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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
October 13, 2004

FROM: Sara Zier
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RE: Civil Legal Needs Study of Washington State

Supreme Court Task Force Documents Scarcity of Necessary Legal Assistance for Low-Income People With Civil Legal Problems

Seattle, WA — The civil equal justice system is out of reach for an overwhelming majority of low-income residents, according to the Washington Supreme Court's Civil Legal Needs Study.

The study documents that more than three quarters of low-income households experience an urgent civil legal need each year, most involving basic human needs. Of those, almost 9 out of 10 people cannot access any legal help to deal with their civil legal problems. According to the study, the many thousands of low-income people who cannot get legal assistance are forced to live with harsh consequences, many of which implicate basic needs such as housing, personal and family safety, and economic security.

A copy of the full report is on the Washington Courts website at www.courts.wa.gov.

"The Civil Legal Needs Study has serious implications for our justice system and society as a whole," said Norm Maleng, King County Prosecuting Attorney and a member of the Supreme Court Task Force on Civil Equal Justice Funding that oversaw the study's development.

"Access to justice is an essential ingredient in a society committed to the rule of law. For people to have respect for the law, they must have confidence that they can effectively enforce and defend their fundamental rights. When access to justice is denied to the poor, all of society suffers."

The Equal Justice Coalition has long championed expanded funding for our state's civil legal aid programs. Decimated by nearly two decades of downsizing and
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challenged to serve the needs of a poverty population that increased by 46% in just the last decade, these legal aid programs are the only source of civil legal assistance for more than 1,000,000 poor and vulnerable residents of our state. Today these programs face a new round of cuts just as the Civil Legal Needs Study reveals the degree to which low income are desperate for more help.

“Access to justice is a promise that lies at the heart of our great democracy,” Gov. Gary Locke said. “The Civil Legal Needs Study objectively documents that our state’s low-income residents are unable to get necessary legal assistance and that the impact is most acutely experienced by women, children, the disabled, and other vulnerable populations. My administration will continue to work with the Supreme Court and the Legislature to ensure that the justice system in our state is open to everyone.”

The Civil Legal Needs Study will serve as the cornerstone of efforts to secure emergency funding from the Legislature for civil legal aid, according to Michele Radosevich, a partner at the Davis Wright Tremaine law firm and chair of the Equal Justice Coalition.

Said Radosevich, “We will continue to work closely with the Supreme Court, the judiciary, the Governor, the Washington State Bar Association, local bar associations across the state, and legislators from both parties to ensure necessary funding for legal aid services in this state.

“The study is a call to action,” Radosevich continued, “As a democracy grounded in the promise of fairness and ‘justice for all,’ we cannot stand idly by when we know that a huge sector of our population is being denied access to justice.”

The Equal Justice Coalition is a broad-based, non-partisan coalition that increases awareness and support for civil legal aid programs in Washington State. The EJC educates the general public and elected officials about civil equal justice and the important role it plays in our lives and communities; and advocates for sufficient and continued funding and resources for both legal aid and volunteer lawyer programs to ensure justice in the lives of low-income people in our state.

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