

MARYLAND ACCESS TO JUSTICE COMMISSION

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*24 February 2009
9:30 am
Annapolis, Maryland*

SUMMARY OF COMMISSION MEETING

Currently, there is a growing funding shortfall in the Interest on Lawyers Trust Account program, through which Maryland legal services organizations are funded. The Access & Delivery of Legal Services Committee recommends that the Commission pursue a voluntary contribution check-off be added to the MSBA dues invoice, inviting attorneys to contribute to a special "Access to Justice Fund."

The **Access & Delivery of Legal Services Committee** identified five discrete areas and will be creating work groups for each: i) Discrete Task Representation – a joint effort with the Self-Represented Litigant (SRL) Committee; ii) Funding; iii) Civil Gideon/Judicare; iv) Fee-Shifting Statutes; and v) Continuum of Services – a joint effort with the Public Education Committee. The **Critical Barriers Committee** identified a range of critical barriers and special populations they want to address including: ability; seniors, youth; court practices and structures; cultural; domestic violence; homelessness; immigration status; incarceration; language; parenting; and sexuality. The **Definitions & Standards Committee** hopes to identify goals, objectives and indicators to frame the work of the Commission. The **Public Education Committee** reported that the Committee hopes to promote enhanced public awareness of the civil justice system. The **Safety, Accessibility & Convenience Committee**, reported that the Committee plans to add some members who handle security in the courts, since that function was not well represented. The **Self-Represented Litigants Committee** is planning to form five subcommittees: i) Public Input; ii) Media Development; iii) Forms Management; iv) Self-Help Centers;

v) Discrete Task Representation. The Committee plans to pursue a District Court Self-Help Center demonstration project.

The Commission continued its discussion about how best to include public participation and input. The following ideas were suggested: focus groups, targeted surveys of self-represented litigants, and exit questionnaires.

The Court Research & Development Department, of the Administrative Office of the Courts, presented the results of the AOC's recent Access & Fairness Survey. The survey revealed that persons with disabilities report "access" to the courts as less satisfactory. Hispanic/Latinos rated "access" and "fairness" higher than other groups. Whites were fairly close behind Hispanic/Latinos. Black/African-American respondents reported lower "access" and "fairness" experiences. Those who identified themselves as "Other" were significantly worse. Within that group, Asians reported higher scores, closer to the ratings given by White and Hispanics; persons of mixed race and other categories reported satisfaction levels well below 70%. The experiences of Black/African-American respondents are significant because they represented such a high percentage of court users completing the survey. The largest disparity came in response to the question, "I was treated equally without regard to race/ethnicity."