

ALABAMA ACCESS TO JUSTICE COMMISSION

PURPOSE: The commission is “charged with the responsibility to assure high quality access for low income residents and others in Alabama who suffer access barriers to the civil justice system.”

NEED: Currently, Alabama ranks 51st in United States and territories in the amount of funding for civil legal aid. On average, Alabama appropriates \$10 annually per every low-income citizen. This places Alabama behind every state in the nation and also behind Puerto Rico in funding.

In the past, planning and coordination for the provisions of legal aid services to the indigent in Alabama was handled by Legal Services Corporation, which is a Congressionally established non-profit corporation designated to provide legal aid to low-income citizens in civil matters. Prior to 2002, Alabama had three programs funded and managed by Legal Services Corporation. In that year the Task Force of Reconfiguration reviewed the operations of those three programs and recommended their merger, which was accomplished. Since then, planning has been handled by the Access to Justice Commission, which has functioned on an ad hoc basis. That Commission has now come to realize that to be truly effective the structure of the Commission need to be more formalized, and that it needs to operate on a regular basis. It has been observed that the most effective of the state access to justice programs in current operation are those which receive direct input from the broad base of the legal community, including both the judiciary and the bar association.

FUNCTION: The Access to Justice Commission will function as a coordinator, bringing together organizations that serve the poor to maximize the use of the limited resources available for providing civil legal services. To reach its goal of assuring high quality access to the civil justice system to low-income citizens of the state the commission will take the following steps:

- evaluate the current system of providing legal aid to low-income citizens;
- develop a collaborative plan to effectively serve clients through a range of service;
- develop standards to assess the performance of providers; and
- review the plan on an annual basis.

MEMBERS: The Commission shall consist of 19 members suggested by the following groups:

- Administrative Office of Courts
- Alabama State Bar President Alabama Law Foundation
- Legal services programs
- Volunteer legal services community
- Advocacy groups representing the interests of low-income Alabamians.

FUNDING: The funding for the Commission will initially come from funds which are

available pursuant to § 12-19-181(3), Ala. Code 1975, which should be sufficient for initial operations and project funding. Additional funds will have to come from sources outside the state budget.