

PRESS CONFERENCES AND PRESS RELEASE

Press Conferences: Monday, June 16, 2014, 10:00 a.m.

Miami Florida Justice Institute, 40th Fl., Miami Tower (Centrust)
100 S.E. Second Street, Miami, FL 33131

Tallahassee Florida Legal Services, Inc.
2425 Torreya Drive
Tallahassee, FL 32303

Not For Release: Until 10:00 a.m., Monday, June 16, 2014

“Access to Justice Petition” Filed in Supreme Court

TALLAHASSEE and MIAMI. There is a crisis in legal services for the poor funding in Florida. “As attorneys, we are given the privilege to practice law, and with this privilege comes the responsibility to assist people in obtaining access to courts and our system of justice,” stated former Supreme Court Justice Raoul Cantero. “The Supreme Court has made it clear that lawyers have been given a special place by the State of Florida -- they in effect have a monopoly on the public justice system. In return, lawyers are morally bound to help the State’s poor gain access to that system. A \$100 a year dues increase – which comes to \$8.33 per month, or said another way, just one lunch—is a modest way to ensure that the justice system is not reserved only to those who can afford it.”

Over 500 attorneys, represented by former Supreme Court Justice Raoul Cantero, filed this morning the “Access to Justice Petition.” The Petition requests the Florida Supreme Court to increase the cap on The Florida Bar’s annual membership fee, currently set at \$265.00, by \$100.00 or \$8.33 per month, with any increase above \$265.00 to go to The Florida Bar Foundation to fund legal aid. The amount of the membership fee increase would be set by the Board of Governors of The Florida Bar. The maximum permissible membership fee would be \$365.00 per year.

There are veterans, seniors, families and children who have been devastated by the current recession, many of whom desperately need legal services, and have been denied representation due to inadequate funding. Because of the historically low interest rates, Interest on Trust Accounts (IOTA) revenue--which is used by The Florida Bar Foundation (TFBF) to fund legal aid to the poor--has dropped from \$44 million in 2007 to \$5.58 million in 2012. TFBF has reduced its grants to legal aid programs and is projecting a reduction of 76% by the 2015-2016 grant year. In 2010 there was the equivalent of 449 attorneys working in legal aid. That number has decreased to 373 by the end of 2013. The number, which is already harming the critical infrastructure of legal aid in Florida, is continuing to decline.

While granting this Petition will not cure the problem, it will begin to address the need, help in maintaining the current delivery system, and work to ensure that the concept of “equal justice under law” is not just a hollow phrase.

Former Justice Raoul Cantero (by video and phone; video statements in English and Spanish), directors of legal services programs (in person), and copies of the Petition will be available at the Press Conference.

For further information contact:

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Copies of the Petition are now available at: www.FloridaJusticeInstitute.org
www.FloridaLegal.org

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