



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
May 17, 2013

CONTACT:  
Mark Tarasiewicz  
215-238-6346  
[mtarasiewicz@philabar.org](mailto:mtarasiewicz@philabar.org)

**CHIEF JUSTICE CASTILLE, OTHER MEMBERS OF CIVIL LEGAL JUSTICE COALITION TO SPEAK ON PLIGHT OF LOW-INCOME PENNSYLVANIANS WITHOUT LEGAL REPRESENTATION AT PUBLIC HEARING OF PA SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE MAY 23**

Pennsylvania Supreme Court Chief Justice Ronald D. Castille will offer remarks along with other judges, low-income Pennsylvanians and the lawyers who help them, and community and business leaders at a Pennsylvania Senate Judiciary Committee Public Hearing, “Civil Legal Representation of the Indigent: Have We Achieved Equal Access to Justice?” on Thursday, May 23 at 9:30 a.m. at the Philadelphia Bar Association, 1101 Market Street, in the 11<sup>th</sup> floor Conference Center. Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Stewart J. Greenleaf (R-Montgomery, Bucks) will chair the hearing.

Chief Justice Castille is the Honorary Chair of a broad-based “Civil Legal Justice Coalition” created to work collaboratively on exploring strategies to improve access to justice. The 13,000-member Philadelphia Bar Association and 28,000-member Pennsylvania Bar Association are among the organizations that are part of the Coalition.

Among those expected to testify at the hearing are a number of low-income clients, and key stakeholders including: Kathleen D. Wilkinson, Chancellor, Philadelphia Bar Association; Sister Mary Scullion, Co-Founder, Project HOME; Hon. Margaret T. Murphy, Supervising Judge, Family Division, Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas; Hon. Annette M. Rizzo, Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas; and Catherine C. Carr, Executive Director, Community Legal Services of Philadelphia.

This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the landmark decision *Gideon v. Wainwright* establishing the right to counsel for the indigent in serious criminal matters. Few such *Gideon*-type rights have been recognized in civil matters where basic human needs such as shelter, safety, health, sustenance and child custody are at stake. Meanwhile, the demand has surged for civil legal representation on behalf of the poor, whose ranks have swelled following one of the worst recessions in the nation's history. Those needs have been largely unmet due to a "perfect storm" of sustained, repeated and severe cuts in federal and state funding and a tight private fund-raising environment that have resulted in layoffs of legal aid staff and office closings. The gulf between client need and availability of legal help has been termed "the civil justice gap."

State and national studies estimate that a staggering 80 percent of critical legal needs of low-income people go unmet due to grossly insufficient funding and support.

The purpose of the public hearing is to explore and create awareness of the current state and scope of the unmet need for civil legal services by low-income Pennsylvanians confronting legal problems involving basic human needs. Three hearings on the issue are being held by the Senate Judiciary Committee. The first hearing was held on May 7 in Harrisburg. Video and audio recordings of the May 7 hearing are available on the website of the Senate Judiciary Committee at <http://pasenategop.com/committees/judiciary/2013/050713/agenda.htm>. A complete witness list and copies of the testimony presented at the hearing are available at the Civil Gideon Corner of the Philadelphia Bar Association's website at <http://www.philadelphiabar.org/page/CivilGideon?appNum=1>. A future hearing will be scheduled in Pittsburgh.

Public interest agency clients with serious legal problems impacting their basic human needs and those of their families – individuals without access to an attorney or who otherwise could not have been helped without access to an attorney – will share their personal stories of struggle at the hearing. Additionally, key stakeholders will testify regarding the legal community's ethical obligations to the civil side of justice and discuss the adverse impact of the growing civil justice gap, including the economic and social harm (direct and/or indirect) when critical legal needs are unmet as well as the economic and social benefits to the community when such needs are met.

It is anticipated that the hearing will elicit information about how the substantial number of unrepresented litigants in civil legal matters adversely impacts the quality of justice for all parties in Pennsylvania courts, increases the amount of litigation and undermines the rule of law. Additionally, the hearing is expected to explore how the unmet need for civil legal assistance is profoundly impacting vulnerable Pennsylvanians and costing taxpayers millions of dollars by increasing homelessness, failing to prevent domestic violence and increasing poverty. In these difficult economic times, current funding is inadequate to meet the critical need for civil legal assistance in the state.

“Equal access to legal representation is one of the most critical justice issues we face today,” said Senator Greenleaf. “I am pleased to see the Commonwealth’s legal community come together to offer their insights and recommendations to the Judiciary Committee on this important matter. In recent years, we have seen the number of individuals seeking assistance increase and funding disappear due to the economic downturn. I would like to thank the Bar Associations of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania for their dedicated work for equal access to justice for all Pennsylvanians.”

###