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CIVIL LEGAL AID RESEARCH

June 3, 2015

Courtesy of Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch

On May 20th, I was pleased to participate in the Justice Department's Civil Legal Aid Research Workshop, sponsored by the National Institute of Justice, Access to Justice, and the National Science Foundation. At this gathering, passionate advocates and dedicated legal professionals worked to identify the data, methods, and research that can inform our efforts to help low-income Americans acquire the legal aid they need and deserve. Drawn from a range of agencies and backgrounds—including both national and international experts, and federal participants from 25 offices—contributors discussed best practices, successful efforts, and new ideas to benefit the men, women, and children we strive to serve.

As someone who has spent my professional career practicing law—and having served on the board of advisors of groups like the Legal Aid Society of New York and the Federal Defenders Service of New York—I am acutely aware of the challenges faced by those who are too often left out and left behind in their efforts to achieve meaningful justice.

Today, more than 20 percent of Americans are eligible for legal aid, yet due to insufficient resources, legal aid professionals are forced to turn away half of those who seek their assistance—from families in danger of being evicted from their homes to individuals experiencing domestic violence; from survivors of human trafficking who need access to legal services to victims of consumer fraud faced with foreclosures and illegal debt collection.

The Department of Justice is working to fill this significant need. Through the Access to Justice Initiative, we're building partnerships across the country to expand legal aid and rethinking policies that reduce its impact. Thanks to the Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable, which ATJ helped launch in 2012, more than two dozen federal grant programs—involving health care, citizenship, post-incarceration reentry, housing for veterans, and other federal priorities—have now been clarified to allow funding for legal services to further program goals. And under the Department's recently-expanded Pro Bono Program, any DOJ employee can now use up to 30 hours of administrative leave for pro bono work that takes place during work hours, such as court appearances and mediations.

With the work of the Civil Legal Aid Research Workshop, we are taking another important step toward identifying strategies that will help us improve the ways we serve those who look to us for help. Among its important contributions, the workshop highlighted new research that shows how legal aid interventions can significantly improve lives and respond to critical civil justice needs. It put a spotlight on innovative cross-disciplinary tactics, such as combining medical and legal services under one roof. It also furthered the Department's commitment to an evidence-based approach that will produce better outcomes for individuals in need of assistance.

The work of ensuring meaningful access to justice for every American is more than just a professional responsibility—it is a moral obligation and a national charge. It is at the very core of what this country stands for. Whether they are rich or poor, young or old, famous or unknown, every person in this country deserves equality under the law. Every person in this country deserves fair treatment from the civil justice system. And every person in this country deserves our best efforts in the service of that cause. In the days ahead—through workshops like this one, and additional efforts across the country—the Department will continue to fulfill that promise, continue to fight for those values, and continue to strive for justice.

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