

Justice Action Group

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Honorable Frank M. Coffin, Of Counsel

June 21, 2006

Dear Colleague,

I am writing to bring you up to date on the progress of the Statewide Access to Justice Planning Initiative recently undertaken by the Justice Action Group (JAG).

Discussion of the need for statewide planning for justice began in 2004 following an evaluation of Maine's justice community conducted by the Legal Services Corporation (LSC). In its evaluation report, LSC commended Maine for its excellent work on access to justice issues and recognized our state as a model among state justice communities. LSC urged Maine to build on its good work by engaging in a statewide planning process, with the goal of creating a vision and a plan for enhancing access to justice over the next 15 years. LSC's recommendation and the fact that Maine's legal service providers and pro bono attorneys are able to serve only about one in four of the low-income households with legal needs spurred JAG – in partnership with the Maine Bar Foundation, Maine State Bar Association, Maine judicial system, Maine's legal services and social service providers and others – to begin a statewide planning process.

JAG kicked off the planning initiative with a successful Planning Retreat held on March 21, 2006 at the Maple Hill Farm in Hallowell. Lawyers, judges, consumer advocates, social service providers and other interested stakeholders got together to develop a vision for the civil justice system in Maine and to generate ideas about goals and strategies that would help to guide the planning process. The Retreat was an energizing experience for those who participated, and it is my goal to ensure that we capture and build upon the interest and enthusiasm generated there.

Since the Retreat, we have been working to pull together a number of work groups that will explore the issues and strategies identified at the Retreat and in surveys circulated to lawyers, judges and consumers several months ago. There are six planning work groups that will focus on the following:

- Reducing the Need for Crisis Intervention
- Assuring a Consumer Friendly System and Assisting Self-Represented Litigants
- Utilizing Lawyers to Enhance Access to Justice
- Expanding Resources
- Sustaining and Assuring Quality, and
- Sustaining and Promoting Leadership for Justice.

To date, more than 115 individuals from all around Maine and from diverse backgrounds and experiences have volunteered to serve on one of these work groups. We are fortunate to have been able to recruit representatives of the private bar, the courts, the legal services providers and the social service community to serve as work group chairs and vice-chairs. In addition, representatives of several of Maine's legal service providers have agreed to provide crucial staff support for the work groups. JAG is deeply appreciative of the commitment of all these people. Without their involvement and dedication, this planning process would not be possible.

In the coming months, the work groups will survey the landscape and assess the current situation in Maine. They will begin to identify strategies and best practices that may address issues and problems presented and then determine how each identified strategy will enhance and expand access to justice. The goal is to pull together the proposals and recommendations of the work groups into an action plan by May 2007. Throughout this process, JAG will continue to reach out to various stakeholder groups to get their input into the process and their feedback on proposed strategies.

I am bringing this information to you here at the Summer Meeting because the MSBA and Maine's attorneys are key elements in the success of JAG's planning initiative. It is important to JAG that you are kept informed, and that we continue to get your feedback about issues you encounter and your suggestions for solutions.

Please do not hesitate to contact me or JAG's Executive Coordinator, Sally Sutton, at any time with questions, concerns or ideas, or if you would like to become a member of one of the work groups. You can also stay informed about the progress of our efforts to enhance access to justice in Maine by visiting JAG's website at: www.mbf.org/justice.htm.

With all best wishes,



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