

## **Justice Dickinson to talk to Congressional subcommittee about civil legal needs of the poor**

May 20, 2014

Supreme Court Presiding Justice Jess Dickinson will talk about civil legal assistance needs of the poor during a briefing before a subcommittee of the U.S. House Commerce Committee at noon Wednesday (1 p.m. Eastern), May 21.

The briefing will be in Room 2352 of the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington. The briefing is not expected to be broadcast or webcast.

“Certainly there is no other state worse off than we are in terms of funding and the resources we have. We need help, and they (Congressmen) need to know that,” Justice Dickinson told the Mississippi Access to Justice Commission on May 6.

Justice Dickinson is the Supreme Court's liaison to organizations providing legal services to the poor, and is a charter member of the Access to Justice Commission.

Congress determines the annual funding for the Legal Services Corporation, LSC. The Legal Service Corporation, an independent non-profit, in turn provides funding for Legal Services offices that represent low income people in civil legal matters including family law, housing and foreclosure, consumer issues and income maintenance. Legal Services also assists military families and provides civil legal assistance to victims of disasters.

Mississippi's two Legal Services organizations have 32 attorneys and three attorney directors to cover the entire state.

“That's 32 lawyers for 600,000 people who live in poverty,” said Justice Dickinson. “There are hundreds of thousands of people who never get any help.... We don't have the money. If we tripled your budget, you couldn't hire enough lawyers,” he said to Legal Services directors at the Access to Justice Commission meeting.

Federal funding through LSC continues to decline for Mississippi's two Legal Services organizations. LSC funding dropped from more than \$6 million in 2010 to \$4.3 million for the 2014 fiscal year, according to Mississippi directors. LSC funding makes up more than three-fourths of the annual budget for the state's two Legal Services offices, North Mississippi Rural Legal Services and the Mississippi Center for Legal Services.

Congress appropriated more money for the Legal Services Corporation during the most recent funding cycle, but Mississippi got less, said North Mississippi Rural Legal Services Executive Director Ben Thomas Cole II of Oxford. While the number of people living in poverty grew in Mississippi, the national poverty population percentage increase was greater. That resulted in a 15.1 percent LSC funding decrease spread over two years for Mississippi Legal Services organizations, Cole

said.

“It’s just a constant battle for funding and we are continuing to do what we can to try to supplement the LSC funding,” Cole said. “We continue to seek new funding sources, but the reality is there is stiff competition for those additional funding sources. There are a number of agencies and organizations that are vying for the same pot of money,” said Cole, who was not among those scheduled to speak before the Congressional subcommittee.

People who live in households with annual incomes of 125 percent of the federal poverty level – \$14,363 for an individual or \$29, 438 for a family of four – qualify for civil legal assistance. Nationally, Legal Services offices turn away about half of the eligible people who ask for assistance. There aren’t enough staff and resources to take all of the cases. In Mississippi, Cole said he’s afraid more than half are turned away.

In 2013, Legal Services offices in Mississippi assisted 23,840 people and finalized 8,627 civil cases for their clients, according to data provided by Cole and Sam H. Buchanan Jr. of Hattiesburg, executive director of the Mississippi Center for Legal Services. That’s 2,198 fewer people and 791 fewer cases than the previous year, based on data from LSC.

Cole details the struggle, but takes heart in what Legal Services accomplishes. “We are able to do a lot of good with the resources we have. We are providing services to the poorest of the poor. We are able to help a lot of people. We can’t help everyone, but for the people we do help...it makes a huge difference in their lives. For me, that’s what keeps me going.”

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