

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – June 1, 2009

Contact: Jill Radwin 404-463-1849 or radwinj@gaaoc.us

Summit to address Georgians' civil legal needs

Statewide study reveals justice gap among income levels

ATLANTA - The civil legal needs of low- and moderate-income households in Georgia will be the focus of a summit meeting sponsored by the Supreme Court of Georgia's Committee on Civil Justice, scheduled for Wednesday, June 24.

The Georgia Civil Legal Needs Summit is part of an ongoing statewide initiative to improve access to the civil justice system in Georgia. The Committee on Civil Justice commissioned a study of the civil legal needs of the state's low- and moderate-income population to provide up-to-date information and analysis about the current level of access to the civil justice system.

Summit participants will discuss the findings of the study, conducted by the A.L. Burruss Institute of Public Service and Research at Kennesaw State University, and begin developing recommendations to address needs identified in the process. The 2007/2008 Georgia Civil Legal Needs Study is the first to be conducted in the state since 1994.

"The concept of equal justice for all is the driving force behind this initiative," said Chief Justice Leah Ward Sears of the Supreme Court of Georgia, ex-officio head of the Committee on Civil Justice. "We are all stakeholders in closing the justice gap. If the system does not work equally for all, then it does not work for any of us."

According to the study, released this week, more than 60 percent of low- and moderate-income households in Georgia experience one or more civil legal needs per year.

Low-income households, defined as up to \$30,000 annual income with four people in the household, experience an average of three civil legal needs annually, totaling more than 2 million civil legal needs per year. Households in the moderate income category (up to \$60,000 annual income for a four-person household) have an average of 2.63 civil legal needs per year, for an annual total exceeding 4 million.

Common problems experienced by low- and moderate-income households in Georgia, according to the study, include consumer issues, housing, health care, employment, public benefits, education and family matters. Approximately 75 percent of participants in the public telephone survey component of the study said they did not realize these problems could be remedied in the justice system, a key reason they often fail to seek legal assistance.

The report discusses other obstacles interfering with access to the justice system and how the courts, attorneys and legal services providers are responding to the situation.

The Committee on Civil Justice has invited a broad spectrum of Georgia leaders to participate in the summit, including representatives from the executive, legislative and judicial branches of federal, state and local governments, local bar associations, law schools, the business community, charitable organizations and the news media.

The summit will be held at the State Bar of Georgia headquarters in downtown Atlanta from 9 a.m. to noon and will be simulcast to the State Bar's South Georgia office in Tifton and new Coastal Georgia office in Savannah, as well as via webinar to open house gatherings hosted by Georgia Legal Services Program offices in selected cities. The statewide summit will be followed by a series of public hearings around the state in an effort to expand awareness of the justice gap and receive more input as to recommended solutions.

“This summit is intended to serve as a springboard for delivering on the constitutional promise of justice for all,” said Committee on Civil Justice Co-Chair Anne W. Lewis, a partner with the Atlanta law firm Strickland Brockington & Lewis. “This is step one, identifying and making the public aware of the scope of the problem, as well as the beginning of step two – seeking and enabling the appropriate solutions.”

Co-Chair Teri P. McClure, Senior Vice President of Legal, Compliance and Public Affairs, General Counsel and Corporate Secretary of United Parcel Service Inc., added, “Providing legal assistance to those who cannot afford it simply levels the playing field – a time-honored, foundational principle of our justice system. By improving access to our courts, we are helping Georgia families help themselves.”

The Supreme Court of Georgia Equal Justice Commission Committee on Civil Justice was created by court order in 2005, began work in 2006 and was charged with the task of creating equal access to justice for all Georgians. The committee's mission statement is “to develop for implementation in Georgia a statewide, broad-based, publicly known and supported, coordinated system for the poor which provide education, advice and tools to identify and address legal issues; ensures competent legal representation when appropriate; and promotes the efficient, effective and fair resolution of legal issues and disputes.”

Anyone planning to attend the summit should pre-register online at www.gaccj.org.

-end-

Access the 2007/2008 Georgia Civil Legal Needs Study at
http://www.gaccj.org/pdf/LegalNeeds_Report+FINAL+5.27.pdf