

Maine Justice Action Group

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The Maine Justice Action Group (JAG) was established in 1995 by a coalition of individuals and organizations including members of the Legislature, the judiciary, the Executive Branch, the Maine State Bar Association, the Maine Bar Foundation, the Maine Trial Lawyers Association, Pine Tree Legal Assistance, Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project, Volunteer Lawyers Project, Legal Services for the Elderly, Maine Equal Justice Project/Partners, the Maine Civil Legal Service Fund and the University of Maine School of Law. JAG itself is not a formal legal entity but functions under an Operational Agreement with the Maine Bar Foundation (MBF). The MBF also provides operational support to JAG and employs one part-time executive coordinator to staff the organization. JAG is comprised of a volunteer board of approximately twenty representative members who meet quarterly. An executive committee of six members meets monthly to guide and facilitate the work of the full JAG Board and oversee implementation of the recommendations of the 2007 Report of the Statewide Planning Initiative: *Justice For All: A Report of the Justice Action Group*. All participants of JAG, other than the part-time Executive Coordinator, are volunteers.

The mission of JAG is to provide leadership and coordination in planning for the provision of civil legal aid to low income and elderly Mainers statewide. JAG also provides a public voice for those in need of legal assistance who are unable to afford it. It is currently focused on educating all Mainers regarding the need for these services and the potential impact of failing to provide access to civil legal aid in Maine.

Justice For All: A Report of the Justice Action Group was the culmination of a two-year planning study published in January 2008. The Report set forth specific recommendations and strategies to expand and enhance access to justice for all Mainers. In January 2008, Justice Jon D. Levy of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court, assumed the chair of JAG and moved forward to implement key recommendations from the Report. Six task forces comprised of 10-20 volunteer members from the legal community, have begun this important effort. Each task force is a partnership between JAG and a sponsoring organization. The task forces' efforts include: sponsoring the first biennial symposium to encourage collaboration, education and creative thinking around access to civil justice issues; expanding the base of financial support for civil legal aid; harnessing existing technologies and building a collaboration between librarians, courthouse based assistance programs, providers, and attorneys to enhance access to justice for self-represented litigants; increasing the opportunities for lawyers to participate in *pro bono* representation; and identifying civil legal problems where early "upstream" intervention will bring about a resolution that avoids more costly and time-consuming contested legal proceedings.

The task forces that have been established thus far are:

Symposium Task Force: The University of Maine School of Law has partnered with JAG to convene the first biennial Access to Justice Symposium in Maine. The JAG Report identified the need to bring together a broad range of stakeholders to focus on access to justice issues and to assess the progress and priorities in improving access. The Report recognized that failing to provide access to justice for all Mainers “has implications for society that extend far beyond the reach of the bench or bar.”

The first biennial JAG Symposium, *Expanding Justice in Maine: Upstream Solutions to Downstream Problems* will be held in October 2009 in Portland, Maine. The theme derives from the Report’s recommendation to “intervene ‘upstream’ to solve problems before they become legal crises.” Plenary sessions will revisit the original mission of civil legal aid in the context of the “War on Poverty” as a means to bring fundamental change to the lives of people living in poverty. Afternoon workshops will include interdisciplinary panels examining innovative ways to address the needs of low-income individuals before they become serious legal problems, including such topics as: (1) medical-legal partnerships; (2) foreclosure diversion and affordable housing; and (3) outreach to low-wage workers.

Funding Development Task Force: The Maine Bar Foundation has partnered with JAG to broaden the base of private financial support for legal aid. The Resource Development Task Force seeks to educate and engage the larger community in supporting access to justice. The task force is working with consultants and local funders and community leaders to explore how best to reach out to the larger community.

Collaboration on Innovation, Technology and Equal Access to Justice: Based on a March 2009 final report issued by the Self-Represented Litigant’s Task Force chaired by Judge Charles LaVerdiere and in consultation with members of JAG’s Technology Task Force and Chief Justice Saufley’s Librarian Task Force, JAG recently passed a resolution to launch the Collaboration on Innovation, Technology and Equal Access to Justice. Chaired by Justice Andrew Mead of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court, the Collaboration’s first meeting will be in October of this year. The Collaboration will coordinate and promote an initiative to expand and improve access to pro bono and web-based services and other resources available to the public in Maine including, but not limited to, the following core elements: 1) Courthouse-based pro bono panels and other pro bono initiatives organized by the Maine State Bar Association, the Maine Volunteer Lawyers Project, county bar associations, and others; 2) HelpMeLaw and other web-based resources; and 3) Maine’s public libraries and major law libraries.

Standing Committee on Pro-Bono and Public Service: This task force is a partnership with the Maine State Bar Association and is chaired by incoming MSBA President Geraldine G. Sanchez. The SCPB has identified four primary initiatives for 2009-2010, while also recognizing that additional initiatives may evolve over time. The four primary initiatives are: (1) Status of Pro Bono Service of Maine’s Private Bar; (2) Recognition and Prestige; (3) Pro Bono Opportunities; and (4) Reporting of Pro Bono.

The SCPB has also introduced a column in the *MSBA Journal* to highlight noteworthy *pro bono* efforts of bar members.

Upstream Intervention Task Force: This task force is a partnership with the Advisory Committee of Providers (ACP), a collaboration of the six primary Maine legal aid providers and the Maine Bar Foundation. The ACP meets bi-monthly and advises and/or coordinates programs and projects with JAG.

The goal of this task force is to identify civil legal problems where early intervention may resolve problems before more costly and time-consuming contested legal proceedings become necessary.

Early this year, the task force made a recommendation to the JAG Board of Directors that it adopt a resolution launching a Foreclosure Diversion Commission. The Commission was launched in late January 2009 and submitted its initial report and recommendations in early June 2009. Those recommendations are currently being implemented in a Supreme Judicial Court pilot project on foreclosure diversion launched in the Springvale District Court for all foreclosure filings in York County.

Implementation Task Force: JAG's Executive Committee serves in this capacity. In addition to providing oversight and facilitation of the various task forces, it works on education and outreach issues. In addition, the Executive Committee continues to evaluate the need for and timeliness of additional task forces to carry out the recommendations of the JAG Report.

For further information, please contact:

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or visit

<http://www.mbf.org/justice.htm>