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Chief justice: Task force will fill 'justice gap'

A new Michigan Supreme Court task force will promote ways to help those who cannot afford an attorney, including developing a web site for non-lawyers who represent themselves in legal proceedings, according to Chief Justice Marilyn Kelly.

Kelly announced the Solutions on Self-Help Task Force during her “State of the Judiciary” address before a joint session of the state House and Senate last week. The task force will be co-chaired by Detroit attorney Lorraine Weber, the Supreme Court's Director of Access and Fairness, and by Lansing attorney Linda Rexer, executive director of the Michigan Bar Foundation, which supports civil legal aid programs.

Kelly said that Michigan's economy has contributed to making many people unable to afford legal services.

While the economy has greatly increased the number of people who are eligible for civil legal aid, legal aid agencies must turn away many of them due to limited resources, Kelly explained.

“Legal aid agencies are doing a valiant job, along with the many Michigan attorneys who donate more than 30,000 hours of free services each year,” she said. “But the need far outstrips their capacities.”

Many people who cannot afford to hire an attorney try to represent themselves, Kelly said. But, she said, many self-represented litigants find it difficult to navigate the legal system and understand legal forms.

“I created this task force to fill the justice gap I see in our state,” Kelly explained.

“Many judges and court staff have tried to develop resources for those who represent themselves, but not all those resources are truly helpful or up-to-date. So, among other goals, the SOS Task Force will develop a statewide self-help Web site, likely

modeled after the Illinois Legal Aid Web site (www.illinoislegalaid.org) that will help non-lawyers represent themselves as effectively as possible.”

Other projects include developing a self-help curriculum for judicial and court staff training, and working with courts to make court forms more understandable by those with limited literacy and limited English proficiency.

Other task force members include:

- Lorrain S.C. Brown, Michigan Poverty Law Program.
- Michael C. Bryce, Director of Clinical Programs, University of Detroit Mercy Law School.
- Hon. Alfred M. Butzbaugh, Chief Judge, Berrien County Trial Court.
- Kari K. Deming, Lakeshore Legal Aid/Counsel & Advocacy Law Line.
- Ruth H. Dukelow, Associate Director, Michigan Library Consortium.
- Hon. Elizabeth Pollard Hines, Judge, 15th District Court (Ann Arbor).
- Hon. Kenneth J. King, Chief Judge Pro Tem, 36th District Court (Detroit).
- Laura Mancini, Director Library Services, Oakland County Law Library.
- Dawn F. McCarty, Director, Michigan Judicial Institute.
- Barbara A. Menear, Court Administrator, Genesee County Circuit Court.
- Dawn Monk, Deputy State Court Administrator, State Court Administrative Office, Michigan Supreme Court.
- Hon. Denise Langford Morris, Judge, Oakland County Circuit Court.
- Terri Stangl, Executive Director, Center for Civil Justice.
- Hon. Cynthia Stephens, Michigan Court of Appeals.
- Kyeena G. Slater, Executive Director, Washtenaw County Bar Association.
- Janet Welch, Executive Director, State Bar of Michigan.
- Valerie Ambrose, Executive Director, Legal Assistance Center, Kent County Courthouse.
- Michelle Alicia Carter, President, Wolverine Bar Association.