

New panel to boost legal access

Commission will focus on city's low-income residents

BY SARAH KELLEY
Examiner Staff Writer

Whether it's a battered woman seeking a restraining order, a mother fighting to retain custody of her child or a family facing an unwarranted eviction, chances are if they're poor and living in the District, they might not get the legal help they need.

That's a reality a group of Washington judges, attorneys and other leaders in the legal community hope to change.

"I think it's important that we have more legal representation for low-income people," said Peter Edelman, chairman of the new Access to Justice Commission.

"Very typically they have nowhere to turn and they end up without help," the Georgetown law professor added Monday after he was sworn in, along with other commission members, by D.C. Court of Appeals Chief Judge Anice Wagner.

Aid, attorneys top priorities

The group now will embark on a mission to increase the access low-income residents have to civil legal services. Specifically, the group will work to seek more funding for legal assistance and recruit more attorneys to provide pro bono work.

"Equal access to justice is a fundamental principle in America," Wagner said Monday. "In spite of



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From left, D.C. Superior Court Judge Puige Lugo, D.C. Superior Court Judge Stephanie Duncan-Peters, D.C. Court of Appeals Judge Inez Smith-Reid and D.C. Court of Appeals Judge Eric Washington are sworn in to the new Access on Justice Commission on Monday in the District.

the continuing efforts of many in our legal community, we still have to work to make that principle a reality in the District."

Access to Justice was launched in Washington in response to a D.C. Bar Foundation study that revealed only one in 10 of the more than 110,000 District residents living in poverty receive legal representation when needed.

This is a problem Judge Wagner said "erodes public trust and confidence in our system of justice."

Despite the efforts of the D.C. Bar's Pro Bono Project and the work of about 20 nonprofits throughout the city that provide civil litigation services to low-

income clients, the needs of many still are not being met, said Jonathan Smith, executive director of the Legal Aid Society for D.C.

Group seeks pro-bono lawyers

Smith said there are about 35,000 D.C. Bar members living in Washington, yet only 100 or so provide full-time pro bono work.

As a member of the commission, Smith said he hopes to generate more funding for community-based legal programs, enhance communication among those working to provide pro bono services and streamline these services for the poor.

The ultimate goal of the com-

mission is to ensure all District residents who need a lawyer in civil cases get one. According to Edelman, the commission will work quickly to achieve that goal.

"When people are already at the edge, a lawyer can make all the difference," he said. "The help of a lawyer can enable poor people to keep their families together, hold onto their home or apartment, fight back against an unscrupulous lender or merchant, protect themselves and their children against an abusive spouse or partner or gain redress against a dishonest employer. The stakes are often at the level of basic survival."

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More top stories

Congress urged on D.C. voting rights

More than 80 percent of Americans support equal voting rights for the District of Columbia, four members of Congress wrote in a letter Monday to their fellow representatives.

The "Dear Colleague" letter was signed by Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton and U.S. Reps. Thomas M. Davis, R-Va., Dana Rohrabacher, R-Calif., and Ralph Regula, R-Ohio. The members have all introduced bills seeking some voting power for the District.

They wrote that 82 percent of Americans support equal voting rights, up 10 points since a 1999 survey. Seventy-seven percent of Republicans support voting rights, as did 87 percent of Democrats.

The telephone survey was conducted Jan. 14-16 by Washington-based KRC Research Inc. for DC Vote. The survey had an estimated margin of error of 3.1 percent.

None of the bills before Congress are expected to survive committee hearings, Norton said, but the four members are laying "the groundwork that is necessary for voting rights to be taken seriously in the Congress."

Two new Dulles runways raise noise level concerns in Fairfax

Fairfax County leaders agreed Monday to propose plans for two new runways at Dulles International Airport but they expressed reservations about increasing noise from the airport.

The county Board of Supervisors approved a letter to the Federal Aviation Administration supporting two proposals for building the runways. The letter was in response to a draft Environmental Impact Statement. An FAA decision on the runways is expected by December.

The county asked that Dulles consider operational changes to reduce noise from the new flights.

"When you go from 22 million to 55 million passengers a year, there is going to be more noise," said Supervisor Michael R. Frey, R-Sully.

Man allegedly exposes himself to three elementary students

Three elementary school students encountered a man exposing as they walked to White Oaks Elementary school Monday morning, Fairfax County police said.

Three girls, ages 10, 11 and 12, were walking near the intersection of Cordwood Court and Shiplett Boulevard when a man in a silver SUV called to them, police said. The man allegedly exposed himself to the 12-year-old girl.

The suspect was described as white, with short brown or dirty blonde hair. Anyone with information is asked to call Crime Solvers at 1-866-411-TIPS.

Nat'l Archives regular guilty of art theft

Staunton man posed as researcher to gain access

BY SARAH KELLEY
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Howard Harner was a regular at the U.S. National Archives, where he would sift through stacks of historic documents pretending to do research. But it wasn't a wealth of knowledge he was after.

Instead, Harner was pocketing thousands of dollars by selling

stolen Civil War-era documents, which he had stealthily tucked into his clothes while no one was watching and smuggled out of the building.

The 68-year-old Staunton, Va., man pleaded guilty Monday in U.S. District Court in Washington to one count of stealing major art work.

Thief hid relics, sold on eBay

Harner admitted to stealing the documents by "hiding them in his clothing during his visits" and then selling them to individuals and auction houses, according to court papers.

He posed as an academic researcher to gain access to the materials.

Between 1996 and 2002 Harner stole more than 100 historic papers.

Many of the stolen items were letters from military officers and government officials involved in directing both the Civil War and the westward expansion of the United States, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office.

Harner faces up to 10 years in prison, but likely will receive a term of about two to three years.

Researcher spurred arrest

Harner was caught when a Civil War researcher from Pennsylvania noticed a document he previously had viewed at the National Archives was being auctioned on eBay.

The researcher notified government officials and eBay immediately pulled the document from its site.

The FBI linked Harner to the document and ultimately to the theft of numerous other documents, according to prosecutors.

Among the documents that Harner stole were letters from famous historical figures such as Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee and Generals Lewis Armistead and George Pickett.

Harner netted more than \$47,000 from the sale of these historic letters and documents.

U.S. District Court Judge James Robertson is expected to sentence Harner on May 26.

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