

## **DC CONSORTIUM OF LEGAL SERVICES PROVIDERS**

**PRESS CONTACT: FAITH MULLEN**  
(202) 319-6613

### **NEW REPORT PROVIDES INSIGHTS INTO LOW-INCOME D.C. RESIDENTS**

Washington, D.C. (April 4, 2016) – The D.C. Consortium of Legal Services Providers today announced the release of a [comprehensive report](#) on the myriad needs of and challenges facing low-income D.C. residents. The report, the culmination of a nearly three-and-a-half year “Community Listening Project,” contains a wealth of findings that should impact how legal and social services providers—and the community as a whole—understand and respond to the experiences of people living in poverty.

“This is an unprecedented undertaking to learn directly from low-income D.C. residents about the many difficulties they face and the barriers that prevent them from overcoming poverty,” said Faith Mullen, one of the report’s principle researchers and a clinical law professor at The Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law. “The report’s findings are illuminating even for those of us who have worked for many years to serve low-income communities in the District.”

The report is based on focus group and survey responses collected from over 700 low-income D.C. residents, defined for the purposes of this Project as individuals whose household incomes are at or below 200% of the federal poverty guideline. People living in and affected by poverty were involved throughout the entire process of developing and conducting the detailed surveys and in-depth focus groups, ensuring that the findings related as closely as possible to the needs, problems, and experiences of low-income people in the District.

Key findings of the Community Listening Project include:

- Housing concerns were the most prevalent issue among survey participants, with almost two thirds of respondents saying that loss of housing and fear of homelessness was a constant concern.
- Low-income people in D.C. face significant barriers to decent paying employment, with almost half of the respondents experiencing employment problems, most significantly the inability to find work.
- The notion that unemployed people living in poverty are not trying to find work is false: Very few survey participants (5.8%) who were unemployed, including those considered long-term unemployed, had stopped looking for work.
- Full-time employment did not mean avoiding financial hardship. Almost half of those surveyed who reported they were working full time also experienced trouble paying their bills, and a similar number reported at least occasional uncertainty about having enough food.

- More than half the survey participants receive at least one public benefit.
- Crime is a serious problem. Three out of ten survey participants had been the victim of a crime in the past two years, and one in six had experienced gun violence.

Focus group and survey participants also identified strengths in their community, which included a sense of people looking out for each other, enthusiasm for services such as public libraries and the D.C. Summer Youth Employment Program, and involvement in organized groups like tenant associations and labor organizations. They also reported relying on churches and other faith communities for support. Another strength was a sense of solidarity with their community and others in their situation, especially in immigrant communities.

With regard to access to justice and civil legal services, only 11% of survey participants reported trying to find legal help in the last two years, and 80% agreed with the view that lawyers are not affordable for low-income people. Those who were able to find legal help, however, largely reported positive experiences, with over three quarters saying that their lawyer was successful in helping them understand or resolve their legal problem.

“While we are still trying to figure out as a legal services community how we can improve our ability to serve our clients and prospective clients, what we do know from this report is that the free legal services available to people living in poverty remain too scarce and inaccessible and unknown to those who most could benefit from them,” said Hannah Lieberman, Executive Director of the Neighborhood Legal Services Program.

“The Community Listening Project provides great insight into the needs of our low-income neighbors, from their perspectives and in their voices,” said Patty Mullahy Fugere, Executive Director of the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. “As the D.C. Council this week begins its consideration of the FY 17 budget, we hope it will turn to this report as an important tool in its decision-making about budget priorities.”

A community release event will take place on April 14, 2016 at 10:30AM in Freedom Plaza. It will feature a poetry slam and stories relating the experiences of individuals to the themes in the report. All are welcome to attend and participate.

The D.C. Consortium of Legal Services Providers is a coalition of 30 organizations that provide direct civil legal services to low-income D.C. residents. The Consortium’s mission is to coordinate the delivery, expand the availability, and improve the quality of legal services for poor and disadvantaged people and groups of people in the District of Columbia.

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