



Legal Services Corporation has a role

For many historic and political reasons, Puerto Rico and the United States share a deep respect for the goal of equal justice for all. "With liberty and justice for all" is a phrase that resonates with practically all residents of this land, and we have embraced "equal justice under law" as an ideal.

But the reality is that the poor — including many working class families — usually cannot hire a lawyer when they need one to solve a pressing civil legal problem. With the onslaught of the current recession, especially in Puerto Rico, it is clear that increasing numbers of people will be turning to legal aid programs because they have no place else to go for assistance.

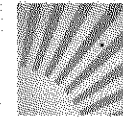
Three vast majority of these low-income residents of Puerto Rico are women seeking protection from abuse, mothers trying to obtain child support, families facing unlawful evictions or foreclosures that could leave them homeless, and individuals who have lost their jobs and need help applying for unemployment compensation and other benefits.

Thirty-five years ago, Congress created the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) to promote equal access to justice and to fund nonprofit programs that provide high-quality civil legal assistance to the nation's poor. President Obama recently recognized this important event with a Presidential Proclamation. In recent years, the government of Puerto Rico has also stepped up to the challenge of funding and supporting legal aid — albeit far below the level necessary to provide adequate services. Puerto Rico Legal Services, Inc. (PRLS) is LSC's largest grantee (out of 137 legal aid offices funded throughout the U.S. and its territories, Puerto Rico's receives the largest chunk of money because of our high poverty levels). However, contrary to many U.S. jurisdictions, law firms, individual attorneys and private foundations in Puerto Rico do not donate as much time and money on behalf of legal aid to the poor as is needed.

On a larger scale, millions of Americans for the first time are, or will be, finding themselves facing poverty because of the recession. The challenge for civil legal aid programs is huge. Nearly 51 million U.S. citizens, including 2 million in Puerto Rico, qualify for civil legal aid from the 137 nonprofit programs around the country that currently receive funding from LSC.

Even before the current recession, LSC-funded programs were not able to help all the people who came through their doors or called on the telephone. In 2005, LSC found that for every eligible client LSC-funded programs were able to assist, one eligible applicant was turned away. LSC understated the magnitude of the "justice gap," because it only included people aware of services and those who came to a legal aid office. In Puerto Rico, the justice gap is more pronounced, with less than one attorney available for every 12,000+ potential clients, according to current estimates.

In Puerto Rico and elsewhere, funding and resources do not keep pace with the demand for civil legal aid. The fact is that the majority of most of our poor do not have access to justice. At a time of economic hardship, governments, businesses and community organizations must step up their efforts to provide high-quality civil legal assistance to the poor. These times require all of us to keep working to make the promise of equal justice a reality.



Publisher
Cooperativa Prensas Unidas
COPU
copu@prdailynews.net

Executive Editor
Marisol Lora-Cruz
mlora@prdailynews.net

Editor
Rafael Matos
editor@prdailynews.net

News Editor
Eduardo San Miguel Tio
news@prdailynews.net

Perspectives
voices@prdailynews.net

Economy Editor
Michelle Kantrow
mkantrow@prdailynews.net

Arts & Living Editor
Ian Malinow
imalinow@prdailynews.net

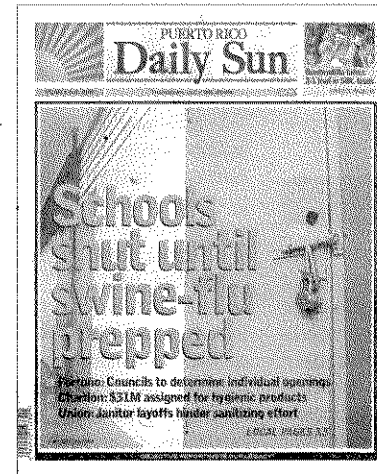
Sports Editor
Aaron Christiana
achristiana@prdailynews.net

Graphics Editor
Edgardo Jiménez
ejimenez@prdailynews.net

Circulation Director
Javier Colón
jcolon@prdailynews.net

Sales Director
Onil Suárez
osuarez@prdailynews.net

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