



# Supreme Court of Illinois

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## **CHIEF JUSTICE STRESSES THE NEED FOR LEGAL AID, PRO BONO SERVICES**

Illinois Supreme Court Chief Justice Rita B. Garman knows the important role legal aid services and pro bono work plays in ensuring equal access to the justice system.

Not only has she seen the need for these services in the courtroom as a longtime judge, but Chief Justice Garman told attendants of Prairie State Legal Services' annual Pro Bono Recognition luncheon earlier this month that she understands the need from their perspective too.

The Chief Justice's first job out of law school in 1968 was making \$90 a week as a legal aid attorney in Vermilion County.

"Legal aid formed who I am today," Chief Justice Garman said after delivering the keynote address at the April 16 event in Peoria.

The Chief Justice said she remembers many of her former clients, including a woman who was deceptively sold a set of encyclopedias she couldn't afford, and that the experience she gained as a legal aid attorney more than four decades ago made her a better lawyer.

While laws have since been passed to better protect consumers like her former client, Chief Justice Garman said the need for legal aid remains. She said the need is driven by several factors and issues, including the recent mortgage foreclosure crisis and the difficulties many pro-se litigants face while trying to navigate the system, such as language barriers.

Substantial cuts in federal funding have made it even harder for groups providing legal aid, like Prairie State Legal Services (PSLS), to meet the growing need. PSLS is a not-for-profit law firm that provides and coordinates free civil legal assistance to low-income and elderly people in 36 counties in northern and central Illinois.

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## **CJ Stresses Need for Legal Aid, Pro Bono Services Add One**

The Chief Justice said there were more than 71,000 individuals living below the poverty line in 2013 in the 10 counties central and western Illinois counties that PSLS's Peoria office serve. Given that half of all low-income individuals will have a civil legal need each year, Chief Justice Garman said that means there is only one attorney from PSLS's Peoria office for every 4,700 people who qualify for legal aid.

To ensure everyone has equal access to justice, the Chief Justice told attendants at PSLS's annual luncheon that communities need to provide financial support to their local legal services office and lawyers should continue volunteering their time by doing pro bono work.

Stressing the importance of public education, Chief Justice Garman said "The greatest barrier to equal justice is a lack of information."

The Chief Justice said she and her colleagues on the Illinois Supreme Court have made access to justice a priority.

The court in 2012 created the Commission on Access to Justice to "promote, facilitate, and enhance equal access to justice with an emphasis on access to the Illinois civil courts and administrative agencies for all people, particularly the poor and vulnerable."

Two years later, the court created a Civil Justice Division within the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts to further improve access to justice throughout the state. Among other initiatives, the court's efforts have led to the creation of standardized forms to help pro se litigants.

Speaking to the packed room of attendants at PSLS's luncheon, which recognized attorneys who handled pro bono cases for the group and those who provided financial support, Chief Justice Garman said she was encouraged by their presence and urged them to recommit themselves to the mission of equal justice.

"The unmet need for legal services is great," Chief Justice Garman said. "It cannot and should not be ignored."

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