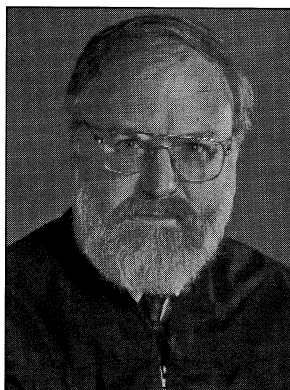


Judge Purdom Serves on Committee To Strengthen Civil Justice

by Karlise Y. Grier

D EKALB COUNTY STATE COURT JUDGE WAYNE M. PURDOM



Judge Wayne M. Purdom

was recently appointed to the Georgia Supreme Court's Committee on Civil Justice, which is working to strengthen the state's civil justice system to ensure that Georgia's poorest citizens have meaningful access to the courts.

"Access to the courts, whether on your own or through an attorney is protected in Georgia's Bill of Rights, and as judges, we take an oath 'to do equal rights to the rich and the poor,'" says Judge Purdom, who will serve a four-year term on the committee.

"I look forward to the work of this committee as an opportunity to advance the responsibilities of my office," Judge Purdom adds.

Judge Purdom, who has a special interest in the issues that impact pro se litigants, offers the committee a unique perspective because of his long history of working in courts with a large number of unrepresented parties. He was appointed to the DeKalb County State Court bench in 1998. Prior to joining the State Court, he served as the Chief Magistrate Court Judge for DeKalb County for 14 years.

Judge Purdom is also a member of the Supreme Court Equal Justice Commission Committee on Fairness and Access to the Courts, which was formerly known as the Commission on Equality. He is the author of several books, including West's Georgia Civil Discovery with Forms and West's Magistrate Court Handbook.

Expanding Court Access

The Committee on Civil Justice will work to strengthen Georgia's civil justice system by developing, coordinating and supporting policy initiatives to expand access to the courts in civil matters for poor and vulnerable Georgians.

The 22-member committee, which held its first meeting on May 2, is a part of the Georgia Equal Justice Commission. The committee is chaired by Marc Gary, general counsel for BellSouth Corporation. Anne W. Lewis, a partner at Strickland Brockington Lewis LLP, is the committee's vice chair.

Although Georgia has made significant

strides in meeting the legal needs of indigent criminal defendants, for many low-income citizens requiring assistance in civil legal matters, the promise of meaningful access to justice has been slow in coming. According to a 1994 Georgia legal needs study, in any given year, nearly 40 percent of the state's poorest citizens had at least one civil legal need, but only one in 10 was able to secure legal representation. Even

more troubling is the fact that most poverty-law cases impact areas of fundamental human concern, including family, housing, health, and education.

Need Increasing Dramatically

At its June 19 meeting, Phyllis Holmen, the executive director of the Georgia Legal Services Program, told the committee there are currently 750,000 people in the Georgia counties served by GLSP who live below the poverty line, which is defined as \$20,000 per year of gross income for a family of four. Steve Gottlieb, the executive director of the Atlanta Legal Aid Society, advised that preliminary census data, trended through the end of the decade, indicate that Georgia's poverty population will increase by 94 percent between 2000 and 2010.

The need for civil legal services for poor and vulnerable Georgians is therefore dramatically increasing.

Building on the work begun by the State Bar of Georgia's Access to Justice Committee, the Committee on Civil Justice hopes to assist stakeholder organizations in developing strategic alliances, eliminating duplication of effort, and securing the legal, financial, and political support necessary to ensure the delivery of civil legal services to all those in need.

The committee has held or will hold several meetings at the State Bar of Georgia. The dates and topics for these meetings are: Aug. 22, 10 a.m. (Various Legal Resources Currently Available to Low-Income Georgians); Sept. 26, 10 a.m. (Pro Se Initiatives and Issues); Oct. 31, 9:30 a.m. (The Justice Gap); Dec. 4, 10 a.m. (National Access to Justice Initiatives).

For more information about the committee's work, please contact Executive Director Karlise Y. Grier, 404-920-0038, or kygrier@aol.com. ❧