

October events put spotlight on pro bono, access to justice

By Amy Yarbrough
Staff writer

Reading about the Justice Gap Fund in a news article a year or so ago, James Wood recalls being shocked – one because he didn't know about the program, which provides key financial help to legal aid organizations statewide, and two because of how severely hit it had been by the economy.

Wood, who was already active in pro bono work in the San Francisco Bay Area, vowed to get involved. The Reed Smith partner is now part of a committee working to get the word out and encourage other attorneys to do pro bono work or donate to the Campaign for Justice, which the Justice Gap Fund helps to support.

Wood and his fellow committee members will be doubling their efforts throughout October, designated Campaign for Justice Month. In addition, there are a number of [events around the state](#) to coincide with National Pro Bono Week the third week in October (Oct. 21-27).

Chair of the volunteer legal services program for the Alameda County Bar and co-chair of the board for the AIDS Legal Referral Panel, Wood said he's always been passionate about helping those in need.

"I saw the campaign as another great opportunity to provide access to justice," he said.

Started in early 2011, the Campaign for Justice supports 95 organizations that provide free legal help to low-income Californians, from a legal center that works with low-income seniors in Yuba and Sutter counties, to bigger groups that push for systemic changes, such as California Advocates for Nursing Home Reform. The campaign receives funding through voluntary contributions to the Justice Gap Fund, which raises money by allowing lawyers to donate through their annual dues statements, which are due Feb. 1.

The campaign's other major funding comes from the Equal Access Fund, administered by the Administrative Office of the Courts, and Interest of Lawyers' Trust Accounts (IOLTA), a source of financing which has taken a dramatic hit in recent years.

Between 2008 and 2011, a drop in interest rates slashed the money coming into the State Bar's Legal Services Trust Fund, which distributes grants to the legal services organizations who benefit from the campaign. It plummeted from roughly \$22.76 million in 2008 to \$6.24 million in 2011. As of August, the fund had brought in only \$3.4 million.

Daniel Passamaneck, grants administrator for the Legal Services Trust Fund, said what makes matters worse is that the state's court system is "choked" with a huge number of litigants who can't afford attorneys, and the outlook for more funds doesn't seem to be getting any better.

"We are seeing interest rates remaining flat for the foreseeable future," he said.

To help turn things around, the campaign has been reaching out to the faith-based community in recent months, asking religious leaders to designate a day in October where they talk to their congregations about the importance of access to justice for underserved Californians and encourage them to donate.

Elena Enzweiler, a senior accountant with the Legal Services Trust Fund, said the timing couldn't be more critical, noting that funding has dropped while foreclosure cases continue to inundate the court system. "The need for legal aid is really rising," she said. "It just creates a perfect storm."

Wood, who has also worked to increase participation in the campaign within Reed Smith, agreed. As legal aid groups struggle for funding, judicial budget cuts have made it harder and harder for Californians to have their day in court.

"Those who have the greatest need have the greatest strikes against them as far as legal services," he said. "We just need to find any way we can to open the doors to the courts."

