; self-help legal desks in courthouses for guidance on simple legal matters; and dispute resolution centers for speedy and less expensive alternatives to litigation.

Equal Justice Illinois Campaign Blue-Ribbon Committee

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Building Better Lives: Profiles in Justice

After years of hard work, **Barbara** achieved what many Americans strive to attain — homeownership. Barbara owned her home free



and clear until lured into a fraudulent home improvement and predatory loan scheme. Civil legal aid helped Barbara receive compensation for the money she lost. Barbara now enjoys living securely in her home.

EQUAL JUSTICE ILLINOIS CAMPAIGN

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